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Brahmins who willing to cross the sea – Pāśupatas gurus as cultural agents in Early Southeast Asian Indianised states

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Abstract
One feature that characterised the transitional period of Early Southeast Asian history was the ideology of "Indianisation," which synchronising two shores of the Bay of Bengal culturally. Archaeological evidence suggests that the contraction between Indic values and Southeast Asian localities was a millennium-long process in which Indian merchants and religious individuals played an instructive role. While the adventurous journey of seafaring Indian brought about multi-religious ideologies from various regions of the subcontinent, it is clear from Southeast Asian epigraphical sources that, over time, the Pāśupata-Saivism was predominate the region, serving as royal preceptor, whose knowledge extends beyond the Saiva dogmas. In this article, some epigraphical and archaeological evidence is assembled and discussed to demonstrate the way in which Pāśupata gurus as cultural agents engaged with the Indianisation of the Early Southeast Asian state-formation process. The question in India from which these gurus may have originated is going to be examined in the second part of this study. The article ends with a note on the possible impact of localisation upon the formation of the Pāśupata movement.
Keywords: *Pāśupata-Saivism, Southeast Asia, Indianisation, Localisation*

Introduction

According to a popular view, Indian merchants were attracted to the place called by Indian mythologies as Suvarnabhūmi ("Land of Gold"), prompting maritime journeys in search of the exotic commodities of the Far East. The arrival of Indians in Southeast Asia resulted in adoption of Indian religious, administrative, and artistic traditions. The term for this situation was earlier coined as Indianisation – the founding of an Indian kingdom in further India (Cœdès, 1975: 14-16).

Traditionally, Mainland Southeast Asia has been zoned into three "sacred geographies": Buddhism thriving in the western mainland (Myanmar and Thailand); Saivism dominating the hinterland before consolidating in Cambodia and central Vietnam; and Vaisnavism predominating in the peninsula (southern Thailand). However, current archaeological and epigraphical data demonstrate otherwise.

Founding in situ during archaeological excavation in 2019, the early 7th-century Wat Pra Ngam inscription provides us that the King of Dvaravati (Dvaravativibhuti) has been compared with Visnu, while simultaneously worshipping the Siva Linga of Pasupati- Paramesvara (Goodall and Revire, 2021), proving the fact that the Saiva institution may profoundly play an instructive role for political and religious transformation. Unfortunately, the names of the king and the brahmin are now lost; nevertheless, according to scholars, the brahmin, who served the deity, seems to belong to Pāśupata school of Saivism, as per being suggested by the corpus of 7th-century inscriptions from Cambodia and Vietnam, which clearly detail their existence. In immediate relationship with the indigenous kings, it reflects a feature of Hinduism in Southeast Asia in the 7th century in which the ruling king tried to presume the overlordship through maintaining the closest possible relationship with Siva by virtue of his ascetic efforts in devotion to Siva, the greatest of all ascetics.

Defining the Indianised States

Chinese sources record a local legend concerning the origin of Funan, often regarded as the earliest "Indianised" state in Southeast Asia. According to this account, an Indian Brahmin named Kauṇḍinya arrived by sea and married

Somā (*Liu-ye - Willow Leaf*), the daughter of the Nāga king. Their union produced a royal lineage that ruled Funan (Cœdès, 1975: 36). The kingdom is generally thought to have been located in the Mekong Delta, a strategically advantageous position along maritime trade routes. Chinese dynastic histories describe the power of its rulers, who extended their influence through military and diplomatic campaigns across the coastal plains of present-day Vietnam and parts of the Malay Peninsula by at least the second century CE.

George Cœdès, director of the *École française d'Extrême-Orient* (EFEO) from 1929 to 1946, interpreted this legend as symbolic of what he famously termed the "Indianization of Southeast Asia." In his view, the story of Kauṇḍinya clothing the Nāga princess, who was said to appear naked, represented the transformation of a supposedly uncivilized society into one shaped by Indian culture and religion. For Cœdès, Indianization signified "the expansion of Indian civilization," resulting in the formation of kingdoms that adopted Indian religious traditions, artistic forms, and Sanskrit as a sacred language (Cœdès, 1975: 14–15, 37–38); a thesis first articulated in his influential 1944 work *Les États hindouisés d'Indochine et d'Indonésie*, translated into English as *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* in 1968.

Cœdès's interpretation was shaped by earlier colonial scholarship, in which Southeast Asia was often studied through the lenses of Indology or Sinology. This intellectual framework tended to emphasize external cultural influences rather than local developments, implicitly portraying Southeast Asia as culturally dependent on India or China (Legge, 2008: 3–7). Subsequent scholars have challenged this perspective, arguing that Southeast Asian societies actively selected and adapted Hindu and Buddhist elements according to local needs. J. C. van Leur maintained that Indian cultural influences were largely confined to royal courts and ritual specialists, while indigenous traditions remained dominant beneath this "thin glaze" of foreign ideas (van Leur, 1967: 95–98). These interpretations helped inspire the concept of localization, later developed by O. W. Wolters, which emphasizes the creative role of Southeast Asian societies in reshaping external cultural influences.

Nevertheless, the term Indianization remains widely used, since the archaeological and textual evidence revealing unmistakable Indic features in early Southeast Asian polities. While its interpretation continues to be debated, Pierre-Yves Manguin (2011) suggests that the term still serves as a convenient label for the phase of cultural exchange during which Southeast Asian elites selectively adopted Indic models of kingship, religion, and political organization.

The Pre-Hindu Southeast Asia – Some Aspects

The Indianization of Southeast Asia did not occur independently of developments within the Indian subcontinent. Hermann Kulke (1982) and Sheldon Pollock (2006) have shown that during the early medieval period in India (c. 5th–6th centuries CE), emerging political centres integrated Sanskritic Brahmanical cosmologies, ethics, and metaphysics to consolidate hierarchical authority and form supra-regional kingdoms. Kulke (1982: 247–250) suggests that Brahmins were often invited by local rulers to employ their expertise in Vedic knowledge and ritual. Their role was to incorporate local cults into a broader Sanskritic courtly framework, producing what Kulke terms dual legitimization. On the one hand, "vertical legitimization" linked rulers to divine authority, presenting the king as the servant or representative of the gods. On the other, "horizontal legitimization" promoted territorial cohesion by symbolically uniting rulers with indigenous communities (Kulke, 1982: 248–263). Pollock (2006: 123–125) further argues that Southeast Asian elites enthusiastically adopted this cosmopolitan Sanskritic culture, including its literary language and political ideals

O. W. Wolters (1979; 1999), however, emphasizes that pre-Hindu Khmer society was structured differently. Rather than rigid social hierarchies, authority derived from personal charisma and innate potency, an idea he adapted from T. A. Kirsch's notion of the "unequal soul." Individuals who demonstrated extraordinary moral or supernatural capacity through ritual performance, warfare, or political success could

achieve leadership, which Wolters described as the authority of "Men of Prowess" (Wolters, 1979: 429–433). This flexible moral order, unlike the institutionalized varṇa system of Brahmanical India, remained fluid. As Richard Gombrich (1997) observes, such fluidity made Southeast Asian societies less rigidly structured by Indic orthodoxy. Consequently, Indian religious ideas, architectural programs, and ritual specialists interacted dynamically with indigenous beliefs, enabling local elites to strengthen authority through patronage of Brahmanical and Buddhist institutions (Murphy and Lefferts, 2017: 771).

Pāśupatas Movement of Early Southeast Asia

Kamaleswar Bhattacharya (1997: 36–39) states that Saivism assimilated into Southeast Asian society via an indigenous religion focused on worship of the mountain's spirit, as illustrated Funanese high custom of worshiping the mount Mo-tan, where God continually descends, found in the Chinese sources (Cœdès, 1975: 61). Saivism had long been associated with Indian kingship since it appears to be more malleable in grafting itself onto indigenous circle, helping to articulate the claim of divine kingship. In *Śivadharma*, it addresses that

> "*…that devotion towards devotees of Siva which is performed by men devoted to him (Siva), that the devotion performed by those devotees always goes to Siva...*"

Elizabeth Cecil (2024) explains that the text intended to present to us the character of Saiva teachers who are more-than-human agents, capable of alleviating suffering.

We know from inscriptions dating back to the 6th century that Siva Linga served as the Zhenla royal emblem, bearing the names of several Saiva tīrthas of the subcontinent, e.g., Amareśvara, Āmrātakeśvaras, Bhadreśvaras. Alexis Sanderson (2003-2004) and Peter Bisschop (2006) argue that the foundational knowledge of Indian Saiva geography is primarily attested in the Skandapuraṇa, while some may come from Matsyapuraṇa, presenting the fact that this overwhelming knowledge was remembered by the brahmins arriving in Cambodia. Wrote in *Les Religions Brahmaniques Dans L'Ancien Cambodge*, Kamaleswar Bhattacharya (1961: 48-53) says everything begins with the K.604 inscription of King Isanavarman I (r. 616-637 CE) in which we come across the first clearly mentioned Saiva tradition – Pāśupata. This inscription talks of Dvijah pāṣupato (Pāśupata brahmin) named Vidyāviśeṣa, who drawn to the various branches of knowledge – grammar, Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya, Sāṁkhya, and Buddhism, and granted by the king (Isanavarman I) the authority to worship the royal Siva Linga and all the deities of the kingdom Cœdès, 1952, Vol. 4: 18). Notably, his name has resurfaced once in K.1235 inscription, also dated to Isanavarman's reign, similarly, in which he was praised as beloved of Isanavarman (Goodall, 2019: 27-28), emphasising their close relationship.

The Movement of Pāśupata Ascetics across the Bay of Bengal

The geographical origin of the Pāśupata teachers who transmitted Saivism to Southeast Asia remains a matter of scholarly debate, yet available textual, epigraphic, and iconographic evidence suggests that they are most likely part of a trading connection from western to eastern regions of India. We have come across sculptures of Lakulīśa along the route from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Mathura, Bihar and coastal Odisha that can be dated as early as 5th century CE. The Pāśupata sect is traditionally associated with Lakulīśa, whose birthplace at Kārohaṇa (modern Karvan in Gujarat) was regarded as the principal center of the tradition. Elizabeth Cecil (2020) asserts that Skandapurana explicitly wrote that the Lakulīśa's journey out of Kārohaṇa resulting in Pāśupata communities in early medieval India time mainly associated with the capitals of most vital cultural, political, and economic territories, once served as the geographical conjunction along the ancient caravan trade route of the 6th – 8th centuries.

Amudalapadu copper-plate inscription, the Calukya King of Deccan, Vikarmaditya I (r. 655–680 CE), after halted the Pallava military aggression, received Pāśupata initiation in the year 660 CE from his preceptor, Srī Sudarsanācārya, who was granted the village of Alampur, one of

Pāśupata strongholds in Telangana (Nandi, 1973: 101-102). This help signifies that the Pāśupata have had participated in the Southern part of India during the same time they were engaged with the Northern trad route.

Parul Pandya Dhar (2016) suggests, from an art-historical perspective, that during the 7th century Southeast Asian artisans absorbed and incorporated Indian artistic references before them sharing among themselves. Her argument is compelling. Southeast Asian architectural remains from this century retain some Indian shapes, which are likely affiliated with the Deccan region (Dhar, 2016: 38-43). Shivani Kapoor (2019) adds to this predicament that the role of coastal eastern India, particularly Odisha, which maintained active maritime contacts with Southeast Asia from the early centuries CE, was immense. She argued that one ascetic figure from Sambor Prei Kuk, an archaeological site in Cambodia, known then as Isanpura, the capital city of Isanavarman, has iconographic parallels with Lakulīśa imagery in Odisha.

These strands of evidence suggest that the transmission of Pāśupata traditions to Southeast Asia was not the result of a single point of origin but rather emerged from a broader network of Saiva centers across Indian regions. Pāśupata teachers may have travelled along these networks, through which these ascetic specialists, ritual experts, and Brahmin preceptors could have accompanied merchants across the Bay of Bengal.

Pāśupata gurus - The Source of Southeast Asian Royal Prowess

Kuk Prah Kot Inscription (K.90) from Khampong Cham province says "King Isanavarman I found pleasure only in the company of sages (Cœdès, 1952, Vol. 4: 26). Similarly, inscription K. 733 from Phnom Preah Vihear region references Pāśupatāchārya Vidyāpuṣpa, beloved teacher of Bhavavarman II (r. 639-657 CE), Isanaverman I's son. To which Wolters (1979) suggests that it reflects the feature of Hinduism in Cambodia by the 7th century, which must be the king, who presumed the overlordship, maintained the closest possible relationship with Siva by virtue of his ascetic efforts in devotion to Siva, the greatest of all ascetics. This circumstance in which both overlord and their servant (bhṛtya) subscribe in their invocations to the doctrinal belief that concerning Saiva devotionalism, Wolters (1979: 431-432) explained, brought about the account of "*Hinduised man*," the personality of man with principled prowess which enable to assert authoritative hegemony, as evident in K. 440 inscription, where Isanavarman I being ascribed with the qualities of three guṇas (sattva, rajas, tamas) of Sāṁkhya with which the foreign kings contented with their down fall (Cœdès, 1953, Vol. 5: 9-10). Personally, it is clear enough that the cultural agent who efficiently brought Sāṁkhya cosmology to Isanavarman I was Vidyavisesa, as known from K. 604, on the one hand; and, on the other hand, it resonates the crucial practice of those Indian kings who fashioned themselves the divine aspect - Parameśvara or suffix - Īsvara that which the Khmer king bore.

Over the past six decades, Bhattacharya's and Wolter's statements have been scholarly accepted. Dominic Goodall (2019) argues that "Vidya-bearer" in 7th-to-9th-century Khmer society seems to represent Pāśupata's conventional naming for the religious elite, who were profoundly associated with the foundation or maintenance of asramas or sanctuaries in which the Siva Linga, perhaps accompanied by those from the Sakandapurana, was installed. Without any doubt, hence, these conventional entitlements have demonstrated that the principal agents of Khmer Saivism may have been the Pāśupatas to whom Wolthers (1979: 433) terms as "*brahmanas who are willing to cross the ocean*." Taken together, these given pictures, this alone could explain that the brahmin who worshipped Siva Linga of Pāśupati - Paramesvara of the newly found Wat Phra Ngam inscription of Thailand possibly belonged to the Pāśupata sect, since the dating of the inscription is impossible to come after the 7th century (Goodall and Revire, 2021). This possibility places Dvaravati into the domain of early Southeast Asian Saivism and highlights that its rulers demanded levels of Brahmanical spiritual endorsement during the early period of Indianization.

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Conclusion

The Indianization of Southeast Asia was a historical phase in which Indic knowledge, which was brought over sea, engaged with dynamically cultural selection of indigenous society, concealing in it the unique belief of natural spirit and authoritative charisma. Concealing within this cultural integration were the Pāśupata brahmins, the first Brahmanical tradition that was able to capture the local elite's awareness. Their philosophical knowledge, which covered multiple branches, prominently concerned the seeker of overlordship to invite them to their courts, regardless of their primary sponsorship of either Hinduism or Buddhism.

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