

Indic Elements in Laos, a Southeast Asian Country: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: This article is about the influence of Indian culture particularly on Laos, which has been a South East Asian country since ancient times and continues to be so today. There are numerous cultural parallels between India and South East Asia. Over the centuries, various aspects of Indian culture have influenced the lives and civilizations of people living in South East Asia. From the second century onward, the principalities that emerged in the region witnessed the peaceful and non-political penetration of Indian culture. The local elite and people went through a selection and rejection process of Indian elements. Laos represented Indianized culture among South East Asian countries. Laotians have made significant advances in fields such as literature, religion, art, and architecture. Assimilation and diffusion occurred at all levels of society. Cultural elements from various parts of India merged to form local cultural forms. The remainder of the population, including Khmers and Thais, regard India as their primary source of cultural history and contemporary culture. Indic elements pervade their literature, which is written in Sanskrit and Pali scripts. Orissa temples influenced their temple architecture. Their devotion to the Ramayana, Jataka figures like Dadhivahana and Vimalaraja, and so on. It was not a case of Indians subduing Laos and imposing their culture. The Indian cultural superstructure was built on an indigenous foundation. Geographically it is far away from India but culture shortened the distance and made such a relation which can create a platform to fulfill the dream of the world is one family.

1 INTRODUCTION

There are many cultural similarities between India and South East Asia. Over the years, several facets of Indian culture have had an impact on the lives and civilizations of people in South East Asia. Indian culture was gradually assimilated into the principalities that arose in the area starting in the second century in a peaceful and non-political manner. The local elite and people went through a process of selecting and rejecting Indian elements. Previously, scholars perceived Indianization as an Indian endeavor, with South East Asia playing a passive role. South East Asia was identified as an Indian colony at the time of the Greater Indian Society's establishment in 1926. Its members alluded to Indian explorers setting up kingdom after kingdom aboard big ships. Actually, the ruling class was the ones who took the positive action, and over time, the local population incorporated aspects of Indian culture that they found appealing. Laos, a landlocked nation, along with Cambodia, Myanmar, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam represented

cultures that were heavily influenced by Indian culture. Laos' ethnic population may be split into four main groupings: Lao Lum (Cvalley Lao), Lao Tai (Tribal Tai), Lao Theng (Lao of mountainsides) and Lao Sung (Lao of mountaintops: Meo and Yeo tribes). Khmers and Thais were being the most influenced by Indians, they considered as the main source of cultural history of Laos. It is difficult to trace the start of cultural interaction between India and Laos due to a paucity of historical documents.

2 LITERATURE & COMMENTARY

In terms of political, economic, social, and cultural development, the golden period of the Mauryan dynasty was to be considered during the reign of Samrat Ashoka. His Dhamma's popularity spread throughout the world. During his rule in Laos, a Buddhist temple was erected, according to local folklore. The Luang of Vientiane was initially

constructed by a Buddhist monk named Phra Chao Chanthaburi Pasithisak to contain Buddhist relics imported from Rajir in India, as stated in the Ourangkharittan chronicle. Laotians living in southern China established principalities around the first century. The Chinese imperial power had spread southward along the Indo-Chinese coast, and China was constantly putting pressure on these principalities. In 1969 AD, King Luang Limao Ngal Lao principality was influenced by Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. Mingti, the Chinese king, had brought from Lord Buddha's image and the Buddhist text Tripitaka. According to the legend described in Pongsavadan Lao. The Chinese defeated Laotian Emperor, who was deeply influenced by Buddhist philosophy and practices. The Laotians then migrated to Nanchao in Yunnan and established a powerful kingdom under Sinhara, whose descendants ruled until the middle of the seventh century. These kings were influenced by Indian culture.

The Khmers were the next stage in the transformation of the Indic factor into Indianization in central and southern Laos. In the mid-sixth century, the Indianized state of Funan began to disintegrate, and its vassal state Chenla, centred in Sresthapura in southern Laos, began to exert pressure on Funan. The Khmer king of Chelna Jayavarmana I (657-681 A.D.) ruled over central and upper Laos. The Chenla emperors claimed to be descended from Brahmana Kaundinya. Brahminism grew in popularity in Laos. Hinduism's popular sects Shaivism and Vaishnavism became popular religions. In the 14th century A.D., Hinduism began to decline, and Buddhism began to rise in the rest of Laos. It was the time when Laos became a unified state. Fa Nagum established the Lan Xang empire in 1353 A.D. with the assistance of Angkor king Jayavarmana Paramesvara, whose daughter he had married. Because of the Khmer princess, the subjects of Laos were converted from their own religion to Buddhism, particularly in Hinayana, and Jayavarmana urged Fa Nagum to follow the teachings of Buddhism in his dealings with the people. Fa Nagum's father-in-law gave him Pali scriptures, a statue of Lord Buddha, and a monastic mission led by Phra Mahapasaman. The Prabang Buddha statue was installed in the capital city of Fa Nagum, which was later renamed Luang Prabang. Thao Oun Muong, Fa Nagum's son, founded Buddhist monasteries, and a copper statue of Lord Buddha was installed in the newly constructed Wat Manorom. Lan Khan Deng, his successor, built more Buddhist monasteries and temples. After a few years, another king, Photisaratha, who had built Wat Visoun, became a Buddhist monk. His son

Sethathirath relocated the capital to Vientiane, where he constructed a well-known shrine to the Emerald Lord Buddha. In 1566 A.D., he built Luang over an old stupa, which was his greatest gift. Van Wuysthoff, a Dutch traveler, visited Laos in 1641 A.D. and wrote about the "worshipped places and schools of Buddhist culture and art" in his diary. The repetition of the word 'Om' while invoking a regular spirit can reveal the breadth of the Indic factor. Laos is teeming with wandering spirits and souls of the dead known as 'Phi.' The life is one of many incarnations, and past actions shape the present life. The Phi sect was such a popular trend that the rulers built sanctuaries for the idols. One such example was Wat Phu Champassak, which was built on one mountain known as Linga Parvata by Phya Kammatha, who sacrificed a pair of virgins and a bowl of alcohol to the idol once a year. After some time, this tradition was restored by the sacrifice of buffalo, animal blood, candles, and incense, which is still a common tradition and belief in many Indian temples in Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

These Hindu beliefs and practices, regarded as an Indic factor, are still popular and encouraged to be passed down from generation to generation through engrave on inscriptions throughout Laos. King Mahendravarmana erected a Sanskrit inscription commemorating the erection of Shiva Linga on Phou Loken Hill. Another fifth-century inscription relates King Shri Devanika with Yudhishtira, Lord Indra, Dhananjaya, and Indradyuma. The name Indradyuma advocates for Devanika's release from Orissa. The inscription extols the virtues of Kurukshetra and indicates that the king intended to establish a new Kurukshetra in Laos, as Mahatirtha had done previously. It has been established that Devanika followed the Sanskrit literature and ritualistic texts. According to the stele inscription of Jayavermana First at Wat Phu temple, which contains Bhadresvara Shiva, the hill was named Linga Parvata. An inscription from the year 835 A.D. refers to Shreshthapura as a holy place because it was associated with Lord Shiva worship. According to the inscription of Jayavarmana Fourth in 11th century A.D. noted that the mother of king's court Pandit, Tilaka has been compared with Goddess Sarasvati because of According to an inscription written by Jayavarmana IV in the 11th century A.D., the mother of the king's court Pandit, Tilaka, has been compared to Goddess Sarasvati because of her learning. Similar to how Indian influences are readily apparent in their culture, which is an important aspect of their life, in art and architecture. The adoption of this Indic factor recognizes Indianization and how it has shaped their

respective societies based on their beliefs and practices. Orissa's customs and traditions influenced the development of scriptures, art, and architecture in Laos. The different Buddhist images that have been found in Laos are in line with Indian canon. The artists' concepts depicted Lord Buddha in the Bhumispara and Abhay mudras. Wat Phu temple's Hindu religious art featured Lord Indra on Airavata and Lord Vishnu on Garuda. The statue of Parvati at Wat Aram's door, images of Garuda and Naga at Wat Pa Rouck, an aquatic animal figure at That Lunog, and representations of Dwarapala at the entrances to various shrines all demonstrate strong Indic influences in their culture. In Laos, temples are classified into two types: Wat, which includes monasteries, pagodas, and temples, and Dhatu, which is an edifice used to house relics. Dhatu Lunog's architecture is reminiscent of Orissa's mediaeval temples. The pillars of Wat Phra Keo show the influence of Orissa style, whereas Fa Rouk and Wat Ban Tan have a close relationship with temples built during the Gupta period. The opulently decorated door and window panels of Wat Nang demonstrate a strong affinity with Indian style, demonstrating the importance of the Indian factor. The best example of Indo-Khmer influence is Wat Phu Champassak. Another distinguishing feature of Laotian architecture is the presence of Hindu and Buddhist icons in the same monument. Wat Pra contains images of both Lakshmi and Lord Buddha. Languages from the past Pali and Sanskrit have made significant contributions to Lao scripts, language, and literature. Sanskrit is used for the majority of the inscriptions. The prevalence of this language aggravated the influence of India on Laotian culture. In 1283 A.D., King Ram Kampheng of Sukhodaya introduced Lao scripts, confirming the shared origin of Thai and Lao alphabets. Simultaneously, as a consequence of the growing influence of Pali, which is one of the key contents of the Indic factor, Pali texts from Sri Lanka were brought. Toua-Lam is a holy form of Lao script that is utilized for Pali language transcription. According to our calculations, approximately 60% of Lao words have Sanskrit or Pali origins. Many words have Indian roots, including Kumara (Kumara), Pativata (Prativada), Pathet (Pradesh), Prom (Brahma), Rusi (Rsi), as well as others. The shift of Indian poems led to the development of the true traditional Lao poetry, and Lao verses follow Indian prosody measures. There are several topics from Indian literature in folk music, plays, and theatre. Lao folklore was influenced by Indian themes, and the rise of Buddhist monk's devotional chanting provided the inspiration for a

number of prose and poetry pieces. One can quickly see when watching classical Lao dance motions and movements that heavily borrow from a variety of dance forms that have been practiced in India from ancient times.

Laos people are captivated by ancient Indian texts such as the Ramayana, which is well-known due to mentions in the Ramayana that Laos was known as Lava, Rama's son. The mythology of Lord Rama, or Phra Lok Phra Lam, has embellished Laotian culture because of its fundamental human worth and societal principle. Laotians have accepted Ramayana legends as though they had occurred in Laos. Characters, names, and even geographical descriptions were presented in the indigenous language. Rabahnasv, Rama, and Bari, three rulers of the same family, ruled over Lanka (Langasuka), Kururathahnagan (Jambudvipa), and Kashi (Kasi in northern Laos). Lord Rama and Lakshmana were the sons of Viruppakhah, King of Jambudvipa, rather than King Dasaratha. Bali (Valin) and Sugipa (Sugriva) were Dattahratthah's sons (Dasaratha). The acceptance of the Laos people's rendition of Ramayana is a process. Valin and Sugriva were given the same respect as Lord Rama and Ravana. Lord Rama's parents had been changed. Nan Sujata took the guise of Sita and incarnated herself on Ravana's lap. The Gvay Dorabhi stated Lord Rama and Ravana's acceptance of overlordship in the marriage of Sita. Lord Rama was given a new father by one hundred and one kings who had come to hoist the bow. The introduction of the Ramayana was significant in that freedom of choice conditioned its evolution on autonomous lines reflecting Laos' environment and culture.

The Panchatantra was the source of the majority of Lao tales. It was translated into Lao language in 1507 A.D. by Phra Samgharaja Vixula Mahaviharathipathi of Wat Vixula Mahavihana. Laos was a huge fan of Orissa's Vishnu Sharma and his Panchatantra stories. Pakon (Prakarana), Nanda, Manduka, Pisaca, Sakuna, and Samgha were the five Pakon (Prakarana) in the Lao version. Tantai Mahadevi, the Sanskrit variation of Tantravaya or story weaver, was the teller of the stories. Mulla Tantai (Mula-Tantra) was a collection of tales used as legal comments. Molam literature was inspired by nature's beauty, Lord Indra's power, and the glories of paradise. Another passage in Lao Sirimangala's Mangalsutta, which was well-known in Burma and was cited in Sasanvamsa, was the Mangalsutta of Lao Sirimangala. 25 The Panasajataka was the inspiration for the renowned Lao poetry Sin Xay. The Jatakas, such as Dadhivahana and Vimalaraja, were translated into Lao and were immensely famous. Laotian literature was rife with

Indian characters. The *Nitan Khun Borom*, which depicted events up to 1571 A.D., stated that the son of Lord Indra was sent from heaven to create the kingdom of Lan Xang. Another chronicle in Laos, *Nitan Praya Cuong Lun*, was used to allude to knowledge regarding the Lava Kingdom's history. Hindu influences may still be seen in daily rituals, customs, and public occasions. In their prayers to Buddha, Laotians invoke the names of Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu, and Lord Indra. The rituals done at the time of birth and death in Laos bear some resemblance to those performed in Orissa. Following the death of a family member, the surviving relatives undertake rituals in the presence of Brahmins. The buffalo sacrifice at Wat Phu may have been influenced by the practise of animal sacrifice in several Orissa temples. The Baisi ritual involves the selection of the chief, known as Brahma, from among the village elders, who then carries out Buddhist and Hindu ceremonies on special events like the New Year, marriage, the arrival of dignitaries, the advancement of government officials, etc. Askin to Pranam, which is a profoundly heartfelt method of welcoming scholarly people and religious leaders, involves linking hands²⁷. Even the habit of chewing betel reminds one of this widespread practice in Orissa and other regions of India. All of these practices got ingrained in Laotian peoples, and the essence of our culture influenced them.

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3 CONCLUSIONS

The Indian culture is full of prosperity and happiness, and any civilization on the earth may readily embrace it. Laos is a South East Asian country where Laotians have achieved great accomplishments in disciplines such as literature, religion, art, and architecture. From ancient times, cultural contact with India has greatly enriched Laotian culture. The governing class was not the only group to absorb Indianized culture; they were early adopters of Indian ideals and customs. At all levels of society, there was assimilation and diffusion. Elements of culture from various parts of India merged to form local cultural forms. It was not a case of Indians subduing Laos and imposing their culture. The indigenous foundation served as the foundation for the Indian cultural superstructure. Geographically, it is distant from India, but culture has shortened the gap²⁵ Sarkar H.B., Cultural

Relations Between India and Southeast Asia Countries, New Delhi, 1998, p.293. 26 Daweewarn, n. 10, p.259-260. 27 The term Baisi is etymologically derived from Brahmana. and created such a relationship that can establish a platform to achieve the world's desire of one family. This cultural assimilation teaches the world that without strikes and political power, we can create an identity as a superpower that only institute peace and prosperity and thus saves the planet.

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