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## UNIT 9 POLITICAL AND CULTURAL EXPANSION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA<sup>1</sup>

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### 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- the motivations behind the Indian expansion in Southeast Asia;
- how Indian ideas and practices travelled across and how they were incorporated into the historical, political and cultural milieu of Southeast Asia;
- to what extent Indian traditions altered as they entered into the Southeast Asian environment and the factors contributing to these changes; and
- what are the discourses pertaining to different aspects of this interaction.

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### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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During the early medieval period, India was actively involved in maritime trade in the Persian Gulf and the South China Sea region, the two extremities between which India was situated. The Arabs enjoyed monopoly over Asian trade and India was seen as a popular destination for trade. The ancient spice and silk trade routes connected India with the outside world. Inscriptional records, indigenous sources, archaeological sources and travellers' accounts show evidence for trade and commercial links between India and Southeast Asia. The Telaga Batu inscription (Indonesia) of the 7<sup>th</sup> century refers to a ship captain and the long distance maritime trade. The Kaladi inscription (a collection of Javanese inscriptions) of the 10<sup>th</sup> century mentions Dravidians, Kalingas, Sinhalese, etc. as

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foreigners coming to the region. The foreign traders in the Javanese and old Balinese inscriptions are mentioned as *banyaga* and merchant guilds as *banigrama*. From the 5<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries powerful states started emerging in Southeast Asia. They adopted Hinduism and Buddhism and some adopted Sanskrit as their official language. But we cannot maintain that Indian influence was imposed on Southeast Asia from outside. There were different centres of diffusion from India and different centres of assimilation in Southeast Asia. The Malay Archipelago was crucial for establishing this link.

In the ancient Indian literary works such as the *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, the Niddesa in the *Khuddaka Nikaya* of the *Sutta Pitaka* (a canonical work in Pali of Theravada Buddhism), the *Milinda-Panha*, the Ceylonese chronicle, *Mahavamsa*, and in Tibetan sources some of the regions in Southeast Asia were denoted by terms like: Suvarnabhumi (the land of gold), Suvarndvipa<sup>2</sup> (the island of gold), *Yavadvipa*, etc. The ancient Greek writings, *The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* and Ptolemy's *Geography* mention the region as Chryse (the Land of Gold) and Chersonesus Aurea respectively. I-tsing, a 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese traveller visited the Srivijaya kingdom of Sumatra. Thus Southeast Asia (especially the Malay Peninsula and Indonesia) was well known to the outside world since antiquity due to its strategic geographical location. The Arab writers such as Al Biruni, Haraki, Yakut too refer to both Suvarnabhumi and Suvarnadvipa.

In the following sections, you will realize that despite Indian merchants and priests going to Southeast Asia and settling there, the dominant Indian influence that we get to see by this period was certainly not due to the outcome of Indian colonization as early historians believed it to be. There were no Indian colonies in Southeast Asia and by and large, there was no use of force on the people to integrate Indian elements. But it cannot be denied that Indian traditions were a significant dominating factor contributing to the rise of the civilization in Southeast Asia. The local chieftains of Southeast Asia carefully selected and adopted Indian concepts of kingship through the aid of Indian priests and scholars. Therefore, the rulers and elite of the Southeast Asian society became an effective channel through which Indian traditions were transmitted. As the traditions reached the local level, they witnessed further localization. Now let us understand various theories concerning Indian expansion in Southeast Asia.

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## 9.2 DIFFUSION OF INDIAN TRADITIONS

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The precise source of diffusion of Indian traditions is a much debated topic. There is no unanimity among historians on whether the spread of Indian traditions to Southeast Asia was from south India as propounded by George Coedes, Stargardt, etc. or was it through its western part or the eastern coast. Some scholars stress that no one particular region of the Indian subcontinent can be attributed for the spread of Indian influence as the region was ruled by a number of different kingdoms. There was no single culture practiced throughout the subcontinent. By

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<sup>2</sup> There are different theories pertaining to the exact location of Suvarnabhumi and Suvarnadvipa but it is commonly believed that Suvarnabhumi was the region comprising the lower Myanmar and the Malay Peninsula while Suvarnadvipa included the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, Java, Borneo, and Bali islands of Indonesia.

the early medieval period there were various religions like Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism flourishing along with many new religious traditions comprising Vaishnavism, Shaivism, Bhakti, Tantrism, etc. For instance, the Indonesian kingdoms assimilated Indian traditions in the 5<sup>th</sup> century from south India, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century from north India and Bengal in the east. The east coast of India had many seaports which facilitated trade via sea routes. Odisha played a vital role in promoting Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism in Southeast Asia as it was one of the important trade centres. Possibly the cotton textile of Kalinga constituted one of the main items of export to Indonesia. Thus according to some historians the origin of Indian influence in Southeast Asia can be understood in terms of continual shifts.

Another question i.e., whether the Southeast Asian culture was completely influenced by Indian culture or it had indigenous elements is also a topic of discussion. The nationalist Indian historians and some Western scholars in the early twentieth century regarded Southeast Asia as 'Farther India' or 'Greater India' in accordance with the 'Indianization' theory. In 1926 the 'Greater Indian Society' was founded and Southeast Asia was deemed as Indian colony. They believed that Southeast Asia was entirely under the influence of Indian traditions. And it was believed that the process of Indianization was on account of Indian initiative. The members of this society and historians like Quaritch Wales argued that Indian rulers or adventurers via sea routes reached Southeast Asia and established kingdoms and thus, initiated the 'Indianization' process. In contrast to this, George Coedes credited Indian brahmanas or others high castes from India for initiating the process of interaction. The Indians fortified the authority of the local chiefs or sometimes exercised their control over the local population. Through the process of intermarriages with the daughters of the local elite, they gave political legitimacy to the 'Hinduized' rulers. But the problem with the 'Indianization' theory is that it projected the indigenous population as passive recipients of Indian culture and traditions. Besides, Indians did not arrive in large numbers in Southeast Asia. Had that been the fact, it would have resulted in a major demographic change. Politically, none of the states of Southeast Asia showed any political allegiance to any ruler of medieval India and there was no economic exploitation. The basic feature of Indian society i.e., the caste system was also absent in Southeast Asia.

Later I. W. Mabbett, J. G. de Casparis and others questioned this theory though failed to explain the penetration of Indian influence in pre-modern Southeast Asian society and culture. By 1960s the 'Indianization' hypothesis was rejected. Oliver Wolters views the Indian influence as the result of a process involving mutual sharing. Southeast Asian traders brought the knowledge of Indian traditions. The Southeast Asian rulers saw this interaction as favourable for administrative and technological reasons and advantageous against their rivals. Thus the Southeast Asian initiative inaugurated a slow process of cultural amalgamation. Recent writings propose that it was neither a blatant appropriation nor imposition of Indian traditions but a synthesis of indigenous and Indian elements. Indian influences were selectively assimilated into the Southeast Asian societies and it has been suggested that this should not be seen as a process of cultural colonization. The Indian interaction led to 'localization of Indian culture' in Southeast Asia.

Another way through which Indian expansion in Southeast Asia is explained is by putting forward a hypothesis that examines the role of kshatriyas, vaishyas and brahmanas. The kshatriyas, the warrior class, by the means of warfare, conquest, armed colonization, and intermarriages between Indian princes and daughters of the local chiefs brought the region under Indian influence. However, this theory of coercive dissemination of culture has long been debunked. The Indian interactions with Southeast Asia are seen as a pacific penetration now and the naval victory of the Cholas against Srivijaya was an exception. The vaishyas or trading class according to N. J. Krom, etc, married local women and hence were responsible for transmitting Indian culture. But the theory fails to explain how merchants of low caste and with limited knowledge could possibly transmit the complex concepts of Indian thought and philosophy. It is unable to explain how Indian influence was disseminated in remote areas such as Kedu and Pranbana in Java from coastal and port areas by the vaishyas. Thus, this hypothesis is objected by historians like J. C. Van Lear. Another theory is that the brahmanas and Buddhist monks propagated Indian culture in Southeast Asia who reached there by following the trade routes. They were literate. The brahmanas belonged to a high caste and were well-versed in Sanskrit which would explain numerous Sanskrit loan words in Southeast Asian languages. The brahmana missionaries travelled with Indian merchants and traders to the region.

Largely, scholars now have come to believe that the penetration of Indian traditions commenced with the coming of merchants and some kshatriya adventurers. Slowly, brahmanas too started accompanying them. Collective interaction of mainly brahmanas and vaishyas with the Southeast Asians led to cultural adaptation. Now in the next section, you will see the role of Indian merchants and traders and priests in state formation during the early medieval period in Southeast Asia.

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### **9.3 STATE FORMATION IN SOUTHEAST ASIA**

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As trade relations between India and Southeast Asia were established, the dynamics concerning the process of state formation in Southeast Asia became more multifaceted. Archaeological sources corroborate the relevance of burgeoning trade in stimulating political development. Through the study of changing trade patterns, the process of political integration in the region can be understood more coherently. But recent writings show that though trade was an important factor, it was not the only motive behind the undertaking of sea voyages. The nature of interactions was diverse which included not just traders and merchants but also seafaring communities, religious groups, scholars and pilgrims. The role of religions in propelling seafaring activity is also significant. The diverse channels of communication aided in the transition of chiefdoms into nascent states in Southeast Asia.

Kenneth R. Hall regards the rise of the kingdom of Funan (in the present day south Cambodia and south Vietnam) in the first century CE owing to its developed trade and port facilities. It was the first Southeast Asian state with a sophisticated political base and the use of Indian vocabulary and technical knowledge. It was also the first dynasty in Southeast Asia to adopt Hinduism as its state-religion. It declined due to a civil war in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century and it was succeeded by a Hindu Khmer state called Chen-la. Later, out of these two kingdoms evolved the Angkor



or Khmer Empire (9<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century) which reached its glory under the rule of Jayavarman VII (c. 1181-1218). By his time, the kingdom comprised of a vast territory which included most of modern Thailand, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam. They had a complex network of irrigation system which they learned from India.

Srivijaya, the most important Hindu kingdom in Sumatra was founded in 670 CE. It emerged as a great centre of trade and culture with its developed maritime polity. The kingdom later evolved into Shailendra Empire which was a great maritime and commercial power. I-tsing informs us that Srivijaya supplanted the Malayu kingdom in Sumatra in the late 7<sup>th</sup> century and promoted Buddhism. The Vat Sema Murong inscription (dated 775 CE) emphasizes the rapid rise of Srivijaya as the overlord of the neighbouring territories and as a significant naval and commercial power.

By the 9<sup>th</sup> century the kingdom of Mataram in Central Java (an important political ally of Srivijaya) along with other kingdoms in Java and Bali had developed intricate economic infrastructure owing to regional and long-distance trading networks. Java had huge paddy terraces on the volcanic slopes and their wet rice farming promoted agricultural surplus which was exported, thus facilitating trade. The Mataram dynasty was Buddhist. Sanskrit inscriptional records show the arrival of a number of religious teachers from Gujarat and Gaur (Bengal). Such interactions helped Mataram to create the first standardized indigenous coinage which incorporated local and Indian systems. There were several prominent Indian Buddhists who visited Southeast Asia. A south Indian Buddhist monk, Vajrabodhi on his way to China halted at Srivijaya for five months in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. As per Tibetan sources Atisa Dipankara, a Buddhist in the Pala kingdom (750-900) stayed in Srivijaya for 12 years and returned to the kingdom which was located in Bengal and Bihar in 1025 CE. The Palas who patronized Mahayana Buddhism had cordial relations with Srivijaya.

The Indian influence on Southeast Asia and the origin of Southeast Asian kingship is explained through a popular Southeast Asian folklore i.e. the marriage between an Indian brahmana named Kaundinya and a local Naga princess, Soma. That is how the Hindu kingdoms in the region came into being.<sup>3</sup> Historians like Paul Wheatley, Kenneth R. Hall argue that the early Southeast Asian society was tribal and ruled by chiefs. G. Coedes puts emphasis on cultural dependency of Southeast Asian states on India which was caused by the introduction of Hinduism and Buddhism in the region. I. W. Mabbett puts forward the proposition that the establishment of first states in Southeast Asia was made possible due to the borrowing of Indian concepts of leadership, ideology and agricultural technology. O. Wolster argues that these tribal societies with their local beliefs and customs viewed some chieftains as superior to others and their personal achievements played a crucial role in establishing and sustaining their respective authority. The religious traditions of India were conducive to the political aspirations of chiefs who projected themselves as secular and spiritually superior. It is in this context that Brahmanism and Buddhism functioned as a political tool and were absorbed into these tribal societies, imparting sanctity to chiefs. This gave rise to various religious cults.

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<sup>3</sup> The Royal families of Cambodia and Vietnam to this day trace their lineages to Soma and Kaundinya.

Brahmana priests played an important role in royal rituals. The brahmanas introduced Indian court rituals, customs and concepts related to kingship and governance. Since they were adept in Sanskrit, they sacralized rulers through Brahmanical rituals and sacrifices and concocted genealogies for the indigenous rulers in order to accentuate their divine status, thereby increasing their prestige and power in the eyes of their subjects. They also aided the ruling class in organizing their administration which was based on the Indian model. They introduced *Manusmriti* (Manu's Code of Law). Therefore, they became a channel through which political legitimacy was gained. Southeast Asian rulers related themselves to the Hindu or Buddhist deities to accentuate their divine status and strengthen temporal authority. The production of the images of Hindu deities enabled them to enforce political ideology. Temples were constructed in which the idols of the Hindu deities were installed and sometimes even of the king or the members of the royal family (whether deceased or living). For instance, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, Indravarman I, the Angkor or Khmer king built six towers of the Preah Ko temple which had images of the royal family. The image of his predecessor, Jayavarman II (802-825 CE) bears a strong resemblance to the image of Shiva. He built a Shiva temple which also served as a funerary site. After his death, his image was to be fashioned after Shiva and he would be revered as an incarnation of Shiva. Similarly, Bayon's towers adorn 216 colossal faces of Bodhisattva Lokeshvara which as per one belief resemble Jayavarman VII. The worship of Shiva and Vishnu was fused with ancestor worship which helped Khmer, Javanese, and Champa rulers to claim the status of godly divine beings. In Java, rulers as incarnations of god were sometimes represented as Vishnu with Shiva emblems. In general, Southeast Asian rulers did not extend any exclusive patronage to any particular deity. The kings were portrayed as *avatars* or reincarnations of Shiva, Vishnu or Bodhisattva because as per the Hindu conception of royalty, a king derived his authority directly from god and that he was a *devaraja* (divine king). Jayavarman II had revived the *devraja* cult which has Indian origins. He had elaborate rituals performed by Hiranyadama, an Indian brahmana who portrayed him as a manifestation of Shiva.

Since the rulers extended their patronage to Sanskrit and brahmana priests, Sanskrit terms came to be used to define kingship. The suffix 'varman' which was used commonly by the south Indian rulers such as the Pallavas later came to be used in Southeast Asia too. The term 'varman' in Sanskrit means shield or protection. The Khmer rulers often used this suffix with the prefix containing the name of a Hindu god. For instance, Indravarman II means the one who is protected by Indra and Suryavarman II means the one who is protected by the Sun god, Surya. At Khinbha-gon near the Kalagangou village in Myanmar, a stupa was found with an inscription written in Pyu around its lower rim bearing the name Sri Prabhavarman of the Pyu kingdom of Sri Ksetra (3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE).

Apart from commissioning the fashioning of statues of Hindu and Buddhist deities, grand religious structures, adoption of Indian notions of kingship, the temple inscriptions issued by the rulers too reflect their aspirations. The Shweguyl pagoda inscription in Pagan (Myanmar) was issued by King Alaungsithu (1113-1167 CE) of the Pagan kingdom (849-1300 CE). The inscription establishes a link between the ruler and Buddhism through the narration of Buddhist doctrines. It also instructs

his subjects not to transgress the teachings of the Buddha. Through such didactic inscriptions, the reigning ruler established himself as an ideal political figure who had authority over his subjects.

So far you read that there was no coercive imposition of Indian elements on Southeast Asia and that the interaction was peaceful. However, the early medieval period also saw an exception to this when the Cholas who were a well-established naval power attacked and defeated another naval power, the Srivijayas and destroyed their cities. This event should not be overlooked to understand Indian expansion and influence in Southeast Asia as it offers some interesting aspects which we will study now.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) What was the 'Indianization' theory and why was it rejected?  
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- 2) How did Indian influences prove conducive to the process of state formation in Southeast Asia?  
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## 9.4 CHOLA NAVAL EXPEDITION AND THE INVASION OF SRIVIJAYA

The Cholas ruled in the *Sangam* age from 300 BCE to 600 CE. In the early medieval period they were reduced to the position of a mere vassal state of the powerful Pallavas. In century 850 CE when the political authority of the Pallavas weakened, the Cholas re-emerged and the imperial Chola kingdom expanded exponentially especially under the reigns of Rajaraja Chola and his son, Rajendra Chola. Like his father, Rajendra Chola followed an expansionist policy. After completing the conquest of the whole of Sri Lanka (which was begun by Rajaraja Chola), Maldives, and Andaman and Nicobar islands, he turned his attention towards the Malay Archipelago. India was located at the centre of maritime silk route. Control over the maritime silk route was crucial in establishing their dominance. They wanted to position their economic machinery consisting of trade guilds (which became more dominant from the 9<sup>th</sup> century to mid-14<sup>th</sup> century) more favourably in international markets. These trade guilds such as the *Manigramam*, *Nanadesi*, *Valanjiyar*, *Ayyahole*, *Ainnurruvan*, etc. were very powerful and resourceful. They even lent money to the Chola rulers. So, the king was obliged to provide the trade guilds with broader economic avenues.

The Srivijaya kingdom had been hurting the Chola's commercial interests in the Malay Archipelago. With the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad, the maritime silk route was undergoing important changes. The Abbasids' ships were now replaced by the Fatimids' ships. The latter passed through the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden into the Indian Ocean and reached Indian coasts for trade and then headed to Southeast

Asia and China (where the Song dynasty was in power). But the Srivijaya rulers encouraged the sea pirates in their region to dock at the Srivijaya ports. They harassed the Tamil traders. Hence, the Hindu Shaivite Chola rulers in alliance with the Shaivite Angkor king fought against the Buddhist Srivijaya ruler and its Buddhist ally, Tambralinga. Angkor asked for military help from the Cholas against Tambralinga. The Cholas attacked the latter. The Srivijayas came to help its ally. The Chola navy was technologically more advanced. Rajendra Chola in 1025 sent a huge naval fleet against the Srivijayas and the Cholas won a decisive victory. The Srivijaya ruler was captured. The Chola invasion and the raids of the city, Srivijaya along with 12 other port cities on the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, and the Nicobar Islands are mentioned in an inscription at a temple at Tanjavur. The incident is also recorded in one of the most significant Malay literary works, *Sejarah Melayu*.

This instance of the invasion of Sumatra by Rajendra Chola is interesting. The Srivijayas had friendly relations with the Cholas during the reign of Rajaraja I. The copper plates which are collectively called Leiden copper plates since they are now in the Leiden University (the Netherlands) show that Rajaraja Chola I issued an imperial order for the maintenance of Chudamani vihara built by another Srivijaya king, Sri Vijaya Maravijayattungavarman, at Nagapattinam. The gift of the Anaimangalam village was made to the Buddhist vihara. So what was the precise rationale behind the invasion of Srivijaya by the royal son of Rajaraja I is yet to be understood. Nilkantha Shastri in his work, *The Cholas* assumes that possibly it was due to the attempt of Srivijaya to hinder Chola's trade with the East. Alternatively it could have been because of the *digvijay* (expansionist policy) of the Cholas. Meera Abraham shows a direct relation between merchant guilds and Chola polity. The early medieval period witnessed the rise of organized merchant associations which enjoyed certain degree of autonomy. These guilds were actively engaged in the organization of trade and commercial activities. The Tamil inscriptions of Myanmar, Thailand and Indonesia and Javanese inscriptions indicate the strong presence of merchant guilds of Indian origin here. The commodities exchanged during this period from Southeast Asia included precious stones, corals, aloe wood, cloves, copper, tin and camphor and from India, they comprised of silk, spices, textiles, pearls, corals, medicinal herbs, etc. Unlike the early commercial interactions, the medieval commercial links were associated with political environment and government policies since taxes imposed on goods of trade constituted a major source of revenue to the state. As a result of the invasion, the Cholas established permanent military garrisons in Srivijaya and Angkor kingdoms to further facilitate Indian commercial interests. There was an influx and dominance of Tamil trade guilds in major trading centres in Southeast Asia. It also led to a matrimonial alliance between the Cholas and the Srivijayas as Rajendra Chola married Onang Kiu, the daughter of Vijayottungavarman.<sup>4</sup> The increasing presence of Tamil merchant associations and the matrimonial alliance cemented the relations between Srivijaya and the Cholas. Diplomatic missions were sent. In 1067 Dipankar or Devakala, a Chola prince and the nephew of Rajendra Chola went to the imperial court of China as a Srivijian ambassador. The prince later sat on the Chola throne as Kulothunga Chola. In 1068 during the Keddah rebellion, Virarajendra Chola helped Srivijaya in regaining back Keddah by sending a naval fleet.

<sup>4</sup> In Malaysia till today the princes have their names ending with Cholan or Chulan.



The imperial Cholas had thriving intercontinental trading links with the Tang and Song dynasties of China, Srivijaya of Sumatra, the Abbasid Caliphate in Baghdad and the Fatimid Caliphate in Egypt. Rajendra Chola successfully eliminated sea piracy in the Malay Archipelago. His navy was extremely well organized with a hierarchical ranking structure with the king as the Supreme Commander of Navy. However despite this, the Cholas were wrongly designated as Srivijaya's vassal state in the official Chinese records. The confusion might have been deliberately caused by the ambassadors of Srivijaya at the Chinese court since the Srivijayan court was divided into factions. This indicates that by this period Southeast Asian states were no longer chiefdoms but had evolved into major maritime political powers in the region. They were connected globally through flourishing networks of maritime trade and Srivijaya was keen to guard its commercial interests.

On the other hand, the Chola's successful naval expedition brought more commercial opportunities to the merchant guilds. Their activities expanded further in the region. The political marriage was not the result of any peaceful dialogue but it was the direct consequence of Chola's successful invasion which later enabled the Cholas to intervene in the politics of Srivijaya when it was engulfed in a civil war during the Keddah rebellion and helped the Srivijaya king to suppress it effectively. Though it is to be noted that despite the successful invasion, the Cholas did not establish any direct control over the kingdom but they plundered the accumulated wealth of the Srivijayas which weakened their power.

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## **9.5 ART AND ARCHITECTURE**

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The Indian influence can also be attested by studying the development of artistic traditions in Southeast Asia which reflect an interchange of ideas both intra-regional and inter-regional. Certain themes were common between the two regions and we also see some local adaptations. It is to be noted that in every field of cultural activity it was the local craftsmen and artists and not Indian artisans who participated in the production process. Therefore, it was natural for them to incorporate local practices and beliefs in their artistic endeavours which were primarily religious in nature. The cultural centres of Buddhist, Hindu, and other local deities co-existed.

Many images of Hindu deities such as Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh, Mahishasurmardini, Harihara, etc. and of Buddhist stupas and sculptures with local features have been found. The Javanese images of Ganesha were often depicted seated on a throne decorated with a row of skulls which was a complete Javanese conception. Po Nagar, the Goddess Mother of the Cham, was originally an indigenous formless goddess. But as Indian traditions reached the kingdom of Champa or Cham (in present-day Vietnam), she was transformed into Shiva's Shakti but she was not called Uma or Parvati. She was granted a new title, Bhagavati Kauthareshvari and was converted into a deity with an elaborate form. There is a hymn dedicated to her in an inscription of the king of Champa, Sripameshvara in 1050 CE. Thus, in some instances local deities were fused with Hindu divine attributes, resulting in a modified divinity. Localization was also evident in the manner in which they adorned the idols. The extravagant Indian style, costumes and embellishments were discarded to be replaced with local materials. The rituals associated with deities were localized as well.

In Myanmar, Hinayana Buddhism was predominant but Mahayana Buddhism and Tantrism too flourished. The stupa architecture here reveals influences from varied sources viz. India, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Indonesia and China and the amalgamation of all these styles resulted in a new style and form in art and architecture which is called Myanmarese. Bronze artifacts in the late Gupta style, the Nat Hlaung Kyaung temple, the Ananda pagoda (temple) show strong influence from India. The Nat Hlaung Kyaung temple was erected for Indian merchants and brahmanas who were in the service of Anawratha, the founder of the Pagan dynasty. It houses the statues of the *dasavatara* of Vishnu. The Ananda pagoda at Bagan was built by another Pagan king, Kyansittha in 1105 CE. It is a Buddhist temple. Its many features including the *shikhara*, circumambulatory corridors, etc. were built in an old Indian temple architectural style of Bengal and Odisha.

The rulers of Champa kingdom which lasted approximately from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> century in ancient Siam (Thailand) commissioned the construction of mammoth religious structures. From the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century many Hindu temples were constructed in the coastal plains of Champa. In 875 CE, King Indravarman II who practiced Mahayana Buddhism built a huge Buddhist monastery at Dong Duong. Siam inherited Hinduism and Buddhism from the Khmer Empire which ruled over the southern region of Siam. The Khmers built their temples (*wat*) in the Dravidian style. The most significant one was Angkorwat built by Suryavarman II in his capital city, Angkor. The reliefs on the walls of the main temple, galleries and causeways depict stories from the two major Hindu Epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It is dedicated to Vishnu and is the largest Hindu temple. The Khmer empire, a successor state to Funan adopted the story of Kaundinya and Soma, a Naga princess to gain legitimacy for their rule. Hence, the naga figure became a dominant motif in the decorative art. A huge bronze image of the 'Reclining Vishnu' belonging to the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, now in the National Museum of Cambodia, is a splendid example of the Indian influence on Khmer art.

The Shailendra rulers<sup>5</sup>, who ruled from central Java and Sumatra between 750 to 850 CE, were the followers of Mahayana Buddhism and commissioned the construction of some magnificent Buddhist structures. In the 9<sup>th</sup> century at Borobudur, they built an imposing stupa which is still the largest Buddhist structure in the world. It comprised of nine successive mandalas in stone, the top of which is adorned with a bell-shaped stupa, symbolizing the celestial realm. The bas-reliefs depict different events in the life of the Buddha. In response to such a mammoth Buddhist structure, the Hindu Sanjaya dynasty's<sup>6</sup> ruler, Rakai Pikatan began the construction of a Hindu temple at Prambanan, Central Java. The Chandi<sup>7</sup> Prambanan is till date Indonesia's largest Hindu temple. The Shivagrha inscription of 856 CE tells that it was built to worship Shiva. The cordial relations between the Shailendras and Palas of Bengal resulted in the production of Buddhist art and sculptures in Nalanda style at Java which in turn influenced the artistic styles of peninsular Thailand. They also contributed in the building of some important

<sup>5</sup> The Shailendra dynasty was originally a Hindu dynasty as Shailendra (meaning "Ruler of the Mountain") is another name for Siva.

<sup>6</sup> The Sanjaya dynasty was founded by Sanjaya in 732 CE.

<sup>7</sup> The Hindu temples in Java are called *Chandi*. The term is derived from one of the names of Goddess Durga.

structures in India. An inscription of the Pala ruler, Devpala, affirms that the king of Suvarnadvipa and Javabhumi, called Balaputradeva constructed a monastery at Nalanda for the residence of scholars from coming from Java to study at the Nalanda Mahavihara.

In this way, different Southeast Asian states absorbed the themes and myths from the Indian Epics, Buddhist and Hindu iconography, Indian style of architecture, motifs, etc. and creatively fused the borrowed components with the cultural climate of their respective regions and time, developing their own distinct styles of art and architecture which could effectively resonate with the local audiences. Thus, different states accorded different artistic treatments to the imported concepts and forms.

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## 9.6 LITERATURE AND DRAMA

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Earlier we read that the brahmana priests played a major role in state formation of many Southeast Asian kingdoms. Consequently, Sanskrit language and literature were given patronage by the kings. Numerous inscriptions were issued by rulers, often inscribed on stone pillars and sometimes on metal plates. The Sanskrit inscriptions primarily deal with political activities. It led to the expansion of the vocabulary of local languages as new terms were introduced. The arrival of Buddhism led to the introduction of Buddhist pedagogical texts. The Kawi script (Old Javanese script), used between the 8<sup>th</sup> century and 16<sup>th</sup> century across much of maritime Southeast Asia was a locally modified version of the Sanskrit writing system. Likewise, Sanskrit and Pallava scripts stimulated the growth of Old Balinese scripts. Sanskrit and Pali also became the official languages of some of the kingdoms such as Dvaravati<sup>8</sup>, Srivijaya, etc. The languages were used in Myanmar till the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Local languages (Mon and Khmer and also Khmer script) between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century used Pali and Sanskrit words and texts. Sanskrit terms were used to name their kings and places.

By the early medieval period, many Southeast Asian kingdoms and empires became familiar with several Hindu literary works such as the *Vedas*, *Puranas*, *Dharmashastras*, the grammar of Panini, six systems of Indian philosophy, etc. Yashovarman, the founder of Kamboja Empire has been compared with Panini, an ancient Indian Sanskrit grammarian and the author of the *Asthadhyayi*. The king wrote a commentary on Patanjali's *Mahabhasya*. Another ruler from this empire, Suryavarman I was also a great Sanskrit scholar accomplished in Vedic learning. The *Horashastra* (astrology), *Siddhantashastra* (astrology), *Ayurveda* (medicine) and *Gandharvavidya* (music) were pursued too. Myanmar's codes of law, *Wagaru Dhammasattha* greatly incorporated the codes prescribed in the *Manusmriti*.

The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* also left a visible impact on the culture of Southeast Asia. The main themes imported were related to the exercise of power, political relations between rulers and their subjects and the elements of supernatural

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<sup>8</sup> Hinduism in Myanmar is believed to have reached by 350 BCE when the Pyu people came and settled there. Later the Mons came from western China and replaced the Pyu people. However, they adopted the culture of the Pyu people. The Mon kingdom ruled for several centuries and expanded their territories to a large extent and even conquered Thailand. Here they founded another kingdom called Dvaravati which was later supplanted by the kingdom of Pagan which ruled in Myanmar from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> century.

e.g. spirits, demons, ghosts, magical weapons, etc. The *Ramayana*, the story of Rama, a legendary ideal king, his adventures and battle against Ravana, the demon king was adopted. Its characters and storyline remained the same but its locale was indigenized with the addition of many local characters. In some cases, some new elements were added. For instance, in a Lao version Ravana is a refined Lao prince. Based on the *Ramayana*, the Yama Zatdaw was introduced in Myanmar during the reign of King Anawratha. In the Yama Zatdaw, through dance and drama the story of Rama is narrated. Yama is the transliteration of Rama. Accordingly, in Myanmar the *Ramayana* is known as the Yamayana. Likewise, in Thailand it is called the Ramakien and it is the country's national Epic. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* also inspired shadow puppet theatre of Southeast Asia such as wayang kulit and wayang golek of Java. Many scholars believe that wayang kulit later became the channel through which Indian elements were transmitted to shadow puppetry of south Thailand viz. nang talung and nang yai. This shows that as Indian traditions diffused from one centre to another they were further modified to suit the new environment.

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) How do you explain the invasion of Srivijaya by the Cholas in understanding the relations between India and Southeast Asia during the early medieval period?

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- 2) In what ways the different states of Southeast Asia borrowed and localized Indian elements to create their own distinct cultural identities in art, architecture, literature and drama?

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**Wayang Kulit**  
Source: Richa Singh





Wayang Golek  
Source: Richa Singh

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## 9.7 SUMMARY

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The study of India's relations with Southeast Asia reveals that India and Southeast Asia during the early medieval period had commercial interactions not only with the outside world but with each other as well. Indian merchants and traders, merchant guilds and state patronage created a conducive environment which made not only the exchange of goods but also the interchange of ideas widespread. It had deep implications on the world. The contacts left a significant impact on their customs, art, architecture, ideas, society, etc. The process of dissemination of Indian traditions was gradual. Their propagation was not coercive in nature but generally peaceful. The role of Indian merchants, traders, monks and priests was important along with the rulers and the elites of Southeast Asia. The association with the Indian model enabled Southeast Asian kings to expand and reinforce the sources of political legitimacy and power and transform their chiefdoms into kingdoms and empires. Although, the initial significant impact of India's culture and religion was at the level of the ruling classes, progressively the borrowed elements merged with indigenous cultures and were localized to generate a series of distinct cultural identities of Southeast Asia.

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## 9.8 KEY WORDS

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- Bodhisattva*** : A Bodhisattva is a person who is capable of attaining *nirvana* (salvation) but he delays his/her salvation out of compassion for those who are suffering and need guidance to be released from the effects of *karma* and *samsara* i.e., the cycle of rebirth.
- Harihara*** : In Hinduism, the concept of composite forms of deities such as Harihara, Ardhanarishwara, etc. exist. Harihara is the fused representation of Vishnu, the preserver and Shiva, the destroyer.

- State Formation** : A process by which a centralized state structure in which power is vested in the leader is established.
- Stupa** : A stupa is a semi-hemispherical structure where the sacred remains of Buddhist saints were buried. It forms a fundamental part of Buddhist architecture. As per Buddhist sources, the relics of the Buddha were divided into eight parts and stupas were built in eight different places to preserve his relics. Since then the stupa became associated with the body of the Buddha. When a stupa is placed inside a prayer hall or a Buddhist temple, then this enclosed structure is called *chaitya*.

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## 9.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise 1

- 1) See Section 9.2
- 2) See Section 9.3

### Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- 1) See Section 9.4
- 2) See Sections 9.5 and 9.6

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## 9.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

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