

A Brief History of Indian Emigration During Ancient and Mediaeval Period

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Indians have a long history of emigration to other parts of the world. India's links with West Asia date back to the 10th century BC with ships moving between the mouth of the river Indus and the Persian Gulf. The Old Testament records of ivory, apes and peacocks used for the decoration of the palaces and temple of King Solomon. Even the queen of Sheba brought spices as gifts to King Solomon and the pepper of the Malabar Coast was known to ancient traders (Abraham, 1993: 269).

Fifty years after Buddha's death (483 BC) his disciples went to the neighbouring countries to spread Buddhism and settled there. The Mauryan Empire was spread up to the Hindukush Mountains. King Ashoka (268-239 BC) embraced Buddhism and sent monks to central and eastern Asia to spread the gospel of Buddha. For the first time, the whole of South Asia, and beyond, was brought under the influence of one unified political and religious system (Tinker, 1989: 7). King Kanishka (1st century AD) was another champion of Buddhism. During his rule Buddhism spread to southern India, eastern Iran, central Asia, China, Greece, Kandahar (now in Afghanistan), Southeast Asia and Indonesia (Motwani, Jyoti, 1993: 33).

Indian settlements were in existence in the north-eastern Africa at the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 BC). Alexander was advised by Aristotle to establish a colony of Greeks in Sokotra Island off northeastern Africa. The army of Alexander conquered the island in which Indians were living (Pankhurst, 1979). The famous work *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea* (a first century Greek guide for sailors) mentions that the Indian ships were arriving along the east African coast. Several Indian gold coins found at Dabra Damma, dating from the third century, have established the trade relations between Ethiopia and India.

"India had a long-standing mercantile connection with this part of the world as a part of the ancient network of the Indian Ocean. Geographical proximity facilitated by the monsoon winds made India for over two thousands years a very important market for gold, ivory, and slaves and the most important source for cotton, cloth, beads and sundry manufactured articles" (Desai, 1993:118).

The Greek work also mentions India's trade relations with Rome, Malay and China. Arikamedu in Tamil Nadu was a Roman settlement where muslin was made for exporting to Rome. It was also an entrepot for ships to Malay and China carrying Indian goods to Rome. Romila Thapar attributes Roman use of this port from the first century BC to the early second century AD. The imports from India were luxury items like spices, jewels, textiles, parrots, peacocks and apes. Originally trade with Southeast Asia was caused by demand for spices which sent Indian merchants as middlemen to Malaya, Java, Sumatra, Cambodia and Borneo which were a treasure-trove of various spices. Bigger trade developed with Indians settling in Southeast Asia with South Indian traders dominating the trade together with prominent merchants from Kalinga and Magadha. During this period trade with China also increased with the use of Chinese cloth and bamboo in India. The routing of China silk through the north-western towns, Taxila and Broach added to the prosperity of northwestern part of India. Thaper traces the colonisation of the Irrawady Delta in Burma and various parts of Java to the Kalingans; and the introduction of Indian culture to Cambodia to an Indian Brahmin named Kaundinya who married a Cambodian prince (Thapar, 1966).

There were permanent settlements of Indian traders along the coast of East Africa. The other dominant trading community was of Arabs. Arabs developed Mogadishu and Mombasa as great trading centers. Indian traders, manufacturers and clove cultivators were concentrated in Zanzibar island. They were both Hindus (mainly Vaishyas) and Muslims (Ismailis and Bokras).

The Venetian traveller Marco Polo has a word of praise for the Gujarati and Saurashtrian merchants on Africa's east coast who he considers to be "the best and most honourable that can be found in the world" (*Travels of Marco Polo* written in 1260 AD. Vasco da Gama touched East Africa on his historic voyage to India. He reached Malindi in 1497 AD and found Indian merchants in Mozambique, Kilwa and Mombasa. He hired a Gujarati mariner named Kanji to take him to the shore of India (Desai, 1993; Samaroo, 1994). The Indian traders had also settled in Aden and the Persian Gulf (Tinker, 1977:2).

The abundance of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain that found its way to East Africa during the medieval period did so, for the most part, in Gujarati ships (Hatim, 1983: 66-72).

"Indian presence on the east African seaboard was quite substantial up to the beginning of the 16th century when the western maritime powers arrived in the Indian Ocean. The use of Indian system of weights and measures and of Indian cowries as currency, a great demand for Indian goods, all pointed to the fact that Indians were playing a key role in the area.

However, there is nothing to indicate that they had penetrated into the interior or made contacts with its Bantu state systems". Indian traders, labourers, adventurers and junior administrators took part in the Portuguese penetration into the interior (Desai 1993:119).

Buddhism was brought to China by the year AD 69. By the fifth century a large segment of Chinese population had embraced Buddhism. "An account written in AD 749 refers to the numerous merchants belonging to the Polomen, i.e., Brahmanas of India on the river of Canton. The same account refers to the three Brahmana monasteries at Canton where Brahmanas were residing" (Motwani, Jyoti 1993:38).

India has more than two thousand years' history of cultural and commercial relations with Southeast Asia. Commercial relations had a longer history than cultural contacts. According to Brian Harrison "from at least the sixth century BC onwards Indian traders were sailing to those lands, and down through those islands, in search of gold and tin" (Harrison 1966:10).

The first civilised society in Burma that of the Pyu and the Mon, was focused upon the south. Its capital Srikshetra (Old Prome) was an Indian-style sacred city. The culture was Indian, and the script borrowed from south India. This society was overthrown by the Burmese.

Java was colonised by the Hindus between the 1st and 7th century. In the 7th century Javanese got converted to Hinduism and an elaborate Hindu culture developed by the 10th century. The Hindu kingdom (8th-13th centuries) covered much of Indonesia. The Chola King Rajaraja the Great (AD 985-1018) conquered the entire south India and extended his hold over Ceylon. Under his son, Rajendra (AD 1018-35) the Chola power reached out to threaten the empire of Sri Vijaya in Java and Sumatra (Sri Vijaya kingdom was founded in Sumatra before the fourth century AD. It rose to prominence towards the close of the seventh century AD). The Colas were expelled from Ceylon in 1070 (Tinker, 1977: 12). Hindu kingdoms were formed in Java during the 5th century AD (Majumdar, 1988).

The people of Java came to share with the Indians their religions, languages, art and architecture, their cultural mores, and legal and political ethos and forms (Arora, 1982: 119). This area was exposed to "the heaviest Indianisation" (Wales, 1951:195). Majority of the people of Bali Island still practice Hinduism.

Brahminical and Buddhist influences spread through the intervening culture areas to islands of Borneo as well as Mindanao and the Vaishyas in the Philippines. They gradually penetrated even to the northernmost island of Luzon. There are traces of Indic influences in the languages, literature and social customs in the Philippines (Rye, 1982:144).

In Indo-China the kingdoms of Fu-nan, Champa, Kambujadesa (Kampuchea), Angkor and Laos were greatly influenced by Indian culture and civilization. From the beginning of the Christian era, the Indian merchants and adventurers, princes and priests, spread the Indian language and literature, religion and philosophy, art and architecture, customs and manners in these countries, the deep imprint of which

is visible even today. The Indian settlements had been widely spread all over the region by the beginning of the Christian era. Later they grew into small kingdoms. Within two to three hundred years nearly the whole of Indo-China and Indonesia, comprising Burma, Siam, Malay Peninsula, Cambodia and Annam in the mainland and the islands of Sumatra, Java, Bali, Borneo, Celebes and perhaps many others were dotted over with such kingdoms (Majumdar, 1985 & 1986). Some of these kingdoms like those of Fu-nan and Champa grew very powerful. These contacts lasted for more than a thousand years (Reddi, 1982:155).

Migration from India to the ancient and medieval states of Southeast Asia involved the limited but important movement of priests and traders. These people were not part of any massive wave of population movement. Instead, by their command of specialist knowledge, they came to fill vitally important roles in the emerging Southeast Asian states so as to implant firmly the Indian culture in Southeast Asia. In general, however, the Southeast Asian classical world does not seem to have been one marked by large-scale voluntary migration. A limited but highly important number of Indians settled in the area and made their mark (Osborne, 1979:90).

Afghanistan had mainly Hindus and Buddhists and was ruled by the Hindu kings till the end of the seventh century when the Arabs conquered it and people embraced Islam.

The Banjaras (Gypsies) migrated from India in the 10th century to several European countries. Their language Romani has a resemblance to Indian languages. It is spoken in widely varying dialects.

"Romani is spoken by the descendants of a population which left India at the end of the first millennium AD and which made its way into Europe via Persia and the Byzantine Empire, arriving there some time during the thirteenth century. The identity of the first population and the circumstances of their exodus have been the subject of scholarly debate since the 1780s. Late twentieth century research, some of it being undertaken in India, suggests strongly that the original population consisted of different Indo- Aryan descent (in particular Dravidians and the Pratihara migrant population who had settled in India from north), out of whom were created Rajput armies to resist the Islamic incursions into India led by Mohammed Ghaznavid. As these armies moved further west, they were again caught up in, and displaced by, the spread of Islam as it overtook the Byzantine Empire. It was the westward movement which pushed the Romani population up into Europe. The common name Gypsy (like Gitano in Spanish) originates in the misassumption that the population had come from Egypt" (Hancock, 1993).

The Gypsies are spread over in Europe. Their population in Europe was about 8 million in 1993 (New York Times, May 5, 1993). Of them 2.5 million lived in Rumania and 5 lakh in Hungary (Motwani, 1994:3).

The Chettiyars who were bankers and traders of south India and Ceylon from medieval times gradually extended their activities to Burma, Malaya, Thailand, Indonesia and Mauritius (Tinker, 1977:3).

Before the arrival of the Portuguese in the Indian Ocean the merchants of Gujarat, Malabar, Coromandel, and Bengal looked to the east, to the Indonesian archipelago, for direct voyages organized with their own shipping and capital. From the sixteenth century the orientation was suddenly reversed and turned westwards, towards the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. Hindu merchants were to be found all through the Middle East in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Chaudhuri, 1985:100).

The Sikh empire was spread up to Peshawar and Khyber. The Gurkhas of Nepal carried out a sub-montane Himalayan empire which stretched from Darjeeling to Simla.

The emigration that took place from India to various parts of the world did not result in any significant permanent settlements overseas. But the impact of religious ideologies of Buddhism and Hinduism left over lasting influence in Southeast, East and South Asia.

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