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Connectivity between India and Siam: As Evident by Archaeological Sources (From the Late Pre Christian Era to Sixth Century CE)

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Abstract

The connectivity between India and various countries of Southeast Asia is one of the interesting subjects of International relations. It is generally acknowledged that from the late pre Christian era approximately, people from Indian subcontinent went to the countries of Southeast Asia both by sea route or land route. India played a crucial role in the material and cultural history of Southeast Asia during the early part of Christian era. The early Indian connectivity is mainly by increased trade and commerce. So, truly, the first catalyst of the relation between India and Southeast Asia was trade. The mineral wealth and fertile soil of Southeast Asia attracted the attention of Indian trading community. Like other Southeast Asian regions India had trading links with ancient Siam (Thailand). The archaeological and literary sources are well evident of these mercantile networks between India and Siam, which was established sometimes before the Christian era. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the scholars became interested about the history of linkages between India and Southeast Asia. New archaeological fieldwork in Siam as well as other Southeast Asian countries has unearthed important materials relating to trade and exchange between India and Southeast Asia since the pre Christian era. This paper aims to discuss the archaeological findings in Siam and in the perspective also tries to analyze the nature of connectivity between India and Siam.

Key Words: Connectivity; Trade; Archaeological findings; Indianisation; Localization.

The connectivity between India and various countries of Southeast Asia dates back to pre-historic time. The region of Southeast Asia has been called by many names since the pre Christian era. Sanskrit records referred to it as *Suvarnabhumi* (Pali *Suvannabhumi*, the Land of Gold) or *Suvarnavipa* (the Golden Island or Peninsula)ⁱ According to *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, it was *Chryse* (golden) Island, “lying not only to the east of the Ganges, but also to the southward of the Chinese Empire.”ⁱⁱ Ptolemy mentioned these regions as *Aurea Cheronesus*.ⁱⁱⁱ In modern time western scholars and nationalist Indian scholars mentioned these regions as Farther India or Greater India. During the Second World War, we got the name Southeast Asia. The modern Southeast Asia consisted of Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines and Singapore.

It is generally acknowledged that from the late pre Christian era to 12th-13th century CE, approximately, people from more or less all parts of India went to the countries of Southeast Asia both by sea route or land route. India played a crucial role in the material and cultural history of

Southeast Asia during the early part of Christian era. The early Indian impact on Southeast Asia is mainly due to increased trade and commerce. So, truly the first catalyst of the relation between India and Southeast Asia was trade, no doubt. The mineral wealth and fertile soil of Southeast Asia attracted the attention of Indian trading community. The Indic mercantile community went there since pre Christian era. Gold, tin, spices (clove, pepper and nutmeg), aromatic woods like sandalwood, fragrant resin (camphor), silk and precious stones were among the most important products of the countries and islands associated with *Suvarnabhumi* and *Suvarnadvipa*. The archaeological and literary sources are well proved this trading connection between India and Southeast Asia which was established sometimes before the Christian era.

The cultural history of most countries in South and Southeast Asia has been closely linked to trade and trade routes. Sea routes are frequently used for travelling as crossing high mountain terrain was rather difficult. Siam had cultural more precisely trade linkages with India more than 2000 years ago, as the archaeological findings as well as the ancient Indian literatures evidenced it. Sea voyage has been referred to the Vedic texts. Before the Vedic age, the Harappan culture had developed and mastered the art of sea voyage as evident from the excavation at Lothal in Gujarat where an ancient dockyard has been exposed. Indian mercantile community had made their presence in Takkola or modern Takua Pa which was their first landing stage.^{iv} They were also in Ligor (Nakhon Si Thammarat), Jaya (Chaiya) and Patalung (Phatalung), all in South Thailand. In this paper I propose to discuss India- Siam connectivity through mercantile activities as evident by archaeological data from late pre Christian era to early centuries.

India- Siam trading networks as evident by archaeological data

Archaeological excavations in Thailand (Siam) as well as in different Southeast Asian countries have unearthed a range of objects of Indian origin and they have pushed back the connectivity between India and Southeast Asia to pre Christian era. Surveys and excavations at U Thong, Ban Don Tha Pet and many sites in Peninsular Siam have brought to light a large variety of objects which proved that Ancient Siam had close mercantile contact with India as well as the Mediterranean world and China. From the early burial sites like Ban Don Ta Phet in west-central Siam archaeological excavations yielded more than 3,000 beads of glass, crystal, agate and carnelian of Indian origin. In addition to Ban Don Ta Phet (Kanchanaburi, Thailand) carnelian beads have been found at Ban Chiang in Siam. These, together with the finds at Arikamedu bears witness to the diversity of the luxury products transported between Rome and China during the first centuries of the Christian era. Some recent archaeological research confirmed that recipient states in southern Siam, along the western coast of the Malay Peninsula. Evidences is provided by artifacts such as Southern Indian roulette ware, Dongson and other bronze artifacts^v established trading links with India and Siam early as the last centuries B C. But Manguin observed that trade networks were clearly forged by Southeast Asian long before Indian influences were felt in their region.^{vi} Manguin puts stress on the trading capability of the indigenous mercantile community of Siam.

Bellina and Glover studied different traded materials in two distinct phases. The first seems to start the fourth century BC and to end around the second century A.D. and the second phase is between second and fourth century A. D.^{vii} The scattered evidence of this phase enabled the Dutch historian Van Leur to refer to regular contacts that preceded Indianization.^{viii} In Southeast Asia the first evidence of regular exchange consists in glass and stone beads and ornaments and ceramic and bronze vessels.^{ix} It seems to us that vessels of this phase are very similar to Indian types, whether imported or locally made.^x They testify already frequent exchange. Three types of vessels seem to characterize this period: bronze containers with a central knob or cone, pottery roulette wares and

stamped wares.^{xi} Knobbed pottery vessels were largely reported from Taxila. In addition, these materials have been found from Nagarjunakonda and coastal Orisha. The range of its date was from around the third-second centuries B.C. to the early centuries of the Christian era. About thirty vessels made from high tin bronze were found during the excavations at Don Ta Phet and these are associated with other prestige goods such as the carnelian and glass beads.^{xii}(Roy; 96) High tin bronze was not so common in India and discovered from Adichanallur, Taxila and the Nilgiri hills.^{xiii}(96)

During the first phase, the semiprecious stones agate and carnelian, and to a lesser extent rock crystal and nephrite, were used for most of the beads and pendants widely found in Southeast Asia, replacing the softer materials such as serpentine, limestone, marble and shell used to make ornaments.^{xiv} These new types of ornament have chiefly been discovered unevenly distributed in burials, indicating that they were probably the valued possession of emerging elite who used them in life, as in death, as indicators of status.^{xv} The rich finds of agate and carnelian beads are discovered at site such as Bon Don Ta Phet, Khao Sam Kaeo and Noen U-Loke in Siam.

In addition to the simple beads of agate and carnelian there are some very unusual lion pendants from Ban Don Ta Phet, Ban U Taphao and Khao Sam Kaeo, all of which have close Indian correlates.^{xvi} Alkaline-etched agate and carnelian beads must also be brought into the picture. This very specialized craft tradition originated 4,500 years ago in the Harappan period and such beads were widely manufactured in India from about 600 BC.^{xvii} The presence of the late centuries BC of spectacular decorated stone beads in Siam may best be understood through the operation of exchange networks.^{xviii} Indian origin etched carnelian beads have been discovered from central, north-east and south Siam, the major ones being U Thong and Krabi.^{xix} (Glover;1989;24) Another item of Indian origin early trade item was glass beads in variety of shapes and colours, commonly referred to as the *mutisalah* beads.^{xx}(Lamb; 1965; 93-124), found Khlong Thom and Takua Pa in Siam. On the basis of present studies, Francis has suggested that the *mutisalah* beads were made by an unique glass tube drawing process still use in the villages of southern Andhra Pradesh.^{xxi}(Francis) Lamb postulated that the chronology of *mutisalah* beads started in India with the megaliths of Kerala, Mysore and Madras and later into mediaeval Chola times.^{xxii}(95; Lamb)

For a long time it has been assumed that all the agate and carnelian found in Southeast Asia in the early period originated in India.^{xxiii} This is because South Asian workshops developed the highly skilled techniques to make fine beads out of these hard stones. Furthermore, no beads made of these materials have yet been found in Southeast Asian contexts prior to the Iron Age.^{xxiv} But from the early centuries onwards we find evidence of local manufacture at Khuan Lukpad and Kuala Selinsing, both on the western coast of the Thai-Malay Peninsula.^{xxv} Whether the raw materials came from South Asia or if Southeast Asians had found and started to exploit local sources, as some recent trace element studies seem to suggest, is not yet known.

Berenice Bellina observed that some Indian craftsmen probably settled in Southeast Asia. When local workshops first developed, then how much Indian influence was involved in the specialized craft of bead making, are among important topics currently being investigated.^{xxvi} Glass, mainly in the forms of beads, appears commonly in archaeological sites in South and Southeast Asia in the first millennium BC. A number of researchers have recently reviewed the evidence for early (i.e. prehistoric) glass in Southeast Asia and discussed the relationships with India.^{xxvii} The first glass is found in the middle of the first millennium BC at Iron Age sites in Peninsular and Central Siam.^{xxviii}

Ban Don Ta Phet is important because it has yielded the best dated and widest range of glass beads with secure contexts of any site in Southeast Asia.^{xxix}

Bronze vessels with a central cone appears to be the most ancient container type indicating links between India and Siam, occurring at a few sites in central and western Thailand such as Ban Don Ta Phet, a cave at Khao Kwark in Ratchaburi Province (where a Dong Son Drum was also recovered) and from looted sites around Lopburi.^{xxx} Metal vessels, probably bronze, also with a central cone were found at Dong Son, Thanh Hoa Province, and dated to about the first century A.D. Examples of this type of container made from pottery, stone, bronze and silver have been found widely distributed in many different cultural settings in the Indian subcontinent.^{xxxi} Rouletted ware or wheel made pottery constitutes a very significant item in the evidence for exchange between South and Southeast Asia. It has been well known in India since the excavations of Wheeler at Arikamedu in 1940s.^{xxxii}

In the early historic period, Indian coins depicting a stylized double-masted ship, found at the Khlong Thom (Khuan lukpad), Krabi province, east coast of South Siam, first –second century AD, reflects the exchange of trans-oceanic trades between the two territories. During that period, etched beads were found at two important port sites of Siam: Khlong Thom and Khao Sam Kaeo. The site of Khuan Lukpad or Khlong Thom is known for its glass and semi-precious stone beads. It is conjectured that the stone and glass bead making and gold ornament making were introduced by Indian craftsman to Siam in the first century BC to third century AD. This is evident from a touchstone of a goldsmith with Tamil inscription dating the third century. The objects like intaglios with scenes of elephants, a lion, an unidentified woman and some seals with Pallava inscriptions were discovered at the Khlong Thom site.^{xxxiii}

Megalith graves are generally thought to be collective tombs for clans or other kin groups. Such tombs are discovered from the Malay Peninsula. They are very rare in most of Mainland Southeast Asia.^{xxxiv} Links with the well-known Iron Age megalithic graves of southern India have long been proposed. Because of the lack of well dated megalithic structures, the exact timing for the arrival of these external cultural traits and materials still unresolved, but it seems probable that they belong to the early metal age of the late centuries BC to early centuries AD, when prestige items such as Dong Son bronze drums and semi-precious stone and glass beads were coming through the developing exchange network.^{xxxv}

Around the beginning of the Christian era, there was a change in the nature of maritime contacts with the Indian subcontinent. As against the early demand for prestige goods by Iron age communities, the items imported by the somewhat later settlements present a larger variety.^{xxxvi} (Roy; 97) Most of the archaeological evidence now consists of Southeast Asian ceramics inspired by Indian models. These include the *Kundika* and *Kendi* pottery types, and stamped and moulded ceramics, which clearly show the adoption of Indian forms and decorative techniques.^{xxxvii} From this time, objects in contexts referred to as “Indianised” may be found.^{xxxviii} Glass and stone beads still came from India along the oceanic trade routes. But local manufacturing in an Indian tradition is now beyond doubt and it is difficult to separate imported from locally made products on the data so far available.^{xxxix}

Kundika vessels were easily identifiable in the Mon sites of Dvaravati in Central Thailand.^{xl} Southeast Asian pottery with stamped or moulded designs also derives from Indian prototypes. In South Asia, such forms occur for the first time during the last centuries BC and last until the sixth-seventh centuries. They are found in major early historic sites such as Mathura, Ujjain, Chichli and

Paithan. Most often, this ceramic is red and the stamped or moulded decoration, consists of symbolic motifs like the *srivatsa*, the *cakra*, the *swastika*, the *hamsa*, plant motifs like rosettes and leaves or geometrical motifs.^{xli} An ivory comb of Indian origin engraved with a pair of horses, a goose with an elaborately plumbed tail and with Buddhist symbols has been unearthed in a dated first-second century context. Other objects like gold jewellery, stone bivalve moulds, bronze bells decorated with filigree spirals and earthenware stamps has been discovered from U Thong, Nakorn Pathom and Chansen.

The Burmese stamped ceramics show strong similarities to those discovered in India and are commonly found in early Buddhist sites such as Beikthano, Halin and Sri Kshetra.^{xlii} Other local adaptations of this stamped or moulded ceramic type are found in Thailand, in Dvaravati sites such as Chansen. Sherds with a band of rosettes from Phra Pratom in Central Thailand strongly resemble example excavated in Kondapur, Andhra Pradesh.^{xliii} Although occasional vessels may have been imported from India, we believe that the southern Asian stamped ceramics are a local product, one that reflects the adoption and adaptation of India techniques and style.^{xliv} Pottery of moulded ware ornamented with radiating flower petals has been found in the Pyu site of Beikthano and also seems to be a local product derived from an Indian model.^{xlv} Moulded decorated pottery has a long history in South Asia and has been found primarily in the western Deccan.^{xlvi} The discovery of Indian made, or Indian influenced, objects in archaeological sites in Southeast Asia in the late centuries BC enables examination of the formation and evolution of regional and inter regional trading networks.^{xlvii}

The Kra Isthmus of the Malay Peninsula continued to play an important role in early trade networks with India. One of the promising sites in this region is that Khuan Lukpad or Khlong Thom. Remains of brick buildings were found and there is a profusion of beads of both glass and semi-precious stones like carnelian. Intaglios depict animal motifs such as an elephant, a lion and a pair of fighting cock. The oldest inscriptions from Thailand also come from Khuan Lukpad and have been engraved on carnelian seals, the earliest reading, '*rujjo*', carved in Brahmi of the first to third centuries A.D.^{xlviii} Khao Sam kheo located on the east coast of South Thailand also has yielded bronze kettle-drums, beads and carnelian seals inscribed with Brahmi characters of the first to fourth centuries A. D.^{xlix}

India-Siam as well as India-Southeast Asia connectivity through mercantile process is an important matter to discuss. When we speak of contacts between India and Southeast Asia we think of Indianisation first, starting perhaps about at the beginning of the Christian era and the Indianisation in Southeast Asia was closely linked with trade. Though there is a great debate regarding Indianisation and localization of Southeast Asia. Nationalist Indian scholars and a group of western scholars put stress on Indian influence in Southeast Asian countries of early Christian era. Other dimension of this debate is localization of Southeast Asia. Here, the scholars argue that, before the arrival of the Indians the local people have their own established socio political and economic system. According to my view, India's shared cultural trends with Southeast Asia cannot be denied; at the same time existence of indigenization and the contribution of 'local genius' in making of Southeast Asian culture should be recognized. Hermann Kulke, a German scholar first postulated this theory as convergence theory. In this paper, we observe India- Siam trading network from late pre Christian era to first six centuries, as the time of the emergence of Dvaravati, the first historical kingdom of Siam. Archaeological and inscriptional data from coastal sites of Indian sub-continent and also from different Siamese regions indicate intensive trading network from the late pre Christian era. Around the second to first centuries B. C., carnelian and glass beads, carnelian

seals with Brahmi inscriptions and ivory objects from India were found at several sites on the mainland and the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. These were the tangible indicators of these contacts. Commodities obtained from Southeast Asia are much more difficult to identify, though there is a strong case for the import of tin, aromatics and woods into India at this time. These trading links between India and Siam continued to expand in the early centuries of the Christian era and provided channels for the transmission of ideas, skills and religious beliefs. Coedes in *The Empire of the South Seas* had justly written that, “The Hindus seem to have been the first to feel the attraction of the transgangetic countries. Their expansion towards the east began a little before the commencement of the Christian era, and carried Indian religions and usage of Sanskrit up to the coast of Annam as well as to Bali and Borneo. In origin it was a commercial expansion.”¹

ⁱ Wheatley Paul; *The Golden Khersonese*; University of Malay Press; Malayasia; 1961; p 179

ⁱⁱ Scroff W. H; *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a merchant of the first century*; Lomgman, Green and Co, New York, U. S; 1912; p 260.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid; p 259

^{iv} Majumdar Ramesh Ch; *Ancient India*; Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi;1974; p 476

^v Manguin P. Y; “Southeast Asian Shipping in the Indian Ocean in during the first millennium A.D.” in H. P. Ray & J. F. Salles edited *Tradition and Archaeology: Early maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*, Manohar Publishers, New Delhi; 1996; p 181-182

^{vi} Ibid; p 182

^{vii} Bellina B and Glover I; “The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediteranean World from fourth century B. C. to Fourth century A. D.” in Glover & Bellwood edited *Southeast Asia: from Prehistory to History*, Routledge, USA; 2004; P 72, 80

^{viii} Casparis j. G. de; “Historical Writing on Indonesia” in D. G. E. Hall edited *Historians of South East Asia*; Oxford University press, London; 1961; p 146

^{ix} Op cit; p 73

^x Bellina B and Glover I; *ibid*; p 73

^{xi} *Ibid*;p 74

^{xii} Ray H. P; *The Winds of Change: Buddhism and the Maritime links of Early South Asia*; Oxford University Press; Delhi; 1994; p 96

^{xiii} *Ibid*;p 96

^{xiv} Bellina B and Glover I; *op cit*; p 74

^{xv} Glover Ian C; “Recent Archaeological Evidence for Early maritime Contacts between India and SouthEast Asia” in H.P. Roy and J. F. Salles edited *Tradition And Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*; Manohar publishers, New Delhi; 1996; p 134

^{xvi} *Ibid*; p 135

^{xvii} *Ibid*; p 136

^{xviii} *Ibid*; p 136

^{xix} Glover Ian; *Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia*; Hull;1989;

^{xx} Lamb A; Some observations on stone and glass beads in early South-east Asia, *JMBRAS*,XXXVIII; 1965; pp 87-124

^{xxi} Francis P; Glass beads in Malaya, *Journal of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, LXIV; 1987; pp 97-118

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- xxii Lamb; op cit; p 95
- xxiii Bellina B and Glover I; op cit; p 76
- xxiv Ibid; p 77
- xxv Ibid; p 77
- xxvi Ibid; p 78
- xxvii Ibid; p 78
- xxviii Ibid; p 79
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- xxx Glover Ian; “Recent Archaeological Evidence for Early maritime Contacts between India and SouthEast Asia” in H.P. Roy and J. F. Salles edited *Tradition And Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*; Manohar publishers, New Delhi; 1996; p 143
- xxxi Ibid; p 142
- xxxii Bellina B and Glover; op cit; p 76
- xxxiii Glover Ian C; op cit; p 135
- xxxiv Ibid; p 80
- xxxv Ibid; p 81
- xxxvi Ray; H. P; op cit; p 97
- xxxvii Ibid; p 81
- xxxviii Ibid; p 81
- xxxix Ibid; p 82
- xl Glover Ian C; “Recent Archaeological Evidence for Early maritime Contacts between India and SouthEast Asia” in H.P. Roy and J. F. Salles edited *Tradition And Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean*; Manohar publishers, New Delhi; 1996; p 142
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- xliv Ibid; p 82
- xlv Ibid; p 83
- xlvi Ibid; p 83
- xlvi Ibid; p 83
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- xlvi Ray H. P; p 105
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