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# **The Influence of Early Tamil Culture in South East Asia**

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## THE INFLUENCE OF EARLY TAMIL CULTURE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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K. M. Panikkar in his "A Survey of Indian History (1954)," says: "*One thing, however, is certain and can no longer be contested that civilization did not come to India with the Aryans. This doctrine of the Aryan origin of Indian civilization which finds no support in Indian Literature is the result of the theories of Indo-Germanic scholars who held that everything valuable in the world originated from the Aryans. Not only is Indian Civilization pre-Vedic, but the essential features of Hindu religion we know it today were perhaps present in Mohenjo-Daro.*"

Hall in his, "Ancient History of the Near East" wrote long ago, "*The Culture of India is pre-Aryan in origin, As in Greece, the conquered countries civilized the conquerors. The Aryan Indian owed his civilization and his degeneration to the Dravidians as the Aryan Greek to the Mycaeneans*".

Hall also believes that "*The Sumerians derived their cultural from India.....*". Investigators have been struck by the fact that similar seals found both in Babylonia and in India belong to the earliest phase of the Mesopotamian culture, but to the latest phase of the Indus civilization, which suggests the priority of Dravidian India. (Will Durant, *Our Oriental Heritage*, 1932, pp. 395). Childe, another historian, confirms this when he states, "*It he Indus civilization was ahead of the Babylonian at the beginning of the third millennium B.C. This, it should be noted, is a later phase of the Indian.*"

Will Durant, speaking of the Dravidians in his book *Our Oriental Heritage*, says: "*They were already a civilized people when the Aryan broke down upon them; their adventurous merchants sailed the sea even to Sumeria and Babylon and their cities knew many refinements and luxuries. It was from them, apparently, that the Aryans took their village community and their system of land-tenure and taxation. To this day the Deccan is still essentially Dravidian in stock and customs, in language, literature and arts.*"

In an old Tamil poem of the Medieval period the writer mentions, 17 countries where the Tamil Language, and consequently the Tamil culture, were

known. Among the seventeen countries referred to are: Ceylon, Java, Malaya, Cambodia and China. The word *senagam* (in Tamil) should be taken to include Arabia and neighbouring countries.

Chinese historical sources which refer to the maritime traders bringing typical Indian products to China as far back as 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.. 'Were generally regarded with incredulity.' These accounts have received striking confirmation by the discovery in the Philippines of a number of iron age finds bearing close resemblance to objects found in south India of about the same period - the first millennium B.C. (Panikkar, K. M., *India and China*, 1957, pp. 17, 18)

In 1200 B.C. at Adichanallur (in South India), the Tamils were found to have cultivated rice, and it was in this region that the iron industry had its origin. There is every evidence to prove that the Tamils were the earliest people to introduce the cultivation of rice and the use of iron implements to the countries in the West as well as in South-East Asia.

Piggot in his book, "*Prehistoric India*", says with regard to rice, "*It seems probable that rice cultivation began earlier in India than it did in China and that the knowledge reached the latter country about 2000 B.C.*" In other words, the Aryan immigrants into India learnt the cultivation of rice from the Dravidians. In the light of these facts, it is amusing to find that Indian historians have been at pains to show that rice cultivation was introduced into Ceylon by the Aryans.

With regard to the centre of origin of iron, I give an extract from the Bulletin of the British Iron and Steel Federation - 1949, Sir William Larke, Director of the British Iron and Steel Federation, says: "*The centre of origin is variously placed in India, where there are historical traditions and remains indicating a highly developed iron culture. Hyderabad and Trichinopoly are considered by many to have been the centers of production of wools ..... This steel was noted for centuries, being carried by merchants from India to Damascus and Toledo.*"

It will be noted that both these sites are in South India (Deccan). Sir William gives the date of this origin of the iron age as 1400 to 1500 B.C. The iron implements found in the Adichanallur site about the same period, and the transport of iron hoes and tridents to distant countries such as Palestine and the Philippines confirms this fact.

For the purpose of studying the influence of Indian Art and Cultural in the countries of South-East Asia, Quaritch Wales in his work, *The Making of Great India*, divides South-East Asian countries into two zones - the Western Zone and the Eastern Zone. Under the Western Zone he includes Ceylon, Burma,

Central Siam, Malaya and Sumatra; while he includes Java, Champa (Siam) and Cambodia in the Eastern Zone.

He points out that Indian scholars - most of them North Indians and a few Aryanis Brahmins of South India - seem often to have tended to over-emphasize the overseas influence of their own part of the country - the implication being that they have exaggerated the role played by North Indian and Aryan culture in South-East Asia. He, however, accepts unhesitatingly the conclusion arrived at by M. Coedes, another great authority on South-East Asian Culture, that, "*All the regions of India contributed more or less to this expansion, and it is South India that had the greatest part, for the Southern half of the Greater India .... Consisting of Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, Borneo, Malaya and Bali - was naturally most exposed to South Indian influence.*"

Most recently, M. Stern has shown that even in Champa (Thailand) and Cambodia which are included in the Eastern Zones by Quaritch Wales, *Pallava* (Tamil) influences have played a significant part from very early times in the evolution of their culture.

The Indianisation of these countries in the Western Zone as well as in the Eastern Zone would appear to have proceeded in successive waves of cultural expansion.

The first wave which may be termed the Amaravati period (2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries) represents the Arts of Andhra which is Dravidian and South Indian.

The second wave - which may be termed the Gupta period - represents North Indian Art modified by Greek influences. The Guptas were Hindus but they did not persecute Buddhism.

The third wave - *Pallava* Art - was mainly Dravidian and Tamil Hindu Art. It must be remembered that the *Pallavas* were at the same time promoters of Sanskrit learning in the Tamil Country.

The fourth wave - *Pala* period - lasted from the 8<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. This Art had its origin in Bengal and was mainly Buddhist.

The fifth wave - *Chola* Art - lasted from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was again South Indian and Tamil. This wave was purely Hindu. Their great achievement was in plastic art known as *Chola* bronzes.

All five waves of Indian cultural expansion affected the countries in the Western as well as the Eastern Zones of South East Asia. In the Western Zone which includes Ceylon, Burma, Central Siam, Malaya and Sumatra, Quaritch Wales states that "*Indiansation was so intense that no indigenous are or culture ever developed, and that the bulk of the upper classes were mainly Indian Colonists. There was no evolution of any are or culture for lack of local genius to act as a shaper of evolution. The archeological remains represent simply the reflection of one or other waves of Indian cultural expansion. They may be justly called, colonial.*

### **The Malay Peninsula (Malaysia)**

It has been found that in the Malay Peninsula early South Indian colonists had founded a number of independent states. There are no records except Chinese notices to from an exact idea of the nature and origin of these states. By the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the entire region came under the power of the Sailendras and later fell an easy prey to the Siamese.

Malacca was an early Indian Hindu colony as proved by the *Makara* fragment built into the retaining wall near an ancient Portuguese generally had no regard for antiquities or relics except for those of their own faith. The find, however, is an indication that the *Pallavas* of South India had exercised authority in Malaya I the early centuries of the Christian era.

Perak, another district, has been identified as an ancient Hindu colony, 'A seal with an inscription in a South Indian script of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. or earlier was found.' Kedah was an unmistakable Hindu settlement. Quaritch Wales investigated no fewer than 30 sites round about Kedah. The results show that this site was in continuous occupation by South Indians - Hindus and Buddhists - mainly Tamils. On a low spar of the Kedah peak to the south have been discovered traces of a Siva temple. A large Siva temple also had been identified as such by a four-armed Ganesh figure and a bronze weapon of Muruga. This temple is assigned to the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Malaya and Islam**

The Malay Peninsula continues to be in debt to South India and Ceylon to this day to thousands of Tamil and Tamil-speaking Muslim merchants, Tamil educationists, doctors, engineers and labourers. The Malaysians themselves would appear to have appreciated the value of this contact by recognizing Tamil as a

language to be taught at the Department of Indian Studies, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. The results on the cultural side of these contacts have struck all observers.

Annandale says that, "*There are many similarities between the Muslims of the Labbies of the Indian shore of the Gulf of Mannar and that of the Malays. It would not be impossible to find striking parallels between objects in daily use, and especially in the pattern, with which these objects are adorned among the two races.*"

It has been established that an old type of South Indian water vessel known in Tamil as *kendi*, the *kendi* with a spout, is in use by the Malays and called by the Tamil name. Several common Malay words like those for washer man, kind or sort, marriage pledge, leaf, couple and so on have been traced indubitably to Tamil origins and these are some of the results of an unbroken contact throughout the centuries that follow the early period of colonization. (Sastri K.A.N. *South Indian Influences in the Far East*).

### **Burma (Myanmar)**

From very early times Hinduism and Buddhism appear to have flourished side by side in Myanmar. From the archaeological excavations made at Prom, the chief city of old Burma, Harvey says that the finds were mainly Hindu rather than Buddhist. In later times, though Burma became predominantly Buddhist, Hindus lived with a Buddhist population and worshipped in their own temples. This early entry of Saivism was probably an event in the great Tamil trade movement which started in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium B.C., and swept across the seas to the Southern Islands and Malaya as far north as the Philippines.

The earliest colonists to exercise authority over Burma appear to have been again South Indians. The city of Prom as also known as Vanadesi, the name of the capital of the Kadambas in South India. The earliest inscriptions discovered at Prom is in the South Indian Kadamba script of the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D. In the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, however, Burma became the center of Southern Buddhism. A number of terracotta plaques carrying the effigy of Buddha were found inscribed in South Indian characters. The contact of South Indian merchants with Burma in the early centuries of the Christian era is attested to by Ptolemy who had noticed that large ships used to sail from the East coast of South India to Burma.

The rise of Hinayana Buddhism in the 5<sup>th</sup> century A.D., was mainly due to inspiration received by Burma from the great movement which started at Kanchi

(*Kanchipuram*) in the Tamil country. Kanchi it will be remembered is referred to in *Manimekalai*, the great Tamil Buddhist epic.

Scott, an authority on Burmese Archaeology and History - in his account of the reign of Alaungithu (1112 - 1187), observes:

*“The connection with India was still maintained and the form of the many Pagam temples suggests architects from the Deccan..... Many of the images and their attitudes are quite South Indian.”*

*“The presence of a considerable number of South Indian Tamils through the centuries is attested by the well-known Grantha-Tamil inscription of Pagam attesting the existence of a Vishnu temple built there by Vanadesi Merchants and a gift to the temple made in the 13<sup>th</sup> century by a merchant from one of the port towns on the Malabar Coast.”*

## Java

By about A.D. 400, Indian culture and Hinduism had obtained firm footing in Java. Though the extant inscriptions in West Java are of a later date than those of Borneo. Nilakanta Sastri says that *“Hindu culture must have reached Java, if anything a little earlier, from South India, than it reached Borneo.”* The inscriptions of West Java are engraved in the distinctly held a century later than the inscriptions refer to the ‘Illustrious Purnavarman’ who once ruled at Taruma in Java. The inscriptions are identical with the Grantha alphabet used by the *Pallavas* of South India (300 to 800 A.D.). Another inscription found at Changgal (732 A.D.) describes the consecration of a Linga by King Sangaya of Central Java, whose ancestors came from *Kunjara-kunjadesa* in South India.

The Sailendras, who ruled over Java and Sumatra and whose origins have not been finally decided upon by scholars, were Mahayanist Buddhists, and in all probability a dynasty that had its origin in South India. Throughout their imperial authority they had been in contact with South India and South Indian Buddhists till they were overpowered later by the *Chola* Empire.

It is interesting to note that while in Java there has been a fusion between Saivism and Mahayanist Buddhism, Bali has always remained Hindu. That South Indian culture is bound up with the Art of Java is clearly evidenced in the dance forms and worship of the Balinese. The Saiva form of Hinduism ante-dated Buddhism in Java, while Bali still remains Hindu; and Saivism was in all probability introduced by Tamil merchants and colonists in pre-Christian times.

Java has had continuous contact with South India in later times. The *Chola* Empire in the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries had close association with Java, and Javanese culture was further influenced by Tamil culture after the *Cholas* defeated the *Sailendras* of Java. *Jayanagara* adopted the characteristic *Pandyan* title *Sundarapandya* at the coronation in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and adopted the *Pandyan* Emblem of the two fishes for his seal.

### Sumatra

In Sumatra are found certain names of tribal subdivisions which are unmistakably South Indians, and specifically Tamilian names such as *Choliya*, *Pandiya*, *Maehliyal*, and also *Pallavas* as *Tekam* (or *Tekkanam* or *Deccan*). Nilakanta Sastri says, “*The social organization of some of these tribes seems to date from a very remote past and it is quite probable that these names were taken over when they were still powerful realities in South India.*”

No temples in Sumatra belonging to this ancient period have survived as they had probably been built of wood following the South Indian practice in pre-Christian times. This contact with Sumatra was kept up by South India for well over a thousand years. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the *Chola* invaded Sumatra which was at that time under the *Sailendras*. Tamil inscriptions of this period have been found at Luba Tua dating from the year 1088. Tamil tribal names are still found among the *Batak* of Sumatra. The Sumatra not only colonized by the *Tamils* but it also became an integral part of the Greater Indian Cultural Area.

### Celebes (Sulawesi)

In Celebes, a large island further east of Borneo and Java and south of the Philippines, traces of South Indian influences have been found. The Buddha images there show affinities with the earliest form of the *Amaravati* Art (2<sup>nd</sup> century) A.D.) Archaeologists have not been able to decide how far this culture had penetrated into the interior of the island. Recently, however, an ancient bell and a pair of cymbals have been discovered. The bell and cymbals are very similar to those still in daily use in South India in domestic worship and otherwise. The probability is that South Indian cultural influence had preceded the arrival of South Indian Buddhism.

The *Pallava-Tamil* period was the age of South Indian colonization par excellence, and unmistakable marks of evidence of *Pallava* rule are found scattered all over South East Asian countries including Celebes. Nilakanta Sastri says “*palaeography and art styles are the two unmistakable marks of the antiquity*





*of objects belonging to really early times and attesting direct contact of these lands, and the tests, as we have seen, point to a time much earlier than that of the rise of the Pallavars."*

### **Borneo**

The earliest archaeological evidence in Borneo is a Sanskrit inscription, fully and decidedly South Indian, referring to the conquest of *Mulavarman*, a *Pallava* king. There is also evidence of the *Agastya* cult in Borneo already noticed in Java, a cult which is essentially South Indian. The Ganesha image found in Sarawak, North Borneo, a Linga and yoni found in West Borneo and a *Pallava* inscription colonization of Borneo by the South Indians, and particularly by the Tamils.

### **Philippines**

Iron age found in Philippines bearing close resemblance to objects found in South India about the same period, more than a thousand years before Christ, and also to other evidences of trade contact with Malays, Indo-China, North Borneo and Philippines in those remote times. The Spanish who dominated the Philippines in recent centuries are not likely to have preserved religious and cultural antiquities of other Faiths. In 1820, however, a copper image of Siva was discovered in one of those islands which points to a remote period in which the worship of Siva had been introduced by South Indian merchants.

These facts are by no means unsupported by other evidence may be shown by the remarks made by Phiroz Kutar (1954), Technical Director, which were reported in the Madras '*Hindu*'.

*"Researches into the cultural and racial origins of the people of Ceylon and of countries lying eastward have shown that they were once colonized from South Indian and in particular, the Fillipino script has striking similarities with that of Tamilark. These researches have also shown that Fillipino dialects belonged to the Dravidian family."*

### **Cambodia**

A State ceremony in Cambodia where Saiva Tamil hymns are sung even today to indicate the extent of Tamil cultural influence in these regions. Cambodia had come under Saiva Tamil influence, not to speak of Southern

Buddhism, from very early days. Though Buddhism continues to be its State religion, the old Saiva ceremonies conducted by the Tamil Brahmin priests are still found incorporated in its Coronation ceremonies. The Saiva Brahmins of Cambodia would appear to have come originally from Rameswaram, South India. Many of these, with the ascendancy of Buddhism and the adoption of the Siamese themselves as Brahmins seem to have taken along with them, elsewhere, valuable documents which would otherwise have revealed more fully the nature of South Indian Tamil influence in the religious ceremonies and court life of the Siamese Cambodia.

Quaritch Wales, in describing the swinging festivals on the occasion of the crowning of Cambodian Kings, says: "*The King seated himself on a throne beneath an umbrella of seven tiers which, after the King was crowned, was replaced by one of nine tiers emblematic of full sovereignty. The high priest of Siva then came to him, and after rendering homage, pronounced the Tamil mantra, the of which means 'Opening of the Portals of Kailasa.'*"

Wales adds that the Siamese priests now know neither Sanskrit nor Tamil, but that in an earlier period there were Brahmins who did understand these Indian languages. The texts which the Siamese priests still possess are Sanskrit and Tamil hymns with instruction in Siamese for the preliminary rites intended to be used in daily worship.

The Cambodian kings bore the title of *Varman*, which reminds one of the *Pallava* kings of South India. The magnificent temples of Angkor-Vat and of Bayon are similar to those of South India. Taking all these facts together as well as the introduction of *Nataraja* Siva from south India one thinks that the colonists perhaps came from Southern India.

R. B. Dixon said that, "*Now both the iron and glass objects are similar to, and in some cases identical with, the prehistoric glass and iron finds in the South of India. They occur in the dolmen tombs and urns which are found by hundreds and thousands, and which almost antedate the historic Chola, Chera and Pandyan kingdoms whose history goes back to the beginning of the Christian era or before. As finds of similar glass beads and bangles have recently been excavated in the Malay Peninsula, in dolmen tombs in Java and in North Borneo, the inference is inescapable that we have clear evidence of trade contact with the Northern Philippines and Southern India, running well back into the first millennium B. C.*"

*The extensive trade and colonization and later conquests of South Indian kingdoms in Sumatra and Java as well as in Indo-China in the early centuries of the Christian era, of course, are well known. This new material, however, seems*



*to make it clear that this was far from being the beginning of such contacts, but rather the last stages in an association reaching as far as the Northern Philippines which had begun many centuries before."*

The Dravidians who were identified with (Tamils) were also known as *Thirayar* - the men who rode the waves, the race which in the very dawn of history carried its trade and culture across the waves to the West and to the East - the harbingers of civilization. They were able to declare through the lips of their incomparable poets, "*Yatum ure yavarum kelir*" - the one world - new to the modern world, was already old to the Tamils of the Sangam age.

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