



ECHOES ACROSS THE BAY: BUDDHISM, MARITIME TIES, AND CULTURAL LINKAGES IN ODISHA-MYANMAR RELATIONS THROUGH THE AGES

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Paper Received On: 21 June 2024

Peer Reviewed On: 25 July 2024

Published On: 01 August 2024

India has had close economic and cultural relations with South East Asia that can be traced almost a thousand years ago to the fourth century BCE. According to stories, legends, Buddhist and Jain texts, and travel accounts of some Chinese and Arab writers, sailor-merchants from India used to go on maritime voyages to countries like Burma, Malaysia, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Bali, Ceylon, and China for trade and commerce. They not only connected the regions economically but also acted as couriers of culture and ambassadors of peace. Apart from the merchants, Indian scholars, and artisans also visited these parts establishing linkages with people of Southeast East Asia. The relations, which started primarily in the economic realm, subsequently expanded, linking people across regions through common ties of history, language, culture, traditions, and customs. Among the Southeast Asian countries, India enjoyed the most intimate relations with Burma based on mutual appreciation of each other's cultural ethos and civilizational exchanges. In India, Odisha, an eastern state has had long-standing civilizational and historical ties with Myanmar and Southeast Asian nations in general. History is a rich tapestry that weaves tales of civilizations interacting with each other through trade, culture, and diplomacy across time and space. One such interesting historical narrative is the link of Odisha, an eastern state of India, with Myanmar (formerly Burma), a country located in Southeast Asia. This relationship has several centuries of history and covers areas from maritime and commercial relations to civilizational exchanges, historical links, and diaspora movements. The relationship of civilization is so deep, based on shared religious and cultural bonds between them, especially from the 8th century onwards, it is found that Buddhism and

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Brahmanical traditions have propagated significantly in various sections of the regions, dominating those practices. The propagation of Buddhism from Odisha to Myanmar was therefore facilitated through maritime routes, and hence its influence on the religious landscape of Myanmar was massive. This eventually led to the development of pagodas and stupas whose architectural similitude with those of Odisha abounds. These maritime routes also were the carriers of robust trade relations, where ships laden with a variety of goods from textiles, and stones, to precious metals, traveled from Odisha to the ports in Myanmar. And in turn, Myanmar exported items such as teak and spices. Political and military activities have also been influential in historical linkages since the rulers had to be in close diplomacy to protect their trade routes and their political interests. However, the people movement between Odisha and Myanmar allowed forming vibrant diasporas that could become key players in the socio-economic development of both areas. They acted de facto ambassadors of culture in preserving and at the same time, getting their traditions adapted to the new environment. What follows from this recognition of the relations between Odisha and Myanmar is the enrichment of our insight into what has preceded us—whose lessons for cultural relations and international affairs generally redound not only to their study but to posterity.

Buddhism: The Bridge

In the ancient period, Buddhism, a non-traditional belief system that espoused peace, non-violence, and harmony, attracted people from across Southeast Asia and helped to link India with the region. It played the most vital role in connecting the people of Burma with India. Buddhism is believed to have reached Burma during the time of Gautam Buddha, much before the reign of Emperor Asoka. As per the popular legend, two Burmese traders, Bhalluka and Tapussa, while traveling from Okkala (presently Yangon) to Rajagiri met Gautam Buddha at the foot of the Rajayatana tree and offered him rice cakes and honey. On their request, the Buddha gave them eight strands of his hair, which were brought to Burma. The king of Okkala welcomed the traders with great honor on their arrival and the hair was enshrined in a pagoda, which is now the biggest and highest pagoda in the world, the Shwedagon golden pagoda of Yangon. To spread Buddha's teachings, King Ashoka sent monks to Thaton, the ancient Ramannadesa (part of Suvannabhumi) and presently a small town in Mon State in Southern Myanmar along with two emissaries, Sona and Uttara. Thaton is considered as the first Burmese city where Buddhism reached through Indian Buddhist monks who made it their home. Also, the people of Thaton enthusiastically embraced Buddhism as their religion. Thaton soon became an important center for Theravada Buddhism, the oldest and most conservative strand

of Buddhism. Buddhism has a deep impact on the socio-religious-cultural life of Burma. In later centuries, Vajrayana Buddhism, a form of tantric Buddhism based on a complex philosophical and ritual system, was introduced to the people in northern Burma. They practiced it together with Hinduism and local folk beliefs. In the middle of the eleventh century, Buddhism received royal patronage as the powerful king Anawratha, who had brought northern and southern Burma under his rule, made it the national religion, and brought Buddhist texts and relics from Sri Lanka. During his reign, many monasteries and stupas were built in the capital city of Pagan which became a major center of Buddhist culture. Buddhism continued to prosper in the succeeding centuries receiving support and patronage from Anawratha's successors even as Burma underwent several periods of wars and political unrest. It was not only royal patronage, but rather the love and adoration of the common people that helped Buddhism grow and thrive in Burma. In every village, schools were set up in the monasteries where monks taught basic Buddhist teachings as well as reading and writing to the children. The Buddhist temples of Pagan in central Myanmar had Sanskrit, Pali, and Tamil prayers inscribed on their walls. The devout Buddhists of Myanmar consider Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya, Bihar as the most sacred place and wish to visit it at least once in their lifetime. Every year, many people from Myanmar come to Bodh Gaya for pilgrimage. Odisha, the land on the eastern seashore of the Bay of Bengal was known variously as Kalinga, Utkal, and Odra in ancient times. A major portion of this extensive territory was known in ancient times as the land of Kalingas, a class of people referred to in Brahmanical literature, in old Pali canons and Asokan inscriptions. In its earliest history, Odisha had become a province and later even the center of the great empire under two of the most important rulers of early India i.e., under Asoka (3rd century B.C.), and Kharavela (1st century B.C.). Then, the stratigraphy is very clear with the influence of Kushanas and Guptas, down to Gangas and Gajapatis in the 15th –16th century A.D. The strategic geographical location of Odisha helped her rise to great heights in trade and commerce from the pre-Buddhist period. Odisha served as a bridge between the trans-oceanic and inland trade of India, causing migration of cultural traits along with trade and commerce. With the rise of trade and commerce in the historical periods it is obvious; that the growth of urbanization leads building of various monuments which are now put together as resources for the development of Tourism in the State. With the archaeological spade in different parts of Odisha, many new materials have emerged in recent years regarding the trade and commerce and growth of Buddhist Monuments.

The Colonial Epoch: Restrained Sovereignty and Enhanced Interconnections

Indeed, the Colonial Epoch had an extremely strong bearing on the relationship shared between India and Myanmar, with a special light on the interlinking of Odisha and Myanmar during British Colonial Rule. During this time, the two were losing their independence as they were leveraged into the administrative and economic structures of the British Empire. The British regime meddled with labor migration patterns in a great way, more so from areas such as Orissa to Myanmar. With a very rich base in agriculture, contribution to the labor force in rice plantations of Myanmar from Odisha was quite substantial and through this means, they were able to cement the bondage that the two regions—communities in fact—share till today. This was part of the overall colonial policy geared at getting maximum economic exploitation through the reallocation of resources and manpower within the empire, and this too was seen through the world-class infrastructural developments such as railways that further bound the regions. The British further fortified educational and institutional links with the establishment of English- medium schools, which contributed towards the creation of a new class of educated people who later on turned out to be the torchbearers of nationalist sentiments and independence movements in either country. They drew their inspiration from common ideological positions against colonial rule and shared experiences that included exploitation and cultural exchange that transcended regional boundaries. It still reflects the legacy of this interconnectedness. The beginning of socio- cultural relations during the colonial period influenced the relations between Odisha and Myanmar, which in turn reflected a very complex history of forced cooperation that has given way to a foundation for mutual understanding and cooperation.

During the colonial epoch, Odisha and Myanmar experienced profound transformations under British rule, which reshaped their geopolitical landscapes, restrained their sovereignty, and significantly enhanced interconnections between the two regions. Historically, Odisha was renowned for its maritime prowess with Kalinga traders reaching as far as Bali, Java, and Sumatra, while Myanmar's Bagan Kingdom, established in the early 11th century, unified the regions that would later constitute modern Myanmar and strongly influenced the propagation of Theravada Buddhism. The onset of British dominance saw Odisha annexed after the conquest of the Marathas in 1803 during the Second Anglo-Maratha War, and Myanmar brought under control through three Anglo-Burmese Wars, culminating in its complete integration into the British Indian Empire by 1885. This led to a new political order that dismantled traditional power structures and imposed a centralized authority aligned with

British interests. The colonial era also marked a significant increase in economic and social interconnections; the British exploited both regions for their natural resources, catalyzing migrations—particularly of laborers from Odisha to Myanmar to work in industries like rubber plantations and railways. The introduction of the Indian Rupee as the official currency in Myanmar and infrastructural developments such as the Burma Railway facilitated not just economic but also cultural exchanges. Both regions experienced a mingling of religious and artistic traditions, enriching shared cultural narratives and practices, including influences on Odisha's classical dance form, Odissi. Resistance to colonial rule was also notable, with Odisha's Paika Rebellion in 1817 and numerous uprisings in Myanmar, leading to significant nationalist movements, most prominently led by Aung San in Myanmar, whose strategic shifts during World War II were crucial in securing independence. Reflecting on this period reveals the complexities of colonial legacies in Odisha and Myanmar, highlighting a shared history of resilience and adaptation in the face of foreign domination, with lasting impacts on their socio-political and cultural identities.

Vernacular Linkages Through Culture and Literature

Vernacular or people-to-people linkages between India and Burma ran deeper than the politico-administrative exchanges effected by the British to govern the two colonies. People of the two countries were connected based on common ties of cultural values, traditions, civilizational ethos, social customs, and relations that could not be disturbed by British rule or even after. While trade and economic transactions connected regions, culture connected the people which led to the emergence of a transnational or cosmopolitan culture. While according to Rajat Ray, the pre-colonial chain of trade and commerce that stretched Africa to Asia, “formed a distinct international system that never lost its identity in the larger dominant world system of the West” (Ray 1995), K. N. Chaudhuri notes that the Indian Ocean blends imperceptibly into Asia, comprising Chinese, Sanskritic, Indian and South East Asian civilizations (Chaudhuri 1990). The nature of the cultural and literary linkage, which has bound Odisha with Myanmar, has a history behind it as both countries share a wide tapestry of interlinks that have majorly contributed to vernacular heritage and literary dialogue. These affinities have come out in various dimensions like religious influences, linguistic affinity, shared folklore, and literary exchange, which all together indicate a profound intercultural dialogue stretching over centuries. High religious and spiritual influence through Buddhism has been brought out, for which the ancient Buddhist sites of Odisha continued to contribute toward the spread of that religion within Southeast Asia, like Myanmar, thus enabling not only religious exchanges but

also cultural exchanges through the translation of Buddhist texts and teachings in Burmese. The respect for the culture of Jagannath from Odisha is also found with equal respect in Myanmar, thereby enforcing its practice of equal religious strength to communal identity. Linguistic affinities through Pali and Sanskrit further present profound cultural relations since the transmission of these languages enriched Burmese Buddhist texts and literature. The oral traditions share common themes and stories between both regions, which look toward movements of the cultural narratives that reflect shared values and lessons. These literary exchanges, marked with translations of religious texts, have gone ahead to strengthen further the vernacular linkages of this region and include festivals and exchanges between the writers from this region with their counterparts in Kannada and Marathi. Such interactions between the two are enriching not only for the literary traditions of Odisha and Myanmar but also elicit an understanding and respect for each other's culture and philosophical outlook, which further strengthens the common heritage concept of not being confined to any geographical location. Many people of Orissa migrated to Myanmar and established a colony named Ukkal (Utkal). In due course, with the growth and development of the activities, many Brahminal Hindus settled in groups along with Buddhists and called their settlement Śrikshetra – the land of Lord Jagannath of Puri. The inscription on the famous Shwezigon Pagoda in Myanmar recalls the Purāṇic tradition referring to the Jagannath temple of Puri as having been built by King Indradyumna with the help of Vishwakarma. When the Buddhist people migrated from Kalinga, they had the beginning Hinayanics; later on, it was observed that Vajrayana, Kālacakrayana, Mahayana, Buddhist Tantrayana, and Sahajayana were transmitted from Kalinga to other countries of Southeast Asia. Most of the Bhaumakara kings of Orissa were Bajrayanists, and the king of Uddiyana, Indrabhūti, was the founder of. His sister Lakṣmīkarā was the founder of Sahajāyāna, and his adopted son Padmasambhava preached Buddhism in Tibet. So, from Kalinga, it is evident that from there, different phases of thoughts had gone. Gold plates inscribed with the Hinayānic text in Pali in the script of the 5th-6th century have been found in Maunggan near Hmawza of Burma. They reveal the strong Hinayānic faith of the rulers of 'Pyu', brought likely from Odisha to their land.

Odisha-Myanmar Ancient Relations: A Legacy of Trade, Maritime, and Cultural Exchange

Orissa, known as Kalinga in history, has been taken to be one of the most formidable kingdoms, sited between the Ganges River to the north and the Godavari River to the south, along the western edge of the Bay of Bengal. This strategic location made it a potential power in terms

of maritime affairs. The maritime trade of enterprising people from Kalinga added substantially to the wealth and power of this kingdom. The coast of Kalinga had abounding ports, navigable ones, indeed—Tamralipti, Chelitalo/Manikapatna, Palur, Khalkattapatna, Pithunda, and Kalingapatnam—that have played a part in the maritime enterprise of Kalinga was not only confined to Asia; it spread up to the coasts of Africa and the Roman Empire; it was active in its contacts with Sri Lanka and countries in Southeast Asia. The maritime activity of Kalinga contributed to some notable influences, such as the influence of Hindu culture on Bali Island and the settlement of the first king of Sri Lanka on Sumatra, from the Kalingans.

Throughout history, the territorial boundaries of Orissa have evolved significantly. In the periods before the Ganga dynasty and during the Gajapati kings' rule, Orissa's domain extended from Tamluk in Bengal to the north, reaching down to the Risikulya River in Ganjam to the south. It was bordered by the ocean in the east and by the territories of Sambalpur and the present-day Chhattisgarh state in the west. Subsequently, under the Gajapatis and certain native rulers, the region's reach extended even further to touch the Godavari River in what is now Andhra Pradesh. These changes were largely influenced by the capabilities and ambitions of the rulers of the time.

This history underscores Orissa's pioneering role in maritime activities and cultural exchanges with regions like Java, Sumatra, Bali, Borneo, and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Despite this rich maritime heritage, much of Orissa's history of naval exploration and cultural influence had faded from collective memory, surviving only in folklore and certain traditions.

Tales of seafaring merchants returning with treasures and the custom of floating miniature boats with lamps on the full-moon day of Kartika are remnants of this glorious past, reflecting the enduring legacy of ancient sea voyages in Orissa's cultural fabric.

Burmese legends and historical traditions suggest that people from Kalinga (modern-day Odisha, India) settled in Burma from ancient times, predating even the conquest of Kalinga by Emperor Ashoka. Researchers like G. E. Gerini and B.C. Majumdar have argued that these connections date back centuries, possibly before Buddhism's arrival in the region. The Arthashastra and Jataka tales refer to Burma as Suvarnabhumi, the "Golden Land," highlighting its significance in ancient trade and cultural exchanges.

The relationship between Kalinga and Burma is further evidenced by the colonization and settlement patterns observed in Burmese history. Indian settlers, including Buddhists and Vaishnavas, likely arrived via both land and sea routes, establishing small principalities and

influencing local culture. Key settlements were in regions like Kale, Arakan, and Pegu, with some of these areas being referred to as Kalingarat in ancient texts.

Kalinga's influence on Burma extended beyond mere colonization. Cultural exchanges are evident in architectural similarities between Burmese pagodas and Orissan temples. The Ananda Temple, built during King Kyanzittha's reign, is a notable example of Orissan architectural influence. The flow of goods, including textiles and religious symbols, further cemented the connection.

Overland routes via Assam and Manipur and maritime routes from ports like Tamralipti were essential for this exchange. The ongoing cultural and commercial interactions between Kalinga and Burma significantly shaped Burmese society, leaving lasting imprints on its architecture, place names, and religious practices. While the exact extent of Kalinga's influence is difficult to measure, its impact on early Burmese civilization is undeniable.

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