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Revisiting the Debate: "Indianization" in Southeast Asian history

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Abstract

The Indianization of Southeast Asia is a pivotal topic in the study of the region's ancient history, marked by considerable scholarly debate. Since the early twentieth century, researchers have been deeply engrossed in this subject, initially forming varied perspectives. Evidence such as Hindu temples, the widespread distribution of Sanskrit inscriptions, and mythological narratives of Indian origin have led scholars to propose an Indianization phase in Southeast Asian history. During the early twentieth century, when much of the Far East was under colonial rule, Western perceptions often framed Southeast Asia as having been culturally and politically influenced by India, seen through the lens of colonialism and the dominance of Indian dynasties. However, this viewpoint has evolved significantly with the emergence of new historical findings and perspectives, particularly following World War II and the subsequent independence movements in Southeast Asia. As these nations gained autonomy and established their own identities, scholarly inquiry into their histories underwent a reevaluation, leading to a more nuanced understanding of the processes of cultural interaction and development in the region.

Keywords: India, Indianization, Southeast Asia, cultural interaction

1. Introduction

Indian culture has a strong influence on many facets of Southeast Asian life and has left a lasting legacy that still shapes the region today. The cross-cultural exchanges between these areas were deep and long-lasting, influencing everything from architecture and language to religion and government. The term "Indianization" was used by scholars to describe the deep and pervasive impact of Indian culture, religion, language, and governance on Southeast Asian civilizations, which started in the early centuries AD and lasted for several centuries.

The Indianization of Southeast Asia is one of the most salient concerns for scholars studying the region's ancient history, and it is a topic of intense debate.

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There were early viewpoints and a great deal of concern about this topic among researchers starting in the early twentieth century. Researchers have hypothesised an Indianization era in Southeast Asia based on the presence of Hindu temple remnants, the density of Sanskrit inscriptions, mythological legends of Indian provenance, etc. The word "Indianization" continues to be controversial among researchers despite more than a century of investigation. Attempts have been made by researchers to clarify the nature of the so-called Indianization in Southeast Asia; is it true that the region ever experienced an Indianized era? What was the nature of the relationship between Southeast Asia and India? The primary focus of discussions surrounding Indianization pertains to the following: What factors led to the Indianization process in Southeast Asia? Who was the primary agent responsible for the spread of Indian culture throughout the region? Did South East Asians actively contribute to the growth of this civilization, or did Indian warriors, brahmins, and merchants colonize the area?; When and to what extent did Southeast Asian countries adopt Indian culture? How deep was Indianization in Southeast Asia? Did the whole Southeast Asian region become another version of the Indian world, or those influences just like a “thin and flaking glaze”?

2. Pre-World War II Scholarly Discourse

R.C. Majumdar, an Indian scholar was the first author considering the issues of Indianization of Southeast Asia seriously (Majumdar, R.C, 1927, 1937). In this series, the author position the Southeast Asian region under the influence of Indian culture, including Indochina and the Malay archipelago, known under the name Suvarnabhumi or ‘Land of Gold’, and Suvarnadvipa or ‘Island of Gold’ (Majumdar, R. C. 1944: 4). According to Majumdar, linguistic evidence suggests that the earliest inhabitants of Southeast Asia, either tribal groups or individuals at a particular level of civilization, came from India and were part of an earlier wave of Indian colonization in prehistoric times in the Far East. This was sometime before or after the start of the Christian era (Majumdar, R. C. 1944: 6).

Majumdar's analysis underscores trade and emigration as principal catalysts for Indian colonization in Southeast Asia. Indian traders were drawn to the region by the prospect of wealth beyond their borders, enticed by the abundance of gold, precious minerals, and spices in the Far East. The allure of this wealth is epitomized in the name Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadvipa, meaning 'land of gold'. Emigration emerged as a second driving force behind Indian colonization, fueled by population growth and the expansion of trade, resulting in a steady influx of Indian emigrants to various parts of the Far East. These settlers established themselves in new territories, intermarried with local populations, and

began disseminating their 'superior culture', gradually Hinduizing society (Majumdar, 1944: 6). The emergence of "Indian colonial Kingdoms" in Southeast Asia was a product of the symbiotic relationship between Hinduized locals and groups of Indian migrants.

Therefore, Majumdar believed that Indians colonized and expanded throughout Southeast Asia, either before or after the start of the Christian era. Many Indian scholars agree with Majumdar and believe that Indian colonization and emigration to Southeast Asia are the main causes of Indianization. They considered Southeast Asia to be a part of "Greater India" or "Further India." For example, C.C. Berg believed that Indian soldiers' conquest and settlement led to the Indianization of the area. According to N.J. Krom, the growth of Indian trade and the ensuing settlement and intermarriage were the main causes of Java's Indianization process (Legge J.D.1992: 7).

George Coedes (1944; 1968) stands as one of the pioneering scholars who conducted comprehensive studies on the history of Southeast Asian countries, highlighting their shared characteristics within the framework of what he termed "Indianized States." For Coedes, the phenomenon of "Indianization" and the expansion of Indian culture represent historical realities that unfolded during a specific historical epoch in Southeast Asia. He defines "Indianized States" as encompassing Indonesia and island Southeast Asia, excluding the Philippines, as well as the Indochinese Peninsula, akin to "India beyond the Ganges," which includes the Malay Peninsula. Notably, regions such as Assam and northern Vietnam are not incorporated into this classification. These areas continue to bear enduring traces of ancient Indian culture, including the presence of Sanskrit elements in local languages, the influence of Indian legal and administrative systems, and the existence of various ancient Hindu-Buddhist temples and monuments throughout the Southeast Asian region (Coedes, 1968: XVI).

In analyzing the causes underlying the Indianization process in Southeast Asia, Coedes proposes three hypotheses. Firstly, he suggests that pressure on the Indian population resulted from the invasions of the Kushans in the first century AD. Secondly, he posits that high-caste Indian adventurers were afforded opportunities to seek their fortunes overseas. Lastly, he underscores the commercial origins of Indianization. Coedes defines Indianization as the expansion of an organized culture rooted in Indian conceptions of royalty, characterized by Hindu or Buddhist cults, the mythology of the Puranas, adherence to the Dharmasastras, and expression through the Sanskrit language. This viewpoint sometimes leads to the use of the term 'Sanskritization' as an alternative to 'Indianization' (Coedes, 1968: 16).

D.G.E. Hall's seminal work "A History of South-east Asia" (1955) provides valuable insights into the phenomenon of Indianization in the region. Hall situates Indianization within the broader historical context of Southeast Asia, tracing its origins to ancient maritime trade networks and cultural exchanges between the Indian subcontinent and the Southeast Asian archipelago. He highlights the pivotal role of Indian merchants, sailors, and Brahminical missionaries in disseminating Indian religious beliefs, cultural practices, and linguistic traditions throughout the region. Hall delves into the significant influence of Indian religions on Southeast Asian societies, with a focus on Buddhism and Hinduism. He traces the dissemination of Hindu-Buddhist cosmology, iconography, and ritual practices throughout the region, emphasizing the establishment of colossal temple complexes like Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Borobudur in Java as enduring representations of Indianized cultural expression.

The studies conducted by R.C. Majumdar, G. Coedes and D.G.E. Hall have significantly influenced the perception of a "Further India" region as a colony of India. These scholars underscored the dominant role of Indian actors while downplaying the agency of Southeast Asian peoples and indigenous elements. Indianization was portrayed as a comprehensive and total phenomenon, exerting influence across all facets of Southeast Asian history. The advent of Indian presence and the onset of Indianization in Southeast Asia were depicted as the genesis of the region's historical narrative, implying that history began only with the arrival of Indians and that the region was devoid of historical significance prior to this encounter. Indian individuals, whether warriors, Brahmins, or merchants, were positioned as the primary agents driving cultural transmission, with Indian culture depicted as inherently superior and Southeast Asian society portrayed as uncivilized and passive recipients. To encapsulate the prevailing external historiography of Indianization, V. Lieberman's assessment is pertinent: "Indianization – the process whereby early Indian religious, architectural, and scriptural traditions were transferred to Southeast Asia during the first millennium C.E. – was portrayed by Hendrik Kern, N.J. Krom, G. Coedes, and other leading scholars as primarily the fruit of Indian, rather than Southeast Asian, initiatives. Either Indian traders had provided an indispensable spur, or Indian warriors had established colonies" (Lieberman, 2003: 7).

Therefore, Majumdar's, CC Berg's, NJ Krom's, and Legge's views on the Indianization of Southeast Asia, through Indian people invading this region with economic motivations, are relevant. The allure of abundant natural resources in Southeast Asia led to colonial exploitation and the symbiotic migration of Indian people, transforming parts of Southeast

Asian countries into an "Indianized" periphery of "Greater India." Coedès provides a more comprehensive analysis of the factors contributing to Indianization in Southeast Asia, but he converges with Majumdar on the crucial role of trade in this process. The expansion of economic trade from the region's rich natural resources was the primary catalyst for cultural, religious, and scriptural influences.

D.G.E. Hall emphasizes the spiritual and cultural aspects of Southeast Asian inhabitants in influencing Indian culture, particularly in terms of script, religious practices, and rituals, which led to the construction of grand religious architectural marvels like Angkor. In Hall's view, we still see deep-rooted causes stemming from Indian merchants expanding trade with Southeast Asian countries. However, from the perspective of colonial historians such as RC Majumdar, G. Coedès, and D.G.E Hall, their analyses may appear subjective as they primarily highlight surface-level manifestations of Indian cultural influence in ancient Southeast Asian societies through the roles of dominant elites, influential figures like monks, kings, merchants, and warriors, without fully acknowledging the role of the common people—the majority in society—who are considered the smallest unit contributing to the distinctive indigenous cultural traits of ancient Southeast Asian peoples.

Is it true that all inhabitants of Southeast Asia during the Indianization period were exposed to Hinduism and Sanskrit, as understood by Western scholars, or is this merely a superficial view limited to the elite classes—those with social, political, religious, and economic status—in ancient Southeast Asian society? What role do cultural historians of Southeast Asia observe the common people playing in shaping indigenous cultures? The answer is substantiated through numerous archaeological discoveries and historical studies since World War II, offering a comprehensive and objective illumination of Southeast Asian history from a new perspective: the proactive engagement and adaptation of Southeast Asian inhabitants to external cultural influences within the framework of their indigenous culture.

3. Post-World War II Perspectives and Debates

Southeast Asia's historiography underwent a significant change following World War II, with a new generation of academics challenging the writings of earlier researchers and calling for a reevaluation of the region's political histories. While Majumdar and G. Coedes diminished the initiative of the Southeast Asian people by overemphasizing the significance of Indian culture as an external force in their work, scholars like P. Mus and Van Leur provided an alternative viewpoint and interpretation. Accordingly, P. Mus and Van Leur P.

emphasizing the local factors and the autonomy of South East Asia, as well as certain (not total) influence of Indian culture in Southeast Asia.

In his work *Cultes indiens et indigenes au Champa*, Mus contested Majumdar's earlier viewpoint. In particular, the Champa kingdom is examined in this book as it relates to the significance of Indian culture in the early stages of Southeast Asian civilization. The author firstly examines the pre-Aryan state of India, as well as discusses about the Aryan contribution and their mutual reaction. He also looks at Hinduism as the combination of the indigenous propensities with the Indo-European component. In order to comprehend the impact of Indian culture on the Champa empire, Paul Mus then looks at a few modern manifestations of the Cham cults, such as the Kuts and the religion of the lingas. He demonstrates the existence of a common substratum of beliefs and culture in both Indian and Southeast Asian societies prior to the arrival of Indians in Southeast Asia by analyzing the earth cults in Champa. In this way, Indian culture spread throughout Southeast Asia and was readily assimilated by the local populace, allowing it to flourish in a new location remote from its place of origin (Mus, P. 1933, 1975).

In his seminal work *Indonesian Trade and Society*, Van Leur (1955) expanded upon and articulated the perspective put out by P. Mus. Van Leur disproved the widespread assumption that Indian civilization has had a significant influence on Southeast Asia in this book, challenging the Eurocentric perspective of the region. However, he contended that rather than being a passive target of outside influences, Southeast Asia was actually an active agent that adopted certain aspects of Indian culture (Van Leur 1955: 17). Van Leur offers a nuanced perspective on Indian influence in Southeast Asia, characterizing it as a "thin and flaking glaze" that coexisted with indigenous elements (1955: 95). Contrary to prevailing hypotheses, he refutes the notion of Indian colonization in the region, arguing instead that Indian influence was primarily confined to courtly realms rather than representing a widespread cultural diffusion.

Both P. Mus and Van Leur have significantly enriched the scholarly discourse by shedding light on the pivotal role of local actors in the historical processes of Southeast Asia. Their contributions diverge from the narratives espoused by scholars like Majumdar or G. Coedes, which tend to overemphasize the extent of Indian influence in the region. As V. Lieberman (2003: 11) observes, "[these scholars] began to delve into the internal dynamics of pre-colonial societies. Rather than negating foreign influences, they aimed to demonstrate how local populations adeptly absorbed, interpreted, and reinterpreted external stimuli, thus retaining agency in shaping their own environments."

Building upon the pioneering theses of P. Mus and Van Leur, numerous scholars in the field of Southeast Asian studies during the period spanning from the 1960s to the 1980s grappled with the fundamental inquiry: “how local peoples had been able to absorb, translate, and re-contextualize external forces, in short, to maintain control of their environments”? (Lieberman, 2003: 11). New voices like O.W. Wolters argued against the monolithic narrative of Indianization and in favor of putting more of an emphasis on indigenous agency and hybridity in cross-cultural interactions. Wolters' concept of "localization" brought to light the proactive part played by elites in Southeast Asia in reinterpreting and modifying aspects of Indian culture to fit their own socio-political contexts.

In his seminal work *"Early Indonesian Commerce,"* O.W. Wolters delves into the nature of trade in the archipelagic region preceding the era of Srivijaya. Contrary to prevailing narratives, Wolters argues that the expansion of trade during the Srivijayan period was primarily an indigenous achievement rather than a consequence of Indian influences (Wolters, 1967: 247). Expounding on this theme in his later work, "*History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives,"* published in 1999, Wolters further emphasizes the concept of 'localization' and the significant role played by Southeast Asian agencies in their interactions with external cultures. He posits that Indian influence did not occur in a vacuum, advocating for a nuanced understanding that acknowledges the region's cultural diversity (Wolters, 1999: 66). Wolters' critique of George Coedes' thesis on "The Hinduised States of Southeast Asia" underscores his commitment to approaching regional history on its own terms rather than through the lens of external influences.

According to Wolters, Indianization involved more than just imposing Indian culture on Southeast Asia. Rather, nations in Southeast Asia deliberately modified and reinterpreted Indian concepts to suit their own requirements and cultural situations. As a result, distinct and syncretic forms of culture combining indigenous and Indian elements emerged. A major theme in Wolters' analysis is the expansion of Buddhism and Hinduism in Southeast Asia. He highlights the role that cultural middlemen, religious authorities, and local elites play in promoting this process. These middlemen were essential in helping their societies understand and adopt Indian religious scriptures and customs. Wolters presents the idea of "mandala" polities, which characterize the political structure of governments in Southeast Asia that have been impacted by Indian models. Similar to the cosmological mandalas of Hindu and Buddhist thinking, these polities were characterized by a flexible and decentralized system of governance, where power radiated from a central court to outlying territories in concentric

circles. Wolters notes that although Sanskrit was utilized in religious literature and regal inscriptions, it was frequently used in conjunction with regional languages. By making Indian concepts understandable and pertinent to the local populace, this bilingual or multilingual approach aided in their dissemination. In sum, O.W. Wolters (1967, 1999) challenges earlier theories that portrayed Southeast Asia as a passive recipient of Indian culture. He argues that such views underestimate the creativity and agency of Southeast Asian societies in shaping their own cultural and political identities. In addition, he rejects the notion that India had a universal influence on Southeast Asia, save for a few particular areas.

By talking about the agencies and the word "Indianization," Ian Mabbet (1977) further advances the field. He draws the conclusion that components of earlier ideas on Indian Agencies, including as the Ksatriya (Warrior) theory, the Vaisya (merchant) theory, and the Brahman theory, did play a role in Southeast Asia's Indianization. According to him “because none of them can be disproved; because the analogy of the mixture of coercion, autonomous borrowing, considered policy, accident, absentmindedness, chicanery, humanitarianism, trade, politics and religion at work in the extension of later western influence in Asia makes the case for an eclectic explanation a priori strong; and because it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the various agencies of Indian influence that have been postulated” (Mabbett, I. W. 1977: 157-8). He also suggests clarifying the term “Indianization”, of which “Indian culture” is not a “monad”, but “a plurality of tradition” share historical ancestry. Consequently, Mabbett states, “It is better to divide it into many local cultures, each of which is linked historically to Indian culture in the first sense” (Mabbett, I. W. 1977: 160).

Kenneth R. Hall's *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia* examines the Indianization process through the lens of economic and political changes driven by maritime trade. Hall's approach sheds light on the ways in which trade relations promoted state formation and cross-cultural exchange in Southeast Asia. The importance of marine trade routes in linking the Indian subcontinent with Southeast Asia is emphasized by K. Hall. Indian influence was aided by these commercial networks, which enabled the flow of products, concepts, and cultural practices. Indian traders and merchants were essential in the dissemination of Indian religion and culture. They served as cultural ambassadors, bringing Indian traditions, beliefs, and social structures to Southeast Asian nations through the establishment of trading posts and settlements along important sea routes. Syncretic belief systems are the product of religious practices from India and the local community interacting. Hall demonstrates how Hindu-Buddhist traditions were blended in distinctive ways by Southeast Asian societies as they modified Indian religious ideas to suit their own cultural

settings. Hall highlights how the process of Indianization varies by area. The degree to which Indian influence varied across Southeast Asia depended on the region, pre-existing cultural practices, and intensity of trade relations (Hall, K. R. 1985).

The interdisciplinary approach applied by scholars such as Anthony Reid (1988) and Pierre-Yves Manguin (2004) expanded the field of study beyond textual sources to incorporate evidence from archaeology, epigraphy, and linguistics. This comprehensive perspective highlighted the reciprocal nature of cultural exchanges and demonstrated the diversity of Indian cultural impacts throughout Southeast Asia. Scholars started to understand Indianization as a dynamic and contingent phenomena shaped by intricate networks of trade, migration, and socio-political alliances, as opposed to seeing it as a linear process. For example, by deciphering Sanskrit and other ancient scripts, scholars can reconstruct historical narratives and trace the spread of Indian religious beliefs, royal genealogies, and administrative systems in Southeast Asia. Epigraphic evidence complements textual sources by offering insights into local adaptations and variations of Indian cultural elements. This interdisciplinary approach enables Anthony Reid and Pierre-Yves Manguin to reconstruct the complex dynamics of cultural exchange, adaptation, and hybridization that shaped the historical trajectory of the region.

4. Conclusion

Before World War II, the prevailing academic perspective on Indianization in Southeast Asia depicted it as a unidirectional process driven by the expansion of Indian culture into the region. Influential scholars such as George Coedes argued that Indian civilization was fundamental in disseminating Southeast Asia's culture, religion, and political ideologies. Coedes' "Indianized states" theory proposed that Southeast Asian societies passively absorbed Indian influences, lacking in originality or agency of their own. This viewpoint reinforced the perception of India's cultural superiority and positioned Southeast Asia as a periphery of Indian civilization. Scholars like R.C. Majumdar further emphasized the significant role of Indian trade networks, Brahminical missionaries, and Hindu-Buddhist rulers in spreading Indian cultural traits throughout Southeast Asia. However, this scholarly focus on India's active role in cultural diffusion led to biased interpretations and a lack of objectivity. Many of these colonial-era scholars were trained in disciplines like Indology or Sinology, which shaped their perspectives and limited their understanding of Southeast Asian cultures. Moreover, the availability of sources such as Sanskrit inscriptions and Indian cultural artifacts in Southeast Asia contributed to the reinforcement of this narrative. This overly India-centric

view of Indianization has been criticized for its oversimplification and neglect of Southeast Asia's historical dynamics and contributions to cultural exchange. The post-World War II era and the subsequent decolonization of Southeast Asia have prompted a reassessment of these narratives, encouraging scholars to adopt more nuanced and inclusive perspectives that recognize the active roles played by Southeast Asian societies in shaping their own histories and cultures.

After World War II, scholarly perspectives on the Indianization of Southeast Asia underwent a significant paradigm shift, marked by a more nuanced and multidisciplinary approach. A new generation of scholars has challenged the earlier hypotheses put forth by figures such as R.C. Majumdar and George Coedes. These scholars have introduced fresh perspectives based on new historical evidence and regional viewpoints, often referred to as "indigenous history" or regional history from a Southeast Asian perspective. This approach seeks to understand Indianization not solely as an imposition of Indian cultural elements, but rather as a dynamic process of cultural interaction and adaptation between India and Southeast Asia. By emphasizing Southeast Asia's active role in cultural exchange, these scholars have moved away from the earlier narrative of passive reception to one that recognizes the region's contributions and adaptations in the Indianization process. This shift has enriched our understanding of Southeast Asia's complex historical and cultural dynamics, challenging previous assumptions and fostering a more inclusive interpretation of its history.

It is historical truth that Indian culture had an impact on Southeast Asian history. But we also need an unbiased viewpoint on how this culture affected the area and who was instrumental in this development. Recent scientific findings have shown how Southeast Asians were proactive in interacting with Indian civilization, adapting and localizing Indian cultural elements to suit their own needs. It has been demonstrated by academics that Southeast Asia and India share a common cultural background, which made it easier for Indian culture to spread throughout the region., in fact, it was a process of "Interaction". Moreover, simultaneous developments, such as the spread and adoption of Hinduism in both South India and Southeast Asia, illustrate the complexity of Indian cultural dynamics. This underscores the notion that "Indian" culture encompasses diverse entities with a shared historical ancestry, influencing Southeast Asia in multifaceted ways. By embracing this nuanced understanding of cultural interaction, scholars aim to move beyond simplistic narratives of cultural diffusion and recognize Southeast Asia's agency in shaping its own historical trajectory through engagement with Indian civilization. This approach enriches our

appreciation of the region's cultural diversity and historical development within broader frameworks of interconnectedness and mutual influence.

From the scholarly perspectives of historians on the "Indianization" of Southeast Asia before and after World War II, it is pertinent to underscore that when a civilization attains prominence and advances significantly, its inherent tendency towards diffusion leads it to extend its cultural influence into neighboring and less developed regions. This phenomenon is regarded as a historical law, observed across many civilizations worldwide and the regions affected by them. However, this diffusion in ancient Southeast Asian countries involved a synthesis or interaction of indigenous (endogenous) and external (exogenous) factors. At the cultural substrate from the Stone Age through the Bronze and Iron Ages, ancient Southeast Asian communities had already established a rich cultural foundation, spanning from the mainland to the islands. They possessed a diverse cultural heritage that was well-developed prior to the arrival of Indian influences. Accumulated over millennia and catalyzed by advancements in metallurgy, their productive capacity experienced rapid growth, accompanied by intensified labor specialization. The emergence of ancient East Asian states was a necessary and objective condition. Positioned advantageously along maritime and overland trade routes, Southeast Asia regularly absorbed external cultural influences, often serving as stimuli for internal development dynamics, fostering the enduring prosperity and cultural vibrancy of these ancient civilizations, as documented in historical records.

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