Chapter III

THE DIFFUSION OF INDIAN CULTURE IN SIAM (MODERN THAILAND)

The history of Thailand is interwoven with and influenced by the histories and cultures that surrounded it. Understanding one culture's past requires a glimpse into several factors and an enquiry into how the actions of one affected the other. The work accomplished by the torchbearers of Indian culture in Thailand was so sound that from the first to thirteenth Century A.D., we find kingdoms and dynasties with Indian names, Brahmanic and Buddhist cults and sacred images, inscriptions showing intimate knowledge of Sanskrit literature and sculptures depicting Indian subjects—all these evidences of Indian culture will help in locating the diffusion of Indian culture in the Thai society.

Thailand, which has been known by various epithets such as “Land of the Free”, “Land of smile” and “Land of the Yellow Robes”, has religious, linguistic and cultural ties with India, which go back to a hoary past. Emperor Ashoka is said to have sent two of his emissaries there, the monks Sona and Uttara, as part of his mission to propagate Buddhism in countries far and near. They are said to have delivered their first sermon at Nakhon Pathom, Sanskrit Nagara Prathama, the First City, so called perhaps to commemorate that event.¹ The Puranas mention Indian ships laden with merchandize touching the ports in Suvaranabhumi, which is all likelihood, included Syamadesa, Siam, as Thailand was called then. A Tamil inscription found in Thailand, at the site of Takua Pa,

testifies to Southeast Asian commerce with the Pallava region. Here a South Indian mercantile corporation, the *manikramam*, had established a settlement possessing its own regiment, had constructed its own temple and tank, and lived as a self-contained colony. Due to contact with Khmers, who were highly Hinduised, the Hindu religion as well as the Sanskrit language found their way into Thailand. So profound was the impact of both that much of it is noticeable even now. Quite a large part of the vocabulary of Thai is Sanskrit.

**Historical Background of Thailand:**

There are conflicting opinions as to the origins of the Thais. Three decades ago it could be said with presumed certainty that the Thais originated in Northwestern Szechwan in China about forty-five hundred years ago and later migrated down to their present homeland. However, this theory has been altered by the discovery of remarkable prehistoric artifacts in the village of Ban Chiang in the Nong Han district of Udon Thani Province in the Northeast. These include evidence of bronze metallurgy going back thirty-five hundred years, as well as other indications of a far more sophisticated culture than any previously suspected by archaeologists. It now appears that the Thais might have originated here in Thailand and later scattered to various parts of Asia, including some parts of China. But, these theories are not satisfactory in confirming their approach.

For many years, to seek an overview of Thai history, one has had to build his/her own out of monographic components, in complete surveys, and articles often difficult to find, and occasionally difficult to read. David K. Wyatt has spent nearly a quarter of a century examining Thailand’s past. However, roughly

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half of his book, *Thailand: A short history*, is devoted to the millenium preceding the Chakri coup d' état of 1782 A.D. Wyatt sees Thai history as a coherent narrative, and the Chakri dynasty largely in terms of linear, qualitative progress.\(^4\) In Wyatt's book, there is little about literature, popular culture; and almost nothing, even in the form of speculation, about the origin of Thais.

However, now it is quite evident that originally the Thai were an offshoot of the people whose homeland was in historical time in Southern China. It is also endorsed by Brian Harrison, who opines that the Thai or Shan people (Shan being a Burmese term, and Thai the indigenous name) seem to have been originally scattered through Central and Southern China.\(^5\) According to D.G.E. Hall, the Siamese descended from a parent racial group, cognate to the Chinese, which is thought to have made its first historical appearance in the sixth century B.C.\(^6\) Since centuries before the Christian Era many of the Thai people, owing to circumstances and vicissitudes, migrated from their old homeland, Southern China and found their ways gradually in a southward direction into Indo-China.\(^7\) Some of them settled down in the mountainous district of Chiangsen in the north of Thailand and formed themselves into many free small principalities. Parts of these Thais together with other streams of this Thai race migrated further South, mingled and settled down in the north of the alluvial plain of the Menam Valley in Central Thailand. But it was not until after 1254 A.D. that the Thais became the dominant element in the Menam lowlands.\(^8\) These complex movements of Thais were to lead eventually to the emergence of the great reverential kingdom

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of Siam occupying the Menam basin. After the thirteenth Century neither the Mons nor the Khmers were sufficiently powerful to prevent the Thais from gaining control over this region in entirety. They again formed themselves into many small principalities, this time not independently but under the suzerainty of the Khmer Empire with its headquarters in Central Thailand at Lophaburi (Lavapuri). In the thirteenth century of the Christian era they succeeded in establishing themselves as a unified Thai kingdom of Sukhothai. Sukhothai’s geographical situation helps to explain its role as the cradle of Siamese Civilization. It lay on the dividing line between the spheres of influence of the Khmers on the one hand and of the Mons and the Burmese on the other. Moreover, it had easy communication with lower Burma, through which it could maintain relations with the metropolis of its Buddhism, Ceylon. Through all these contacts it absorbed important cultural elements and incorporated them in the civilization of Siam. A century later arose upon the last remnants of the now declining Khmer empire in the lower portion of the Menam Valley, another Thai kingdom of Ayuthia (Ayudhya). The new kingdom of Ayuthia was founded according to tradition in 1350 A.D. by a Thai Prince from U-thong, a district to the Northwest of Bangkok. By the end of fourteenth century Ayuthia’s domains had been extended to include not only Sukhothai and its erstwhile dependencies but also Moulmein, Tavoy, Tenasserim and much of the Malay Peninsula. Ayuthia herself as the capital of Thailand in the course of history, gave place to Bangkok or Krung Thep as called by the Thai which was founded in 1782 A.D. and has since remained the capital of Siam or Thailand. Eventually these two kingdoms, Sukhothai and Ayuthia and later Chiangsen and other parts of

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9 Ibid, P.114.
10 D.G.E. Hall,op.cit., p. 188.
Thailand were amalgamated into one unified kingdom of Thailand.\textsuperscript{12} Moreover, with in the traditional Thai order as has been developed in the kingdoms of Sukhothai(1230-1350), Ayudhya(1350-1767), and Bangkok(1782-till date), the king held a pre-eminent position.\textsuperscript{13} Thus, the Thai political system relied on the monarchy as the basis for its legitimacy. Today the kingdom of Thailand shares borders with Myanmar (Burma) on the West and Northwest, Laos on the East and Northeast, Cambodia (Kampuchea) on the Southeast, and Malaysia on the South. The Northern borders are only hundred miles from the People's Republic of China. North and South Vietnam are less than a hundred miles to its East. Its total land area is 513,115 sq. kilometers.\textsuperscript{14}

The people of Thailand share a rich ethnic diversity consisting of Thai, Mo'n, Khmer, Laotian, Chinese, Malay, and Indian descendants. The largest minority in Thailand is the ethnic Chinese. However, many of them have been assimilated into the Thai culture and have become Thai citizens.\textsuperscript{15} Though the area has historically been a migratory crossroads, however, integration is such that culturally and socially there is enormous unity.

**Dvaravati; The Earliest Kingdom of Siam (Modern Thailand) – Indicator of Indian Cultural influence:**

The diffusion of Indian culture in Siam (Modern Thailand) was a process of acculturation free from aggrandizement of whatsoever form. India, which witnessed cultural development since second millennium B.C., began to play the role of a cultural centre from the late half of the first millennium B.C.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p.14.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
transcending its culture to the neighbouring areas. From the beginning of Christian era, the waves of Indian cultural expansion – Catalysed by the Guptas, the Pallavas, and the Cholas –were responsible for the foundation of Indianized kingdoms in Thailand like Dvaravati.

As regards the origins and early history of Dvaravati Kingdom, the historical record remains sparse. However, literary and archaeological evidence has confirmed that central Thailand was the homeland of an early kingdom, referred to in inscriptions as “Dvaravati”.16 D.G.E. Hall, too, opines that central Siam, the home of the Mon people, witnessed the rise of their state known by the Sanskrit title of Dvaravati.17 The name Dvaravati is that of the legendary capital of Krishna in the Mahabharata story. The existence of a kingdom situated between the Khmer kingdom and the Pyu kingdom of Shrikhsetra is attested by the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang, who called it To'-lo-po-ti. This name corresponds to Dvaravati.18 Gordon Luce in his paper ‘Dvaravati and old Burma’, describes the kingdom of Dvaravati as essentially ‘Monland,’ the cultural Centre of the Mons.19 Evidence that the people of Dvaravati were originally Mon-speaking is provided by the fragment of an inscription in Indian script found at the chief site at Nagarama Patha (Nakhon Pathom, or more usually, Phra Pathom), and by another text carved on a Pillar at Lop Buri. Both texts are in archaic Mon, and the first dates perhaps from the sixth and the other perhaps from the seventh century.20 In 1959 A.D. Pierre Dupont convinced most

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16 Phasook Indrawoorth, “The Archaeology of the Early Buddhist Kingdoms of Thailand”, in Ian Glover and Peter Bellwood ed., Southeast Asia: From Prehistory to History, New York, 2004, p. 120.
20 G. Coedes, op. cit., p. 69
scholars that Dvaravati was indeed a great Mon Kingdom whose culture extended widely and came to embrace virtually the whole area of modern Thailand. Not long after that came the supposition that Dvaravati formed part of a Mon confederacy Centered at Thaton in Lower Burma. However, this supposition had no support beyond vague legendary and linguistic evidence. So, it is quite certain that the Dvaravati did not form part of the Mon confederacy centred at Thaton in lower Burma, as suggested by some scholars, but developed out of the earlier Austroasiatic-speaking chiefdoms of prehistoric Central Thailand.  

The dispersal of Dvaravati sites and the nature of the objects uncovered there at these sites provide considerable information concerning Dvaravati civilization. These archaeological remains attest to the presence, over a wide area which is now known as Thailand, of an extensive, populous and prosperous Buddhist civilization. Perhaps deriving partly from its ethnic and linguistic identity as Mon, Dvaravati civilization had distinctive qualities of its own that sharply contrasted with those of the neighbouring Khmer. The seventh century A.D. saw a large number of moated sites in occupation located along the margins of the central plain of Thailand. Sites in these regions include a number of important Dvaravati towns, such as U-Thong, Nakhon Pathom, ku Bua, Sri Thep etc.

U-Thong is situated in Suphanburi Province some thirty miles east of the Mekong river. Besides being an important port of the Dvaravati Kingdom, U-Thong was also an important early Buddhist center. H.G.Q. Wales has advanced the view that U-Thong was the earliest capital of the kingdom, which dates from

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21 Phasook Indrawoot, op.cit., p. 142.
550 A.D. and that from the beginning Theravada Buddhism predominated in this area.\textsuperscript{23} One can find in the museum at U-Thong portions of beautiful stucco and terracotta architectural decoration in a pure Amaravati style such as a terracotta relief with Buddhist disciples carrying their bowls and the lower part of a Stucco image of the Buddha sheltered by the Naga.\textsuperscript{24} These finds imply the former existence at U-Thong of Buddhist constructions of the third or fourth centuries A.D. The most important of these is the stone \textit{Dharmachakra}, the well-known symbol of Buddhism. Thus, U-Thong offers clear evidence of having been a Centre for the diffusion of Indian cultural influence.\textsuperscript{25}

Nakhon Pathom, situated near the West bank of the Ta Chin River, is nearer to the Gulf of Thailand than U-thong. The most important small finds from Nakhon Pathom are two inscribed silver coins found in a small earthen jar beneath a ruined Sanctuary at Nern Hin, West of Pra Praton Chedi.\textsuperscript{26} On the reverse of each Coin are engraved the Sanskrit words \textit{Sridvaravati Svarapunya}, meaning “meritorious deed of the king of Dvaravati”.\textsuperscript{27} On the obverse of one coin is a Purnaghata (vase of plenty), from which two creepers are sprouting. On the other side is a cow with its calf, symbolising of fertility and prosperity. G. Coedes, who read the inscriptions, stated that they are in South Indian Characters of the seventh Century and recognized their importance as confirming the Sanskrit name of the kingdom referred to in Chinese Sources as To-lo-po-ti.

Other important finds include pieces of stone \textit{Dharmachakra} (wheels of Law), one with two figures of Crouching deer to symbolize the first sermon in

\textsuperscript{23} Quoted in D.G.E. Hall, op.cit., p. 182-183.
\textsuperscript{24} Phasook Indrawooth, op.cit., p. 128.
\textsuperscript{25} D.G.E. Hall, op.cit., pp. 183-103.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p.102.
the Deer Park at Sarnath, as well as images of the Buddha made of stone and bronze. Thus, the Buddhist monuments at Nakhon Pathom, including Pra Pathon Chedi, emphasize its importance as a Buddhist center during Dvaravatī times. In addition, the Pali texts engraved on some stone Dharmachakra, mostly with Patieeasamappada-Sutta, provide evidence of familiarity with the Pali canon. A wide range of implements and domestic utensils occur in the occupational areas of sites such as Nakhon Pathom. These include polished stone axes, iron tools, terracotta spindle whorls, and stone saddle querns and rollers derived from Indian prototypes.28

Sri Thep is situated on the eastern side of the Pasak River in Petchabun province. The discovery of Hindu images of Vishnu, Krishna and Surya confirms the presence of an Indianised settlement at Sri Thep during the Gupta and post-Gupta periods (500-800 A.D.), as does a Sanskrit inscription mentioning a hermit’s daughter. G. Coedes also confirms that the images of Vishnu are preponderant in Sri Thep.29 After the mid tenth century Sri Thep was occupied by the Khmers, whose ruined temples are much in evidence at the site.30

The archaeological remains of central Thailand during the Dvaravatī period provide clear perspectives on themes in Dvaravatī material culture, such as town plans, buildings, implements, domestic utensils, ornaments and ceramics. As far as town plans are concerned, the series of large mooted towns along the margins of the central plains of Thailand during the Dvaravatī period undoubtedly reflect a high degree of Indianization.31 In the realm of Dvaravatī

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31 Phasook Indrawoot, op.cit., p. 132.
ceramics, pottery basically continued forms of the prehistoric period, such as the dish-on-stand, but strongly carinated vessels with ridges perhaps followed Indian ceramic styles. Jars with spouts (Kendi), sprinklers (Kundika) and small cups used as lamps also show close similarity in shape and design to Indian prototypes dating from the early Christian era up to the Post -Gupta Period (500-800 A.D.).³² A technique of decorative pots in relief used carved stamps following a technique introduced by Indian potters of the Gupta (300-500 A.D.) and the post-Gupta periods (500-800 A.D.).

The Thai culture was predominantly Indian. Hinduism and Buddhism were both the religion of the Dvaravati, but during the fourth to eighth century the predominant religion in central Thailand was Buddhism which gave origin to the Dvaravati art.³³ While Buddhism was the dominant religion of the Dvaravati, we should not lose sight of the Hindu elements in Dvaravati religion, especially at U-Thong. The existence of Saivism at U-Thong is indicated by a mid-seventh century copper-plate inscription which mentions gifts of a jeweled litter, a parasol and musical instruments to the Amratakeshvara (a form of linga) by Sri Harsvarman, grandson of king Sri Isanavarman. Not only Saivism, but traces of Vaisnavism are also evident with rough figures of Visnu in high relief, probably in Pallava style, kept in the U-Thong San Chao or spirit Shrine.

Nevertheless, the earliest evidence of religious belief at U-Thong is still Buddhist. A number of stucco or terracotta architectural decorations in Amaravati Style indicate that the Buddhist monuments already existed at U-Thong in the third of fourth Centuries.³⁴ Most scholars agree that Buddhist

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³² H.B. Sarkar, op.cit., p.59.
³⁴ Phosook Indrawooth, op.cit., p. 138.
beliefs were introduced here from Nagarjunakonda in the Krishna –Godavari region of South India, when it was under Ikshvakus rule between 200 and 350 A.D. The Buddhist worshipped Buddha images as we have many bronze and stone images from the main Dvaravati Sites. Devout Buddhists preferred to construct Mahachaityas in the centers of important cities, such as Chula Paton at Nakhon Pathom, Wat Klong at Ku Bua and Kao Klang Nai at Sri Thep.35 We also learn from epigraphical records that Dvaravati Buddhism was influenced not only from the Krishna –Godavari region, but also from Buddhist Centres in other parts of India. For instance, the religious beliefs held by the Hinayana sect of Buddhism, centred at Valabhi in Gujarat (India) and under the patronage of the Saka-Kshatraps (200-400 A.D.) and Maitrakas (400-800 A.D.) of India, seem to have had much influence on Dvaravati Buddhism.

Architectural remains of the Dvaravati period also indicate the diffusion of Indian Culture in the area as they are revealed by archaeological excavations. As regards architecture, there is at Phra Pathom (Nakhon Pathom) the lower part of a Buddhist temple which has a two-layered stepped base, upon each face of which seated Buddhas are placed in niches flanked by colonnetters and pilasters. Other foundations have been found farther west at Phong Tuk on the river Kanburi, along with a bronze lamp is Hellenistic style and Statuettes of the Buddha in post-Gupta style.36 According to Gordon Luce, Dvaravati architecture reflects the influence of Amaravati. The first native material to be used for Buddhist art in Dvaravati was laterite,37 and Gordon Luce has commented on the beauty of colouring retained by it even when the surface patterns of the image

have been lost. Phra Pathom has a life-size torso-image and a ten-spoke wheel-of-Law in laterite.38

In addition to architecture, there are many Carved Buddha images of the Dvaravati period, having the same characteristics as the architectural remains of the Indian Gupta period. These Dvaravati Buddha images may have been one of the many causes which influenced the formation of artistic appreciation of Thai sculptural art. The sculptural art of Dvaravati came under the influence of Buddhism from northern, eastern and Deccan centres of India. From Sarnath, a wheel flanked by two deer symbolizing the first Sermon in the Deer Park became the accepted emblem of the seals of almost all the Mahaviharas in Dvaravati. This motif was also considered to be of paramount importance by the Dvaravati people.39 The art of Dvaravati was also influenced by Mahayana Buddhism, emanating from the Deccan under the patronage of the Gupta and Vakataka rulers (300-600 A.D.). The art of the Deccan caves at Ajanta, Karle and Kanheri was also imitated, in particular the colossal images of Buddha Seated in Pralambapada-asana position, reliefs of preaching Buddha and of the Great Miracle of Sravasti.40

We also have the evidence of prevalence of Indian Concepts of state and kingship in Dvaravati. Inscribed silver coins from sites such as Nakhon Pathom, U-Thong, Ku Bua, etc. indicate the reality of Dvaravati kingship. On the obverse sides of these coins are engraved Indian symbols of fertility and prosperity, such as Purnaghata (Vase of plenty) or an animal-cow or deer- with its offspring. On the reverse sides occur the words Sridvaravati-Svarapunya, meaning

39 Phasook Indrawooth, op.cit., p.142.
40 D. Mitra, Buddhist Monuments, Calcutta, 1997, p.34.
“meritorious deeds of the king of Dvaravati”. A large number of uninscribed silver coins bear Indian symbols of kingship and prosperity such as the rising sun or Sankha (Conch Shell and Srivatsa (indicating the abode of Sri, goddess of fertility). These have been found throughout the Dvaravati region and in turn indicating the diffusion of Indian culture in Dvaravati.

Although some Dvaravati kings patronized Buddhist temples and no doubt followed the Buddha’s teaching, it is believed that they were exalted far above ordinary mortals through the magical power of the Rajasuya, or Royal consecration, which imbued the king with divine powers.\(^4^1\) According to Buddhist tradition, Dvaravati Kings could also be regarded “Universal Emperors” (Chakravartin), as recorded in the Chakravathisihanada Sutta. This states:

> "Just as Buddha appears from time to time in the cosmic Cycle, heralded by auspicious omens and endowed with favorable signs, to lead all living beings along the road to enlightenment, so does a Universal Emperor appear, to conquer all Jambudvipa and rule prosperously and righteously."\(^4^2\)

The concept of Chakravartin indicates that the Chakra or wheel (symbol of sovereignty) of the state chariot rolls everywhere without obstruction. It is believed that the Mauryas developed the concept of Chakravartin, which was incorporated into Buddhist tradition. Stone Dharmachakra that symbolize the Universal Empire and Buddha images, together with Buddhist monuments of typical Dvaravati style, have been discovered at the main Dvaravati sites in

\(^{4^2}\) Ibid.,p.21.
Central Thailand and in other religions to which Dvaravati Culture spread. All these indicate that the Dvaravati kings followed Buddhist practice as recorded in the *Chakkavathisihanada Sutta*, and as practiced by Asoka. The Dvaravati kings tried to follow Asoka in establishing *Dharma* or the "Law of Piety" (*Dharma-Vijaya*) in foreign regions, in order that they could be regarded as *digvijayins* – conquerors of the four quarters.

Thus we find from the various evidences that there was indeed the diffusion of Indian culture in Dvaravati, the earliest kingdom of Thailand. The Dvaravati rulers accepted the Indian concepts in order to give divine legitimacy to their secular rule. They therefore brought to their courts the priests and literati who introduced many elements of Indian culture to the Dvaravati people, such as the system of coinage, seals and sealings, town plans, ceramics, concepts of state and kingship, the Pali and Sanskrit languages, art and architecture, and religious beliefs.

**Religions of Indian Origin as an Integrating factor in Thai Culture:**

India is "the central link in a chain of regional civilizations...... About half the total number of living higher religions are of Indian origin...... Thus India holds the balance in the world wide competition between rival ideologies...... (and) India has also been a major force in the world history......"43, observed Arnold J. Toynbee, while dealing with the role of India in human history. For over thousand years, large number of peoples in many parts of the world adopted Indian religion, art, culture, languages and literature which, according to Reginald Le May, "Seem naturally to have exercised an

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extraordinary fascination over the indigenous peoples of all territories...". The excerpts quoted above highlight the dynamism and vibrancy of Indian religion and its role in shaping the world civilization through the twin process of transmission and assimilation. However, it must always be kept in mind that a religion not only shapes a cultural identity but is also shaped by the culture in which it is practiced. So also, Thailand has shaped and seasoned Indian religion, Buddhism with its own unique cultural ingredients. Although vivid Indian cultural forms theories of kingship and administration, religion and philosophy, language and literature, art and architecture, and dance and drama flourished throughout Thailand, but it was in the sphere of religion that the impact of Indian influence was more striking. Archaeological material of the beginning of the Christian era give the first definite indication of the religious conditions in the area of Thailand.

Buddhism first appeared in Thailand during the third century B.C. in the area of the present day provincial capital, Nakhon Pathom. Once established, it proved such a durable and pervasive force that some ethnic groups which migrated into that area during the Dvaravati period readily adopted it as their state religion. At its inception, Buddhism had been a reaction against Brahmanism, eschewing Brahmanism’s emphasis on caste and dogma regarding sacrifice and ritual. At the same time, it modified Brahmanic concepts of karma and rebirth. These above lines are also endorsed by Brian Harrison who opines that Buddhism arose partly as a challenge to the predominance of the Brahman caste as well as to the polytheism of ordinary Indian life. It had monks but no

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priests; it was not linked to the caste system.⁴⁷ Fundamentally, Buddhism is an empirical way of life. Free of dogma, it is a flexible moral, ethical, and philosophical framework within which people find room to fashion their own salvation. After its introduction into Thailand, Buddhism gained wide acceptance because its emphasis on tolerance and individual initiative complemented the Thai’s cherished sense of inner freedom. In addition to this, with its claims to be a universal religion, Buddhism could penetrate deeper among the masses because of the social structure provided by this religion.⁴⁸

Since Buddhism is such an integral part of Thai life, it is not surprising that it plays a particularly important role at those critical periods that serve to mark a person’s passage-like birth, marriage, and death. Birth; The religious practices following a birth may vary from region to region. In the central part of the country, for example, it is customary to shave the baby’s head when he or she is one month old. This essentially Brahmanic rite, known as the Khwan ceremony, may be accompanied by a Buddhist ceremony in which monks recite passages from the sacred texts. Ordination; The second rite in the life span of most Thai men is ordination into monk hood. It is considered that monk hood matures a man and prepares him for his adult life. For the period that he is ordained he is expected to live in the monastery, exemplifying the Buddhist ideal of life and undergoing rigorous training in body and mind control. He is free to revert to the status of layman at any time he so desires. Marriage; Buddhism also plays an important role in the ceremony which binds two people in the sacred bond of marriage. Traditionally, monks are invited to chant in the home of the bridal couple on the evening before their marriage. In the morning of the day

⁴⁸ G. Coedes, the Making of Southeast Asia, Berkeley, 1966, p. 70.
of wedding, the monks partake of food at the home of the bride’s parents, and chant verses from the sacred text as a blessing for the bridal couple. Upon completion of the chanting, the most senior monk sprinkles holy waters on the bride and groom and all the people gathered at the ceremony. **Funeral Rites;** These vary according to local customs, the type of death and whether the person was a layman or monk at the time of his demise. As the moment of death approaches, Buddhist chants are whispered, if possible, into the ear of the dying person. Once death has occurred, a bathing ceremony is usually conducted on the first afternoon, either at home where he dies, or at the monastery where his body is taken from a hospital or any other location. Although cremation may follow immediately, it is common that evening prayers would be continued for at least a week. The actual cremation can be performed in a variety of ways such as burning the body in a wooden coffin on a funeral pyre or in a modern crematorium. Thus, it would not be an exaggeration to say that, to the majority of Thais, Buddhism permeates their way of life from birth till death.

Thai religion is changing and so is Thai society. This shows that social and especially material changes drive religious ones.49 Since the 1980s, there has been a rapid weakening in politician’s interest in controlling forms of Buddhist religiosity in Thailand – except to eradicate monastic corruption or counter-clerical immorality. This has permitted the rise of a range of religious movements, which in earlier decades would have incited political and legal intervention to enforce normative practice and teaching.50

Along with the most of the Southeast Asian nation, Thailand practices a form of Buddhism Known as Theravada (Hinayana), or "the way of the elders". We may have some archaeological and even epigraphical proof, relating to the popularity of Theravada Buddhism around sixth century A.D., but the real impetus was garnered from the later part of the eleventh century A.D. It is also believed that Sukhothai's (1275-1350 A.D.) king, Ramkamhaeng, already a devout Buddhist, invited Theravada monks from Ceylon (centre for Theravada Buddhism) to Sukhothai to purify the Khmer-influenced Buddhism that was being practiced and this was the period which witnessed the glorious days of popularity of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand. The recent discovery of a Buddhist inscription at Noen Sa Bua in the Prachinburi area of eastern Thailand, dated 761 A.D., written in old Khmer with a quotation of three Verses in Pali, indicates the expansion of Theravada Buddhism to the present Thai-Cambodian border in the pre-Angkor period. 51

The fundamental doctrine of this ancient Buddhist sect is to remain aloof from all sorts of evil, to do everything what is good and to purify the mind. All these things could be possible only by observance of Sila (Good Conduct), Samadhi (meditation) and Panna (wisdom). Theravada Buddhism does not recognize god as the all knowledgeable, eternal being. It does not believe in total divine control. Karma is the pathway, not stile. Karma can earn divine status and hence there is belief in god too in Theravada. This is because the mythological world of the early Buddhist texts is inhabited primarily by the Devas, the traditional Indian gods. The Theravada teachings on "Simple Compassion" (Karuna), though few in number, do offer some guiding principles for social

action. It is the Theravada teachings of “sympathy” (Anukampa) that presents the greatest amount of material for the motivation of social activity. Thais, however, did not give up their previous beliefs in spirits (Phi) and vital essence (Kwan) nor did they discard the idea of the cosmic order. They were subordinated to the Theravadin doctrine of Karma and the Theravada message of Nirvana (Salvation). 52

Theravada Buddhism in Thailand is focussed primarily on the well-being of the monastic community and the Wat, or “temple”, in which they reside. There are thousands of Wats throughout Thailand. Apart from being a centre of religion, it is also a centre for recreation. During the festival seasons, the Wat has a very important role to play. Fairs are organized in the monastery compounds. The Wat fairs are the place where the villagers have a chance to express their common social and cultural membership. Their participation underlines their sense of belonging to a common way of life and cultural heritage. In the southern part of Thailand, shadow plays depicting the Thai Version of the Ramayana are normally performed. The wall-painting of the outer gallery of Wat (temple) Phra Keo (in Bangkok) portrays the scenes of the Ramakien which are also of unique interest. 53 Thus, Wat fairs assist is the preservation of time –honoured traditions. In recent years, many Thai Buddhist temples have become, in partnerships with local doctors and nurses, innovative pioneers in hospice care for the terminally ill, which has become particularly important in the wake of AIDS spread in Thailand. 54 Thus, we see that Theravada Buddhism profoundly influences everyday life. It finds expression in the Thais’

52 Suchita Ghosh, op.cit., p. 49.
tolerance and kindness towards their fellow men, regardless of race, creed or
nationality. Today, it is the professed religion of over 90% of the Thai people.

Through the centuries Buddhism has been the main driving force in Thai
cultural development. Much of classified Thai art, particularly architecture,
sculpture, painting, and early literature are in reality Buddhist art. The art
reflects the complex formal structure and etiquette of court culture, with its
heavy Indian influences, and expresses both religious and intellectual impulses.
The earliest surviving murals in Thailand are characterized by earth colours
made from natural pigments. They depict excerpts from the Jataka stories,
episodes from the Buddha's life, and scenes of contemporary life. The murals in
Bangkok's Wat suthat and Thon Buri's Wat suwannaram are particularly of fine
depict excerpts from the Jataka stories, episodes from the Buddha's life, and scenes of contemporary life. The murals in
Bangkok's Wat suthat and Thon Buri's Wat suwannaram are particularly of fine
examples. Thai sculptors of the past concentrated almost exclusively on Buddha
images, producing works that rank among the world's greatest expression of
Buddhist art.

Although Buddhism is the "State religion" in Thailand, other indigenous
traditions like animism and ancestor worship are also observed and practiced.
Animists have a profound respect for nature and the environment, and ancestor
worshippers keep the honour and memory of past family members and heroes
alive in their hearts and minds. One of the more unique aspects of Thai
Buddhism is its "popular religiosity", or its assimilation of some of these ancient
indigenous folk practices like astrology, divination, fortune-telling, the
maintaining of spirit houses, and the collecting of amulets.55 The collection of
amulets is perhaps the most intriguing aspect of popular religion in Thailand.

55 Ibid, p. 144.
Any discussion of religion in Thailand would not be complete without
addressing Hinduism, the religion that has historically shaped and more or less
dominated the cultural landscape of Thailand. Perhaps the most surprising is
Hinduism's seemingly incongruous presence in the ritual protocol that has for
centuries surrounded the Thai royal court. As Buddhism evolved from its
Indian/Hindu context, it is quite natural that there would be relationship between
Hinduism and Buddhism. For example, Hinduism gives the Buddha the same
respect that it gives to their traditional deities, because Hindus regard Buddha
as simply one of their multifaceted perception of divinity (i.e., that vast
multitudes of god comprise the singular ultimate reality of Brahman). Though the
Buddha had little to say about the Hindu deities, he did not simply renounce or
deny their existence, nor did he claim a divine status for himself. Prior to the
arrival of the earliest Buddhist missionaries, Hinduism permeated Southeast Asia
in the pre-Thai Kingdoms. Even after the kingdom of Sukhothai embraced
Theravada Buddhism once and for all as its “state religion”, Hindu deities like
Indra or the cyclical “trinity” of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva simply remained on
the scene as familiar and secure facets of the Thai religious landscape.

The Hindu civilization spread to Siam (historical name of Thailand) in
early times from about second century A.D. The Hindus set up many colonies in
Siam and the most important of them was Dvaravati, which ruled from Cambodia
to the Bay of Bengal upto the tenth Century A.D., when it was overthrown by the
Kaundinya Kingdom. Numerous excavations have yielded extensive evidence of
Indianization and some remarkable piece of art. From the sixth to tenth century
A.D. Mon Dvaravati art saw its apogee. Influenced by Gupta percepts, it

56 Ibid, p. 148
developed many local schools spreading over central and northeast Thailand. As Siam increasingly assimilated Indian art and culture into a local pattern, relics of pure Indian descent are more ancient than those reflecting local influences. One of the most remarkable sites in the center of Siam is Srideb, where statues of Hindu deities bearing Sanskrit inscriptions of the fifth and sixth century have been discovered. The art of Srideb is of excellent quality and provides a link between Indian art and the art of Southeast Asia.

The Brahmins in Thailand had long back come from India and there too from South India as is known from the only readable line in the otherwise moth-eaten last page of a Diary with Phra Khru Chavin, son of late Phra Rathchakru Vamathevamuni, Sri Rajaguru Vamadivamuni which records the fact that “the ancestors of the Brahmins had come to Thailand from a place called Ramnagar in South India”\(^57\). One thing to be noticed in the case of the Brahmins in Thailand is that not everybody born in the Brahmin family is called a Brahmin. This appellation attaches to only those who have initiation in Brahminhood. For initiation to Brahminhood there is no age limit, but a person of less than twenty-one years of age cannot take part in the Brahmin ritual\(^58\). The legends that tell of the arrival of Brahmin priests from India often have a highly practical twist to them. The Brahmins of the legends bring wisdom and advice to the rulers, instructing them in statecraft as well as in religion. The learned Brahmins introduced Hindu concepts and rites, as well as the sciences, arts and techniques of India\(^59\). They were the architects of such a high caliber that they not only shaped their temples in accordance with the demands of building technology, but

\(^57\) Satya Vrat Shastri, op.cit., p. 52  
\(^58\) Ibid, p. 53  
\(^59\) Phasook Indrawoot, op.cit., p.125.
also in terms of religious symbolism and astronomical observation.\textsuperscript{60} The Brahmins of Thailand have their own ritual, their own temples called the Bot Phram; one at Bangkok and the other at Nakon Si Thammarat, Nagara Sri Dharamaraja in the South of Thailand and their own festivals and customs. The Brahmin temple, the Bot Phram, at Nakhon Si Thammarat is older than the one at Bangkok having been set up, as tradition has it, with the arrival of the Brahmins in Thailand.

The pantheon of gods and goddesses in Thailand is Hindu in origin. The very words of gods and goddesses are Sanskriti: \textit{theva, thevi, thevada}, like Sanskrit \textit{deva, devi, devata}.\textsuperscript{61} Lord Ganesh has been a major deity, since the seventh and eighth Centuries, in Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam. Ganesha literally means “Lord of the Gana”. Lord Ganesha is found in Thai art especially around Sukhothai in central Thailand. There are also spectacular images coming from Myanmar, Malaysia, and Laos—with both Buddhism and Hinduism intertwined and Ganesha appearing predominantly as a protector and guardian. It was Ganesha in his role as remover of obstacles that was primarily accepted in mainland Southeast Asia. Even today in Buddhist Thailand, Ganesha is regarded as god of success.\textsuperscript{62}

\textbf{Thai’s Language and Literature, Art and Architecture—A testimony to the Indian cultural diffusion}

Famous Indian literary works, such as the \textit{Ramayana}, the \textit{Mahabharata} and the \textit{Shakuntalam} have formed the basis of some of the outstanding Siamese literature. The temples situated in its capital, Bangkok, were adorned with

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\item[\textsuperscript{61}] Satya Vrat Shastri,\textit{op.cit.}, p. 52.
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sculptures depicting scenes from the Ramayana. The Ramayana, known in Siam as the Ramakien “Ram-Akhyan” where Akhya is a Sanskrit word meaning “rendition of the story of”. It is regarded as a Siamese Classic. Knowledge of this work is as essential for a cultured Siamese as Homer used to be for a European. The epic and Puranic literature of India constituted the principle source of inspiration not only for Siam but also for the whole of Southeast Asia. It provided the themes for classical theatre, Shadow theatre, and marionette shows.

It was through the spread of Hinduism and Buddhism, and especially the later, to which the art, architecture and literature of the Thai owe their origin. When the Thai came within the orbit of Hinduism and Buddhism, it is easy to imagine that the Khmer art developed in relation to these two great religions and gradually got transfused into the spirit of the Thai people. Through their inborn aesthetic sense of art and racial characteristics the Thai were able to create their own personality in art, quite distinct from that of the old background.\(^6\) Although the Thai people intermingled freely for centuries with other races in the peninsula of Indo-China, they nevertheless maintained their own identity.

Most of the Thai literature in olden days was works on Buddhist religion and romantic tales and mythology derived from Buddhism and Hinduism directly or indirectly. Apart from treatises on the religion, arts and science of those days, the old Thai literary works, like in India, were composed in verse. In recent times much of the Kavaya literature together with the romantic didactic tales of India has been introduced into Thai literature through translated English versions. There are three version of the Ramayana in Thai. They are all written

\(^6\) Phya Anuman Rajadhon, op.cit., p. 16.
in verse.\textsuperscript{64} The Thai versions of the Ramayana, called in Thai ‘Ramakien’ (Ramakirti), is in consonance with the original Valmiki epic, but many exotic episodes have been introduced in the Thai versions. Some of them may be traced to Ramayana of southern India, especially the Tamil version. One of the episodes in the Thai Ramayana is nearly identical with the character of Kakua in the Bengali version of Chandaravati. Another episode in the Thai Ramayana deals with the three celestial beings. They are Mekhala, the Southern Indian Goddess of the sea and of the Buddhist Jataka, Parasu-Rama the 6\textsuperscript{th} avatar of Vishnu, and Parjanya, the Vedic Rain God. The three met one another during the early part of the rainy season. Here Mekhala has the character of the Goddess of Lightning, Parasu-Rama (Corrupted in Thai as Ramasun, i.e., Ram, the Asura and sometimes Parote i.e. Parasu) as the God of Thunder, and Parjana, in Thai ‘Prachun’, as the God of Rain. These three characters are identical with Indian names.

The Thais absorbed polysyllabic Sanskrit (the Classical language of ancient India) and Pali words as Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism asserted their shaping influences. King Ramakamhaeng of Sukhothai created the first Thai alphabet in 1283 AD, basing it on Mon and Khmer Scripts which, in turn, were derived from a South Indian script.

**Indian Concept of State and Kingship:**

The traditional Thai political structure has been described as an elaborate, encompassing, persistent structure formally organized on the premise that it existed to serve the king, the source of all authority. In theory, the king possessed all legitimate power, a power rooted

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid, p. 20.
in a divine, quasi-magical charisma. Given the immensely elevated status of traditional Buddhist rulers, there should be no surprise in the fact that a ruler such as the Thai monarch has continued to be a fundamentally important figure in the modern history of Thailand.

In Thailand, Hindu-Buddhist traditions of kingship saw the monarch as a repository of *karma* linking the kingdom to the cosmos and as possessing, both in his person and in his office, a relationship to the invisible world by which his body and his actions were made sacred. The various manes by which Bangkok was known such as the “Heavenly Royal city”, the “city of the Angels” or the “Abode of the Gods” is an indication of the capital being looked upon as an image of the cosmos. On the one hand, the structure of the Buddhist cosmos-- in particular its hierarchical, merit-determined order-- was reproduced at the level of human social and political organization. On the other hand, it inherited from Hindu tradition its *devaraja* concept of divine kingship. The Hindu notion of divine kingship, in its modified form, conceptualized the king as the embodiment of the law and provided him with a majestic aura of mystery and a place in the cosmic order. The king’s divine status reflected the fact that the monarch and the throne he occupied were the centre of the kingdom. As for Buddhism, it affirmed the role of kingship as the expression of the *dhamma* and righteousness, and as the fountain of justice, as well as the ordering principle of society. Both traditions accordingly concurred in buttressing the political authority of kingship, each giving its own legitimization to the polity.

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67 Suchita Ghosh, op.cit., p.43.
68 Milton Osborne, op.cit., p.40.
Hindu tradition manifested itself in the form of royal ceremonies, such as rituals associated with the oath of allegiance and the coronation of the king. As in the Vedic rituals concerning the coronation of kings, the enthronement ceremony in Siam followed a similar pattern. At his enthronement a king of Siam was surrounded by eight Brahmans representing the Lokapalas who guard the eight points of the Brahman cosmogony. Even in Dvaravati, the first historical kingdom of Thailand, where most of the kings patronized Buddhism, it is believed that they were exalted far above ordinary mortals through the magical power of the Rajasuya, or Indian concept of royal consecration, which imbued the king with divine powers. Dvaravati coinage also suggests that some of the Indian concepts of the state and kingship were accepted by Dvaravati rulers. A large number of uninscribed silver coins bear Indian symbols of kingship and prosperity such as the rising sun or Sankha (Conch shell) and Srivatsa (indicating the abode of Sri, Goddess of fertility). These have been found throughout the Dvaravati region and in contemporary cities influenced by Indian civilization, from Burma to the lower Mekong Valley. In the Thai court of Sukhothai period, the Brahmans conducted the great ceremonies, such as the royal consecration, and functioned as ministers and counsellors. Moreover, the ancient Brahanical rituals associated with the kingship and the court continued to be followed even into the modern period.

Conclusion

Thus, it is quite lucid that the religions of Indian origin, Buddhism and Hinduism, have proved to be a socially integrating and stabilizing force for the Thai society. It has brought the people together in religious as well as social

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69 H.B. Sarkar, op. cit, 1985, p.140.
70 Ibid, P.144.
71 Phasook Indrawooth, op. cit., p.136.
73 Nicholas Traling, ed, op. cit., p.288.
gatherings. Further, Buddhism and Hinduism have not proved to be divisive or mutually exclusive as each has its own place in the Thai world order. India left the indelible impress of her high culture on Thailand, not only upon religion, but also upon art and architecture, literature, languages, the system of coinage, seals and sealings, concept of state and kingship. Indian cultural diffusion in Thailand was entirely by peaceful means. Seldom has the world seen such a protracted and pervasive cultural diffusion. It stands as a monument to the vitality and magnetism of Indian civilization.