Chapter V

CONCLUSION

It is by now an established fact, that the pattern of Southeast Asian cultural history has been influenced and drawn by the history of cultural forces in the surrounding areas of Asia. And as the broad spectrum of cultural forces became more integrated, they began to exercise and articulate a correspondingly strong and more easily defined influence. In this endeavour, India made more inroads, whereas China, the close neighbour of Southeast Asia, due to its imperialistic designs, failed to make much headway, except in Vietnam. India advanced its cultural links through subtle and refined methods. It was a peaceful penetration rather than a military conquest. India was able to leave a far greater and more enduring imprint on the Southeast Asian countries than China by providing the very basis and inspiration for the great Hindu empires that flourished like that of the Funan (the most important Indianized state) and Khmer empires in Cambodia, as well as Majapahit, Sailendra and Sri Vijaya empires in Indonesia, and the Buddhist kingdoms in Thailand and Burma.

Historically, ‘Indianization’ was the term generally used for Indian cultural diffusion in southeast Asia because as a zone of confluence, it is one such region that had experienced a long process of Indian cultural influence through the process of assimilation and adaptation which are still prevalent, despite the disruption of trade relations with India for well over hundreds of years and the racial differences between the Indians and Southeast Asian peoples. This Indianization of Southeast Asia provided an adaptive and flexible unity to those regions it influenced. For example, in Thailand we can find the city of Ayodhya and Thai versions of the Ramayana. Every polity influenced
by this Indianization was able to incorporate the vast Indian culture into its own as it never resorted to physical force or coercion to subvert local cultures or identities. Its worldviews were based on compassion and mutual exchange. This is not to say that political disputes and wars of conquest never occurred, but that in most instances, neither the motive nor the result was the imposition of cultural homogeneity. This malleability provided a non-invasive and unimposing diffusion.

Although the culture of India, largely embodied in insular Southeast Asia with the Sanskrit language, art, philosophy, the concept of state and monarchy, and the Hindu and Buddhist religions, was eagerly grasped by the elite of the existing society, typically Indian concepts, such as caste and the inferior status of women, appear to have made little or no headway against existing Southeast Asian traditions. Though there are doubts as to whether Indian culture ever reached the lower strata of the native society during the Hindu period, it cannot be denied that in the Buddhist states of Southeast Asia the entire population came under Buddhist influence. Today also, one can find that the cosmogony, the belief in transmigration and in the retribution brought about by actions, and all the other basically Indian concepts contained in Buddhism are inculcated into the people of Buddhist states of Southeast Asia from childhood on, whatever their social status may be; and thus they continue to belong to the Indian cultural zone. Buddhism is deeply rooted in Siam, Burma, Cambodia and Laos and still receives the staunch allegiance of these countries. Indian cultural diffusion was deepest in those areas where it operated most continuously, and where there was a centralized government run by an oligarchy of princes and dignitaries who were impregnated with Indian culture.
In the whole gamut of Indian cultural diffusion in Southeast Asia, both Indians and Southeast Asians played their role. Rather than being the result of a single factor, most likely the whole process of this diffusion was the outcome of endeavours of traders, priests, missionaries and adventurers from India along with the indigenous initiative. The indigenous initiative came mainly from the ruling classes, who invited the Brahmans to serve at their courts as priests, astrologers and advisors. Contacts between India and Southeast through trade, once established, persisted, and subsequently paved the way for the process of Indian cultural diffusion in the region. The fabulous wealth of Southeast Asia was an attraction for the Indian traders. Moreover, the economic motives were tinged with a sprit of adventure. The type of names given to different regions of Southeast Asia is recognition of this desire for economic gain. The Ramayan, the Puranas, the Pali Nidusa, the Jatakas, Kautilya’s Arthasashtra and other works refer to Southeast Asia as Suvarnabhumi (land of gold), Suvarnadvipa (island of gold), Karapuradvipa (island of camphor), and Yavadvipa (island of barley) etc. Along with traders, Brahmans (priests) from India came to this region, who acquainted the local elite with Indian rituals, scriptures, and literature. They became counsellors in the affairs of the royal courts. They played an important part by performing rituals and concocting genealogies for local rulers, thus providing legitimacy. In Hindu and Buddhist thought, the ruler occupied an exalted position as either the incarnation of a god or a bodhisattva (future Buddha). Elaborate, Indian – style ceremonies confirmed the ruler’s exalted status. However, some scholars are skeptical about the role of priests because high – caste Brahmans would have been prohibited by Brahmanic codes from crossing the polluting waters of the ocean to the archipelago.
Indian cultural elements like Sanskrit language, the Hindu – Buddhist cults, the legal concepts of the *Dharmashastras*, and the Indian concept of royalty became essential features of the early states of Southeast Asia. The common people, too, were influenced by Indian elements like the stories of the *Ramayana*. Sanskrit was the primary vehicle for the spread of Indian ideas overseas, and it was almost the sole language used in epigraphs, apart from the local vernaculars. As the inscription show, at least the cultural elite were well acquainted with Sanskrit language and literature. Even today, Sanskrit and Pali remain the chief sources of enrichment. Both, Sanskrit and Pali, have contributed in a massive way to the evolution of vernacular literature. The scripts of most of their languages are adaptations of Indian writing. Besides abstract terms relating to religion and philosophy, words concerning material culture were also borrowed from Sanskrit.

What Monier Williams wrote of India applies equally to Southeast Asia as well:

"*India's national character is cast in a Sanskrit mould and in Sanskrit language. Its literature is a key to its vast religious system. Sanskrit is one medium of approach to the hearts of the Indians, however unlearned, or however disunited by the various circumstances of country, cast, and creed*".

The epigraphic and literary evidence shows that the Indianized countries of Southeast Asia had knowledge of Indian law. Despite the fact that India never exercised any suzerainty over these countries, it provided them with the concepts, the methods, and the terminology which formed the necessary apparatus for the creation of a legal system that could be applied to already existing institutions. So, the influence of the *Dharmashastras* on the polity of these lands is quite evident.
The spread of the universal themes and ideals of the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, is an important example of cultural diffusion and adaptation from India to Southeast Asia. In the process of adoption, the stories of *Ramayana* have been interpreted with local variations. The epic themes and ideals of righteous behaviour, loyalty to family and kingdom, the balance of good and evil, self-sacrifice for the betterment of society and the exploration of ideal relationships provide both global appeal and an opportunity for expression of local cultural identity. Performing arts like shadow plays and puppet shows have continuous interaction with *Rama* story. For example, the shadow - play or *Nang*, as it is called in Thailand, is most of the time based upon the Rama – Sketch. In the bas – relief of temples, there are representations from the *Ramayana* stories. Truly, *Ramayana* tradition is a multivociced entity in Southeast Asia encompassing tellings of the *Rama* story that vary according to regional location and social context. It still contribute to the themes for the theatre, dances, shadow plays and the marionette shows of Malaya, Java and Bali.

Indian culture was diffused through the autochthonous societies of Southeast Asia, whose social base was of such a standard that it could assimilate elements of Indian culture. The conception of divine kingship as imbibed from India was adopted by those who came within the sphere of India culture and found very conducive environment there in which to flourish. In this process of diffusion, the tribal society, while retaining the best that was in their culture, was gradually brought within the framework of the Indian concept of state and kingship. On being converted to monarchy on the Indian pattern from their original tribal society, the Indianized kingdoms were able to develop and to extend their influence over adjacent territories by following the Indian principles of
ruling. They applied the theory of universal monarchy and formed a king of federation under the scepter of a sovereign who had achieved the conquest of the four directions and taken the significant title of Chakravartin.

The spurt of further diffusion of Indian culture took place with the introduction of Indian religions (Hinduism and Buddhism) with their myths, philosophical systems and traditions in Southeast Asia. Indian religions have historically shaped and more or less dominated the cultural landscape of Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular. Though it seems that any knowledge or deep understanding of the Hindu and Buddhist dogmas was confined to the circles of small elite, the ritual and the outward manifestations of the Indian religions comprised the most lasting and firmly established element in the process of Indianization. The gods of the Hindu and Buddhist pantheons were worshipped alongside indigenous gods without difficulty, or sometimes even merged with them. It is quite astonishing to notice that Indian religious in Southeast Asia had shown mutual tolerance towards each other, often amounting to a tendency towards syncretism. Even today, Hindu and Buddhist cults coexist peacefully. Moreover, the Indian cultural diffusion in Southeast Asia is primarily religious in nature and most of these cultural traits are Hindu or Buddhist in nature and origin.

Tangible results of their contact with India may be seen in their architectural monuments and temples. The enthralling stupa of Borobodur, the Siva temple of Prambanan, the Ramayana sculptures of East Java, the Arjuna candi (temple) of Java, the immortal legacy of khmer Angkor vat visnu temple with its Ramayana, Mahabharata, Hari–Vamsa sculpture gallery, the Skyline temple in Bangkok, the Korat image of Buddha found in Siam, the Ngakye Nadaun stupa of Pagan, the images of Bodhisattvas
in Burma, the Ananda temple of Pagan, the monuments of Gedong Songo in Java, the Pura Besakih temple of Bali and much more – all these reflecting toward the vitality and magnetism of the elements of Indian culture which seem naturally to have exercised an extraordinary fascination over the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia.

The persistence of Indian cultural elements in contemporary Thailand and some other parts of Southeast Asia are strong logical pointers to the magnitude and intensity of India cultural diffusion. We saw in the preceding chapter how in most of the contemporary Southeast Asian countries the Indian cultural elements are persisting without any hindrances. For example, although today Indonesia is the world largest Muslim nation (ironically Islam was also brought mainly by Indian seafarers form the Coromandal coast and Gujarat), but beneath the surface much of the Hindu culture still endures. The great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, though no longer with their same previous religious significance are still enormously popular throughout the archipelago especially in Java and Bali. Of course, the Thais, once established in the Menam basin, underwent a process of Indianization in the realm of its culture, which is well documented. The art and architecture found in the country along with folk theatre and folklore, religious rites and rituals, personal names and the language still bear overwhelming impression of the Indian cultural influence on them. Even today, the kings of Thailand bear the royal title as Rama, a Hindu avatara and the story of Ramayana, called the Ramakien in Thai, is depicted on the palace and temple walls of Bangkok. Hindu festivals such as Dusshera commemorating the victory of Rama over the demon king Ravana, are still observed in Thailand. The Thais, like the Hindus, still believe in Vishnu or Narayana (called Phra Narain in Thai), and Mahadeva or Shiva, and condemn
the asuras (asuns in Thai) as the enemies of the devas (gods). The extent and effect of Indian cultural diffusion is also evident in Siamese dance, drama, and music. Many of the themes of Siam’s various dance-dramas (Lakhon-ram) are drawn from Indian stories: for example, the story of Savitri and Satyavan. Many Thai musical instruments closely resemble those of India. Moreover, the Siamese legal system is directly descended from the Manusmriti. The Hindu Dharmasashtra provide the framework for Siamese justice.

Although Thailand is today predominantly Buddhist, the Hindu influence continues to be visible mostly in the court ceremonies. Until recently, the court Brahmans cast horoscopes, consulted omens, and performed worship of both Hindu and Buddhist deities. Ceremonies of coronation, tonsure, cremation, and lesser rites connected with agriculture were developed by the Brahmans. The Siamese call their coronation ceremony by its ancient Sanskrit designation, the Rajyabhiskeka. The entire complex of coronation ceremonies such as homa (sacrifice to the fire), purificatory rites, ablutions, and anointment are closely modelled on Hindu rituals, and are presided by the Brahmrajguru. The tonsure ceremony in Siam is a rite of initiation of youth, corresponding to the Hindu, Cudakarna Mangala, which is very important Hindu Samsakara. Cremation, an old vedic rite, is the means of disposal of the deceased royalty in siam. Thus, the above mentioned contributions are like multifaceted streams that flow in the heart of Thailand from the deep of India’s being.

Although the above references are the most obvious features indicative of the deep influence India has on Southeast Asia in general and Thailand in particular, it should not be misconstrued as Indian cultural supremacy over Southeast Asia. At the same time, it will be naive to say that indigenous contribution was not important because
in almost every sphere native elements, though not so pronounced, remained embedded, which gradually became eloquent with the passage of time. It can not be denied that Southeast Asians borrowed heavily from the multifarious Indian cultural elements but they absorbed, into their indigenous traditional cultural patterns, the imported Buddhist and Hindu elements which they adjusted to their own requirements without losing their own identity and heritage. In fact, the cultural endowments of India were so cognate to the people of Southeast Asia as to become acceptable to them. The whole process of Indian cultural diffusion was the culminating impact of continuous interaction between the cultures of India and Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia has been an integral part of the Indian historical and cultural consiousness, which according to a former Indian diplomat, A.N.Ram, is both intricate and abiding, which "in turn contributed significantly to India's sense of security in an extended neighbourhood in which India is neither seen as an alien power nor as a country with a colonial past". It was due to colonial domination that the bonds were weakened. Besides, after these countries and India gained independence they took different directions in their path to progress. It was the post-cold war era that launched a new phase of re-discovery and a renaissance in the relationship. However, with the articulation of India's "Look East Policy", there is a concerted endeavour to focus on Southeast Asia, asserting the deep rooted historical, cultural and civilizational ties. Once again Southeast Asia is all set to assume its former historical role as a commercial hub for the emerging and already substantial India-China trade route.

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