



The story of *Shibi-Jataka*, on a slab, from Gandhara, first-second century CE, now in British Museum, London



The story of *Shibi-Jataka*, Buddhist *stupa*, Borobudur, (Java, Indonesia), 9<sup>th</sup> century CE.

## **North-East India and South-East Asia: Cross-Border Migration & Cultural Relationship with reference to the Stone Jars of Dima-Hasao, Assam**

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### **Abstract**

*The Northeastern region of India, the gateway to East and South-East Asia, also considered as a bridge between India and South-East Asia, is more close to South-East Asia than the main land of India. The region has a relationship with the countries of South-East Asia like Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia etc. from the ancient time. It is said that India's maritime contact with South-East Asia can be dated as far back the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was these trade networks which not only marked trade and exchanges but also characterized the trajectory of the culture of the region. Both the region sharing a common physical features in Art & Dance forms, social structure, eating habits, weaving motifs, hunting practices, and cultural practices. There are some pre-historic stone jars, found in North Cachar hill, which are very similar to the stone jars of South-East Asian countries like Laos and Phillipines. After an extensive study, it is confirmed that it was made by the Austro-Asiatic speaking people, who lived here before they migrated to South-East Asian region. These archaeological evidences helps us to evaluate the origin, affinity and to construct the ethnicity of Northeast India along with the relationship of both the region.*

**Keywords:** North-East India, South-East Asia, Cultural Practices, Trade, Stone Jars.

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**Introduction:**

The North-East India stands as “the physical and cultural bridge” between India, South-East Asia and East Asia (Thomas, 2017). The region has a relationship with the countries like Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Cambodia etc. from ancient times. Both the region has a strong ethnic and cultural ties. It is argued that India’s maritime contact with South-East Asia can be dated as far back the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE. It was these trade networks which not only marked trade and exchanges but also characterized the trajectory of the culture of the region. Both the region sharing a common physical features in Art & Dance forms, social structure, eating habits, weaving motifs, hunting practices, and cultural practices.

South-East Asia was particularly attractive to Indian mercantile class in old days because of it’s natural and agricultural richness and it was named as ‘Swarnabhumi’ or ‘land of gold’, ‘Tokola’ or land of cardamons or ‘Narikeldeep’ the land of coconuts. These names also found in the Ramayana, Pali Nidesa and other classical texts. They followed two routes to enter in to this land- one through land via Bengal, Assam, Manipur and Burma to reach different parts of South East Asia. The other route was the maritime route from Coromandel coast or the coast of Bay of Bengal to Cape Comorin and via Malacca strait to reach the Malay Peninsula. During Gupta period there was much demand for Indian goods and trade between India and South-East Asia which was seen as a land of spices and rice growing fertile lands, flourished. With that Hindu priests and Buddhist monks accompanied mercantile class and assumed a leading role in spreading the message of Indian thought and culture to the entire South East Asian region. Since, they had no political ambitions and were living in hermitages and ashramas, the local people welcomed them. Thus, merchants, monks and Hindu Brahmin priests travelled to far away kingdoms like Cambodia and Indonesia in large numbers and India’s culture, religion and civilisation spread to these parts of South-East Asia. Indian religion, political thought, literature, mythology, artistic motifs and style, were absorbed deeply into local culture as greater interaction with Indians who settled in the courts of South East Asia. Buddhism came to this region from India in 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE when Buddhist monks were sent by king Ashoka. Besides, Hinduism and Brahmanism also entered in the mainland of South East Asia in about 14-20 BCE in the Chola period. They entered via the sea route supported by the monsoon which brought them directly to the southern part of Thailand. They migrated from the Tamil domain in the South via the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago and stopped at Takola, the present Takua Pa district of South Thailand.

## **Settlement of Indians in South East Asia:**

There is historical references to the foundation of colonies in South East Asia by emigrants from India. They used two routes for emigration, one by land through Assam-Burma and the other reaching Indo-China by sea through the Bay of Bengal (Kenneth, 2011). Historian R.C. Majumdar has shown that the Indian colonists proceeded to these regions through East Bengal and Assam and established colonies not only in Burma but also in the valleys of the Chindwin, the Irrawaddy, the Salween, the Mekong and the Red River as far as Yunnan. To the east of the hills bordering on Manipur there was the Hindu Kingdom of Ta-tsinj about 150 miles further east, beyond the Chindwin, was another Kingdom just to the north of Ngan-si. In Yunnan was the Kingdom of Nan-chao or Tali. The whole of Upper Burma was colonised by the Indians who established kingdoms at Prome, Pagan, Tagaung and other places. Similar Kingdoms existed in Laos, in central Indo-China. The colonists, proceeding by sea established kingdoms in Arakan, Lower Burma, Malaya Peninsula, Siam, Cambodia, Cochin China and Annam on the main land, and in the islands of Sumatra, Java, Borneo and Bali in the East Indies (Basa, 1998). In Pan-pan, a tiny kingdom located in the Malay Peninsula, found a number of Indian Brahmins who migrated here in search of wealth recorded by Liang shu, a 7<sup>th</sup> century Chinese source. One Sanskrit stone inscription (known as Vo-Cahn) of 3<sup>rd</sup> century mentions that Indian Brahmins were present in the areas known today as Vietnam and Cambodia (Daweewarn, 1982).

According to the Burmese chronicle, in prehistoric times a Sakya prince came from Kapilavastu, Nepal and founded a kingdom in Upper Burma and ruled for generations. Another group of Ksatriyas came during the time of the Buddha and later moved southwards and founded their capital in Sri-ksetra now called Hmwaza, near Prome, present Pyay town of Myanmar. Sir Edward Gait pointed out that an Indian king Samuda, who ruled in Upper Burma in 105 CE. It is possible that Samuda belonged to a ruling family in Assam.

These references indicate that both politically and culturally the ancient history of India as well as North East seems inseparably connected with the ancient history of Burma, Arakan and other South East Asian countries. Especially, Assam or North East politically or culturally had an important links with the people of South East Asia.

## **Common Festivals & Rituals:**

Though, the South East Asian countries and North East India are separate as nation or geographical region both share such some common festivals and rituals. It is fascinating to

witness the unique cultural practices of one community being replicated and performed by people in a different country altogether. Such connections naturally play to bring communities and countries together. There are some festivals celebrated by the people in both the regions are similar to each other. This sameness creates feeling of oneness with one another and is a vector for forging stronger ties between the two regions.

The people of Lao celebrated 'Pi Mai' as New Year like 'Rongali Bihu' in Assam, which is also a celebration of Assamese New Year. The Pi Mai Lao celebration has become synonymous of Lao identity. The celebration attracts much fanfare with traditional throwing of water on each other, parades and dances and singing songs. The cleansing of statue and images of Buddha is also a ritual of the celebration. Devotees collect water falling off from the statues and images and pour on one another as an act of ridding them from past sins.

The celebration of 'Songkran' in Thailand and 'Sangken' in Arunachal Pradesh also similar festivals celebrated by the people of both the region (Sarkar, 1985). The Sangken festival is similar to the Pi Mai and Songkran, celebrated in Arunachal Pradesh by the tribes Tai Khamptis, Singphoos and Tangsas (Tikhaks) with fervour and zeal. It marks the advent of the New Year. This three day festival is also celebrated with people throwing water at each other. The very important ritual of this festival is bathing the Buddha and people from all over come to witness this event. The pouring of water is symbolic of the cleansing of the spirit, mind and body. Besides, the language speak by the Tai people living in parts of Arunachal Pradesh and Assam has some similarities with the language spoken in Thailand and Lao as they all are a branch of Tai-Kadai language family.

The shifting cultivation, an age old method of agricultural system, originated in Neolithic period is still practiced in the hills of South East Asia and North East India. The method is considered to be intricately associated with social structure, religious beliefs, traditional knowledge, fairs and festivals of the concerned practicing communities of both the geographical regions.

There is a similarities between both the region in terms of pottery and tool typo-technology of Neolithic culture too. The Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) made by the indogenous potters of longpi Tangkhul Nage tribe of Manipur and the people of South East Asia (Tarling, 1992). For making this Tangkhul people still adopt the handmade technique pottery. It does not require any metal tools, the fingers of the potters are sufficient to fashion it and it is black in colour. This NBPW has been discovered in various parts of the South East Asian countries.

Thus, these similarities of both the regions offer a unique standpoint for both the region to assimilate and form a stronger association basing on the common cultural practices and legacy.

### **The Stone Jars of Dima-Hasao:**

The Dima Hasao district of Assam earlier it was known as North Cachar Hill district is archaeologically rich and is known for its pre-historic archaeological remains, the Stone Jars. For the first time these Jars were reported by Colonial Administrators J.P Mills and J.H Hutton in 1929 CE at different places of North Cachar hills viz. Bolasan, Derebore, Molongpa, Kobak, Kartong and Ndulge (Thakuria, 2014). The Jars were perhaps used as ancestral bone repository by an ancient tribe. No such similar type of stone jars were found in the country except in NC Hill. However, similar stone jars are found in South East Asian countries like Laos and Phillipines. In Laos, extensive studies were carried out on the stone jars by Madeliene Colani in 1930 (ASI: Guwahati, 2015). She proposed that the jars in Laos were made by the Austro-Asiatic speaking people who lived around 800-700 BCE. Looking at the distribution of jars from Laos to N.C Hills, she proposed that this group of people travelled with their unique culture along the salt trade route and entered N.C Hill. They were also groups who were well equipped with the knowledge of iron. The recent study on Jars sites in Laos further pushed back the antiquity of jars to the end of second millennium BCE (Sayavonghamdy & Bellwood, 2000). Such information on jars in Laos has immense significance in evaluating the origin, affinity and construction of ethnicity in Northeast India.

There are no memories and stories regarding the jars among the present ethnic communities. The present ethnic communities living in North Cahar do not claim the authorship of these jars. However, Zemi Nagas refer to a tribe called “siami” who made these jars (Oliver, 1958). There is not much information about this “siami”. Perhaps, from the information provided by the Zemis, “siami” were Austro-Asiatic language speaker (Thakuria, 2014). Anyway, there is no doubt that these jars belongs to pre-historic period and made by the Austro-Asiatic speaking people, who lived in N.C hill before they migrated to South-East Asian region (Thakuria, 2014).

The jars are facing vandalism both by nature and human to the extent that only 180 jars are presently traceably out of the 400 reported by J.P. Mills and J.H. Hutton. It was the initiative of J.P. Mills and J. H. Hutton that the site was declared protected and an iron fence was erected around the area preserving the jars. But when it explored again in 2014, after almost 80 years, no trace of iron fencing was found. Villagers informed that they have removed the

iron fence and pillars. The site represents jars of various sizes and shapes. All the jars were made out of locally available sandstone blocks. The average heights of these jars range between 150 cm to 50 cm. There are four types of jars. They are as follows:

- **Type-I:** The first type is represented by the elongated bi-cone shape jars. The edge of the bi-cone is not in the center. The edge is more towards the apex where cavity was curved out. The other apex is more pointed. There are only a few jars of this type present at the site. Jars of this type are between 180 cm to 150 cm in length.
- **Type-II:** This type is represented by bi-cone shaped jars where edge is almost in the centre. The apex where cavity is curved is broader than the other apex. This type is represented by jars of sizes between 70 cm to 40 cm in length.
- **Type-III:** This type is represented by cylindrical shape. The base of the cylinder is narrower than the cavity end. They are 130 cm to 70 cm in length
- **Type-IV:** This type is represented by convex bi-cone shape. In this shape the height of the jar is smaller than its diameter. The edge of facets is so large that the jars look like almost bulbous. However, in some cases the edge is little sharp.

Besides, engravings of footprints, triangles and circles were noticed on some of the jars. Some of the engravings are not clearly visible as they are either damaged by natural agents or by humans. Some stone pieces with flat surface was engraved with human face and other kind of symbols like circle and lines. The jars, at all the sites, are made of sandstone. It seems that jars were strategically made near the source of sandstones to reduce the effort to transport them. The jars were fashioned from the sandstone block using tools made of metal. All most all the jars carry parallel marks caused by chisels. It seems that chisels were of iron. The outer surface of the jars were smoothed or polished to remove the chisel marks. According to Mills and Hutton the jars were used for funerary purposes that they had found a human bone from the jar (Thakuria, 2014).

It is believed that, the jars of Laos and Assam certainly show great affinities in shape, size, distribution and also it is a production of same tradition. These artifacts emphasize the similarity or affinity of archaeology in both the region and also shows that the sharing of common culture which also revealed the early relationship of both the region.

At present India's relationship with South-east Asian countries is a key pillar of the foreign policy of the nation which is also a part of Act East Policy. For this India has set up a separate mission to maintain the relationship with this region interms of economic and political strategies.



**Jar 1**



**Jar 2**