

# **Exploring Earliest Bengali Diaspora and Cultural Penetration to Southeast Asia and Maritime Connectivity (400 BCE-800 CE)**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.69862/carass2025LMBookSharmin>

## **1. Introduction**

The territory of Bengal<sup>1</sup> was a prosperous regional entity on the map of the Indian subcontinent in ancient times. Its geographical position, socio-cultural dynamics, and economic activities had a significant impact on both South and Southeast Asia during antiquity. Throughout different epochs, this territory has been known by various names such as Vanga, Bangalah, and Bengal. Situated strategically amidst the colossal Bay of Bengal to the south, Bengal formed an integral part of the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BIBS).<sup>2</sup> This geographical identity was pivotal in facilitating extensive maritime trade routes, fostering East-West connectivity. Consequently, Bengal emerged as a crucial nexus for cultural exchange between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia on a grand scale. Notably, the heartland of Bengal, centred around the Ganges Valley or Gangaridai, played a central role in shaping its historical and cultural trajectory. The eastern coastal region, recognised as Bengal, assumed particular significance owing to its intermediary position between these two regions. Bengal's historical importance lies in its multifaceted role as a cultural crossroads and a pivotal hub for maritime trade, encapsulating its profound influence on the broader socio-economic and cultural landscape of South and Southeast Asia. Since sailing has historically served as a key mode of transportation across the Bay of Bengal, facilitating communication between the eastern coast of India and Southeast Asia, this maritime connectivity holds significant importance in the socio-economic and cultural history of ancient Bengal, an important region of India. While the 'Age of Sail' conventionally commences around 1450 CE (Gaynor, 2013), earlier epochs witnessed extensive maritime activities, including the navigation of rivers, seas, and oceans, underscoring broader narratives of interaction. Over millennia, a continuous flow of people, ideas, and goods traversed between India and Southeast Asia. A pivotal era from 400 BCE to 800 CE witnessed

profound interconnections between Bengal (Ganges region) and Suvarnabhumi (some ancient regions of Southeast Asia), as attested by various ancient texts such as the *Kathasaritsagara*, *Jataka*, *Arthashastra*, *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*, and Ptolemy's *Geography*, alongside corroborative archaeological findings. The extensive maritime trade facilitated by Bengali diaspora settlements enabled an affluent cultural amalgamation.

During this period, Southeast Asia was perceived as a geographical extension eastward from Bengal, symbolised by expressions like the sunrise appears from the Ganges. Notably, Ptolemy's accounts (Girini, 1974) from the 3rd to 4th centuries BCE referred to this region as the 'Golden Khersonese', a forested peninsula stretching from mainland Asia towards the East-Indian Archipelago, delineating the Bay of Bengal from the South China Sea (Wheatley, 1961). Geographically, it was depicted as a forested, club-shaped peninsula stretching from the southeastern edge of mainland Asia towards the East-Indian Archipelago, separating the Bay of Bengal from the South China Sea (Wheatley, 1961, p. xvii). This geographical notion played a crucial role in the navigation history of these waters, encompassing realms of cultural, architectural, linguistic, and religious influence. Medieval Tamil inscriptions found in Sumatra and Thailand provide insights into the extensive trade networks involving Indian merchants (Christie, 1998). The concept of 'Indianisation' is pivotal in understanding this historical process, signifying the widespread migration and cultural diffusion from India to ancient Southeast Asia. Bengal played a prominent role in this phenomenon, actively contributing to the commercial and cultural dynamics of the region (Akhtar & Hanizah, 2020). Scholars have characterised this historical phenomenon as a 'look towards the east' policy, emphasising Bengal's leadership role in the globalisation process of ancient India. Bengal not only pioneered but also dominated the commercial sector during this early period, showcasing its enduring influence on regional interactions (Sen & Kayal, 2007). Hence, the objectives of this study are to examine how the Bengali diaspora and cultural concepts served as the driving force to impact the socio-cultural life of Southeast Asia and how Southeast Asia adopted and practised all Bengali cultural norms that were introduced from pre-Indianisation times through maritime connectivity between the two regions. In scholarly discourse, the movement of Indian peoples and cultural elements towards Southeast Asia from Bengal is often referred to as the Indian shift.

This study adopts a historiographic approach, synthesising archaeological findings, classical accounts, and ancient manuscripts, including primary sources. Secondary sources, such as published books and articles, have also been thoroughly reviewed. Data collection involved visits to various archaeological sites, museums, archives, and libraries across Bangladesh, India, and Malaysia. Notably, this research addresses a significant gap in historical scholarship by examining the history of the Bengali diaspora and its cultural influence in Southeast Asia during the period of maritime connectivity from 400 BCE to 800 CE. By integrating diverse sources and conducting fieldwork across multiple countries, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of the intricate networks and exchanges that shaped regional dynamics during this pivotal era.

## 2. Literature Review

Scholars have extensively studied India's early contacts with Southeast Asia throughout this century, producing numerous articles and books on the subject. Some pioneering literary contributions are essential for understanding the Indian diaspora, Indianization, and the overall connection with India and Southeast Asia. However, the Bengali diaspora and their cultural influence have often been overlooked or superficially portrayed in existing literature.

One seminal work in academia is *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia* by Coedes (1968), which introduced the term 'Indianisation' and explored its chronological and geographical scope, as well as its socio-cultural impact on Southeast Asia. Although Bengal's role in this process was occasionally acknowledged, the specific contributions of the Bengali diaspora and their cultural influence received insufficient attention.

Hall (1966) addressed Southeast Asian history from prehistoric times, yet only briefly mentioned early Indian relations in the initial chapters. Works focusing on Indian colonization by Mookherjee (1912), Hall (1985, 2011), Majumder (1927, 1937, 1944a, 1944b), Sakar (1934), Chhabra (1964), Sastri (1921), and Ray (1995) highlight Indian influence in Southeast Asia, but largely omit the specific contributions of the Bengali diaspora and cultural elements.

Scholars directly engaged with this subject include Chowdhury (1996), Datta (1999), Chakravarti (2002), and Jahan (2006). Their works touch upon maritime trade and cultural linkages, yet fail to adequately explore how the

Bengali diasporic connection and cultural elements from Bengal impacted Southeast Asian socio-cultural life during their apex and the region's receptivity to this process.

Another relevant study is *History of Early Bengal in Regional Perspectives (up to c. 1200 CE)* (Chowdhury & Chakrabarti, 2018), which briefly touches upon Bengal's connections with Southeast Asia in two chapters.

As a result, scholarly depth in elucidating Bengal's nuanced relationship with Southeast Asia was less evident. In such cases, this research identifies a significant gap in the historical relationship, as the connections between the Bengali diaspora and the comprehensive exploration of cultural elements in distant lands, such as Southeast Asia, remain underexplored.

### 3. Analysis

#### 3.1 Port-to-port connectivity of both regions

Ports, epitomised as essential centres for maritime trade, have played a vital role in facilitating the exchange of goods, ships, and cultural interactions. Kidwai (1992) emphasises ports as pivotal junctions where commodities, people, and cultures converge, bridging maritime and inland transportation networks. Hoyle (1967, p. 7) further defines ports as socio-economic hubs interconnected with hinterlands and global sea routes, forming integral nodes in international trade networks. Moreover, Bengal's historical ports, such as Tamralipti, Chandraketurah (also known as Gangabandar), and Wari-Bateshwar, played crucial roles during the third to fourth centuries BCE. The literary text *Raghuvamsa* (Kale, 1922, IV, 38) describes Tamralipti, situated on the Kapisa River, as a dronimukha-type seaport (Chandra, 1977, p. 159), strategically located near the confluence of the Rupnarayana River and the Bay of Bengal (Cunningham, 1871, p. 425). Ancient Indian literary sources frequently reference early maritime interactions between Bengal and regions such as Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadvipa, which corresponds to present-day Southeast Asia; however, scholarly attention to this subject has been sporadic. Within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), the Bay of Bengal plays a critical role in facilitating maritime movements that link the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This strategic nexus of South and Southeast Asian regions, encompassing the Malacca Strait, Java Sea, and South China Sea, has

historically been vital for economic exchange and geographic connectivity (Gamege, 2017).

In Southeast Asia, seven major ports or *Pattana* emerged as essential hubs based on their frequency of connectivity, geographical significance, and periods of peak maritime activity during the Maurya and Post-Maurya periods (321 BCE - 320 CE), the Gupta Period (320-550 CE), and Post-Gupta Period (550-750 CE). During the Maurya and post-Maurya periods, ports such as Oc-Eo, Mahakataha or old Kedah, Takkola (Chu-li), Ban Don Ta Phet (BDTP), and Khao Sam Kaeo (KSK)<sup>3</sup> maintained regular maritime connections with Bengal. In the Gupta period, ports such as Kataha (or old Kedah) on the Malay Peninsula, Takkola (Siam), Oc-Eo (Funan), Ko-Ying (Sunda Valley, Sumatra), and in the post-Gupta period, Kataha, Oc-Eo, and Srivijaya were prominent in facilitating trade and religious propagation with ancient Bengal. These ports are selected from three main geographical sub-regions of Southeast Asia: Indo-China (Funan), represented by Oc-Eo; Siam-Malay Peninsula, represented by old Kedah, Takkola, Ban Don Ta Phet, and Khao Sam Kaeo; and Sumatra, represented by Ko-Ying and Srivijaya. They are noted for their discovery of Bengal-origin artefacts and frequent mentions in ancient texts, highlighting their role in East-West maritime connectivity. Therefore, it can be stated that the historical ports of Bengal and Southeast Asia play a crucial role in maritime history, exemplifying the dynamic exchanges in trade, cultural diffusion, and religious interactions that characterised ancient interactions between these regions.

### **3.2 Craftsmen and merchant's movement**

The maritime connectivity between Bengal and Southeast Asia enabled significant interactions, mainly driven by Bengali merchant groups, religious emissaries, craftsmen, and other travellers. These exchanges played a critical role in transmitting Bengali cultural norms across distant lands, particularly through extensive trade networks. From ancient times, Bengal's merchants were instrumental in forging commercial links with Southeast Asia, drawn by the region's wealth in gold and tin, as chronicled in Greek, Latin, and Indian historical texts. Known as the 'Golden Chersonese' in Western literature and 'Suvarnabhumi' in Indian texts, Southeast Asia held an allure for Bengal's traders, who sought to expand their economic horizons. Archaeological evidence, including artefacts of Bengali origin, supports early contact between

Bengal and Southeast Asia, underscoring the economic motivations that underpinned these maritime ventures. The activities of these merchants are attested from as early as the second century BCE, evidenced by inscribed seals found in Chandraketurgarh and various Southeast Asian sites. Historical records and B.N. Mukherjee's seminal study in 1990 further elucidate the close ties between Bengal and Southeast Asia during this period, particularly, the involvement of Yue-Chi merchants, originally from China but settled in Bengal (Vanga region), in significant trade activities with Funan and Ko-Ying, contributing further to Bengal's role in Southeast Asian commerce.

Literary sources such as *Kathasaritsagar*, compiled by Tawney in 1924, offer invaluable insights into the movements and commercial voyages of Bengali merchants to Southeast Asia. These accounts depict an extensive network of maritime voyages spanning the coastal areas of the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. During the Gupta period, one prominent figure, Guhasena, emerged from these narratives as a leading merchant of Tamralipti, who established thriving business operations in the ancient Malay port city of Kedah. At that time, marked by the flourishing of Brahmanism, Tamralipti emerged as the foremost port among Northern Indian ports, further solidifying Bengal's pivotal role in maritime trade. Wealthy Bengali traders, such as the Guhosenas, wielded substantial influence in Southeast Asian societies, with Guhosena himself attaining a position of leadership within the local trading community in Kedah. His success and prestige were such that visitors from afar travelled covertly to Tamralipti to witness firsthand the opulence and social standing of Guhosena and his wife, Devasmita. This anecdote highlights the profound impact of Bengal's traders on Southeast Asian commerce and society during the fifth century CE.

Archaeological findings provide additional evidence of Bengali maritime activity, such as the fragmented stone inscription of Bengali Mahanavika Buddhagupta, who voyaged from Tamralipti to the Malay Peninsula. This inscription, along with quotations from *Sagarmati-pariprccha*, discovered by Dr. Wales in the Bujang Valley, Wellesley province, dating to the sixth century CE, further corroborates the enduring maritime connections between Bengal and Southeast Asia. Thus, Bengal merchants were distributed throughout several market towns in the Southeast Asian region during the Gupta period, engaging in regular maritime trade activities. Hence, the historical records,

literary sources, and archaeological evidence collectively affirm the robust and enduring maritime ties between Bengal and Southeast Asia, driven by commerce, cultural exchange, and the entrepreneurial spirit of Bengali merchants across centuries.

### **3. 3 Bengali diaspora**

Bengali merchants and other communities had a significant influence on Southeast Asian trade, aided by extended settlement, which accelerated Bengali migration and cultural integration. This phenomenon is supported by source analysis, which highlights three key areas where such interactions took place.

#### ***3.3.1 Bengali Diaspora to Siam-Malay Zone***

The first area of significance is the Siam-Malay Peninsula, comprising the central region of Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadvipa in Southeast Asia, which was historically connected with the Indian subcontinent. Traders and adventurers from various parts of India, notably the Gangetic Valley, embarked on voyages to Suvarnabhumi in the third century BCE. Emperor Asoka of the Maurya dynasty furthered these connections by dispatching his missionaries Sona, Uttara and Theras to propagate Buddhism in Suvarnabhumi or the Chryse region (Jernsawadi, 1977, p. 21). They started their journey from the Bengal port of Tamralipti. Archaeological excavations and scholarly findings indicate that central and southern Thailand, along with the northern Malay Peninsula, constituted the core territories of Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadvipa. Thai historians mentioned that Nakhon Pathom was the primary destination visited by Asoka's missionaries, establishing it as the capital of Suvarnabhumi during the third century BCE. The archaeological discovery of significant structures such as Phra Pathom Chedi and extensive stupas in this region lends credence to early Indian and Bengali penetration of Southeast Asia. Consequently, this period marked the advent of maritime exploits and seafaring merchants from Bengal as depicted in ancient Buddhist literature (Coedes, 1968, p. 21). This narrative underscores the integral role of Bengali settlement and cultural diffusion in shaping trade networks and regional dynamics in Southeast Asia during antiquity.

### 3.3.2 Bengali Diaspora to Java-Sumatra Zone

Java, referred to as Javadvipa in ancient Indian texts, maintained significant trade connections with Bengal, particularly in the lucrative spice trade that enriched generations of Indian merchants. This relationship evolved into aspirations for establishing Indian kingdoms in Java during the early Christian Era. The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya, a renowned manual compiled in the fourth century BCE, highlights the allure of Javadvipa, stating that anyone who ventures there never returns empty-handed; those who do return bring wealth capable of sustaining seven generations of their family (Glover I., 2012). Indian merchants and aristocrats in Java seized opportunities to integrate into the royal family through their wealth and intellectual prowess. They offered medicinal cures, protective charms, and amulets, establishing themselves as indispensable figures in the local courtly milieu (Coedes, 1968, p. 22).

Some scholars suggest that language was an obstacle for Indian immigrants, which was not their claim. In that situation, they did not utilize interpreters but used the neighbourhood dialect for simple correspondence. In this way, the Indian immigrants managed the chief's families to make a marital relationship with them (Coedes, 1968, pp. 22-23). Consequently, those individuals were primed to transmit their faith and traditions, as well as social, moral, and religious norms, to their life partners, who were also royal and held a position of honour. As a result, due to the princess's reputation, Indian customs and traditions spread throughout the Southeast Asian region.

### 3.3.3 Bengali Diaspora to Funan-Champa Zone

The establishment of the first Indian-influenced kingdom in Southeast Asia is attributed to Funan, with its capital, Vyadyapura, referred to as 'the city of hunters' during a specific period. Situated approximately 200 kilometres inland from the sea, Funan's heartland encompassed the lower reaches and delta of the Mekong River, maintaining significant connections with ancient Bengal. The Mekong, often regarded as a derivative of Ma Ganga (Mother Ganga) originating from Bengal, defined Funan's territorial boundaries, stretching across Southern Vietnam, the central Mekong region, a substantial portion of the Menam Valley, and the Malay Peninsula (Mookherji, 1912, p. 75). Cambodian historians recognise Funan as one of the earliest Khmer kingdoms, distinguished by advanced maritime capabilities and extensive engagement in trade. Despite considerable Indian influence, particularly from Bengal and the

Gangetic Valley, Funan retained distinctive indigenous characteristics in its political structures, religious philosophies, and technological practices (Hall, year, p. X). Its economic prosperity relied heavily on maritime commerce, fostering close commercial ties with India. During the reign of Fan-Ch'an, diplomatic channels were established between Bengal and Funan, evidenced by emissaries dispatched to Bengal to facilitate information exchange and bolster trade (Coedes, 1968, p. 43).

Moreover, the relationship between the Bengali people and the Champa is extensively documented in scholarly literature. Present-day Quang Nam, with archaeological sites such as Tra Kieu and Dong Duong, is considered the spiritual centre of Champa (Coedes, 1968, p. 43). Known as Linyi in Mandarin, this region was named after a place in ancient Vietnam, a common practice among colonists who named new territories after familiar places from their homeland. India also had a place named Champa, in Bhagalpur, Bihar, which may have influenced the naming of the region in Vietnam. Similarly, in northwestern Yunnan, the Indian name 'Gandhara' replaced local names, illustrating a broader pattern of cultural imprinting. The Cham people, ancestors of the Cham ethnic group, were influenced by Austronesian cultures from ancient Khmer and Vietnam. The Javanese ethnic group known as 'Jihnan', after being Indianized, migrated to Champa, contributing to its cultural diversity (Coedes, 1968, p. 43) and founded in 192 CE by local leader Sri Mara (Khu Lein), the Kingdom of Champa coexisted with Funan during its early period (Meyer, 1997, p. 63; Gerini, 1974, p. 564). Historical texts, such as the *Mahajanaka Jataka*, mention voyages between Campa (Bihar) and Suvarnabhumi. Bengal and nearby regions, such as Benares, were pivotal in sea trade along the Bay of Bengal coast. The sea route between Champa (Annam) and India (Ganges of Bengal) was crucial, as evidenced by Chinese records describing diplomatic exchanges between a Champa king and the Ganges king around 240-245 CE (Majumder, 1944, p. 17).

### **3.4 Bengali Cultural Penetration in Southeast Asia**

Bengal's merchants and aristocrats often established prolonged residencies in Southeast Asia to facilitate trade and cultural exchange. The predominant religious affiliation among these travellers was Hinduism, reflecting the dominance of Hindu religious phenomena in Northern India prior to the Kaling War, situated on India's east coast. Between 400 BCE and 300 CE, Bengal's

historical ties with Southeast Asia were predominantly shaped by trade networks and the migration of elites and merchants (Srisuchat, 1996). Classical Malay texts trace royal genealogies back to ancient Indian kings, highlighting ancestral links with Kalinga (Andaya & Andaya, 2017, p. 17). Following the Kaling War in the 260s BCE, Buddhism gained prominence due to the patronage and propagation efforts of Maurya Emperor Asoka across Southeast Asia (Smith, 1962, p. 164). The discovery of Knobbed Ware and Rouletted Ware in Southeast Asian burial sites associated with Buddhist rituals underscores the spread of Buddhism in the region during this period.

The spread of Buddhism facilitated the movement of Buddhist religious figures, thereby accelerating the propagation of the religion in Southeast Asia. This period demonstrates that Bengal's trade activities were not limited to specific regions but extended across various territories within Southeast Asia, simultaneously fostering cultural norms and the dissemination of Buddhism (Smith, 1962, p. 164).

A Chinese document mentioned the expansion of Indian merchants in the Funan kingdom that stated, in the fifth century CE, Indian merchants crowded Kunlun country, and around five hundred families of *Hu*, the merchants from India (according to Pillot, the term *Hu* means merchants, to distinguish them from Indian Brahmans. Kunlun people probably represented as old Khmer) along with around two hundred Buddhist and more than a thousand Indian Brahmans. Due to such a summit of Indian merchants and the religious community, Indian culture was introduced into the local society. The Kunlun people started to practice Indian norms and doctrines. Even Indian and Southeast Asian people are mutually linked through marriage relations. In marriage, the local people gave their daughters many of these Brahmans, and they became habituated to reading the sacred books of the heavenly spirits of Brahminical works (Briggs, 1950). Hence, it is not far from the truth that the Bengali trading class and religious persons influenced ancient Khmer and the Malay Peninsula.

Moreover, during the Gupta period, Hinduism gained considerable precedence in Bengal. It was oriented to Brahman's ideas that appeared in the stone inscription. For example, the inscription tablet of Mahanavika Buddhagupta found in Kedah of the Malay Peninsula contained the religious verses of Brahmanical ideas (Nadaranjan, 2011, p. 47). In this way, religious and

cultural norms spread beyond Bengal, in addition to the overseas maritime trade. Therefore, despite being a small part of eastern India, Bengal's religious influence and trade routes played a vital role in the cultural penetration of the Bengali people into the societies of the Southeast Asian region.

However, the maritime trade and religious propagation simultaneously worked from Bengal to Southeast Asia. Tamralipti, Pundranagar, was a rich Buddhist religious centre with a legacy of substantial trading activities. From the fifth to the seventh century, Bengal was renowned for its role as a destination for Chinese pilgrims to religious learning centres, which have frequently been mentioned in the accounts of Fa-Hien, I-Tsing, and Hiuen-Tsang. Many Buddhist viharas were built, and Chinese pilgrims visited for their religious learning. After visiting, they travelled to China via some stations in Southeast Asia, including Java, Kedah, and Srivijaya. By sharing Buddhist rituals and ideas with local people, it can be assumed that Buddhist religious concepts gained popularity in Southeast Asia.

After the highest level of business connection, Buddhist religious architectural concepts became visible in Southeast Asian sites in the eighth to ninth century CE, for which architectural ideas were borrowed from the Buddhist structures of Bengal. In the seventh century, two of the most significant religious architectural buildings in southeast and north Bengal were established with the concept of Buddhist moral ideas and operated as international learning centres; these were Mainamati (Rupban Mura Vihara, Salbon Vihara and Ananda Vihar) and Paharpur (Sompura Buddha Vihara) respectively. Mainamati of Comilla and Paharpur Buddhist Viharas in the Naogaon district of Bangladesh were more prominent and famous for applying cruciform plans. Bengal's prominence started to emerge in the southeastern Samatata-Harikela zone in the seventh century. The cruciform building structure of Rupban Mura Vihara, Salbon Vihara, Ananda Vihara, and Bhoja Vihara (Husain, 1997, pp. 31-40) was established during the first half of the 7th century CE in Mainamati of Southeast Bengal (Bhuiyan, 2018) In the Pala dynasty, the Pala king Dharmapala and his son Devapala built such a structure from 780 CE to 820 CE, with the massive cruciform structure of 111.5 m north-south by 96 m east-west, founded in the centre (Dikshit, 1938, p. 7). It had a big courtyard encircled by a massive rectangular wall with a row of 177 monk's cells opening to a verandah (Herrmann-Pfandt, 2012) The Paharpur Buddhist temple was the prominent one built in the Pala period of Bengal, and the idea

of the same structure was loaned and built-in Borobudur, Java of ancient Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asian countries, a similar conceptual establishment, such as the Salbon Vihara at Mainamati and Paharpur of Bengal, is found in the Ananda Temple at Pagan in Burma, the Candi Kalsan at Prambanan in Central Java, Indonesia. They also plagiarised the ‘Sarvatobhadra’ (a universal art pattern of ancient India) art style from Bengal in their architecture (Sharmin & Hanizah, 2020). Paharpur and Mainamati had considerably influenced the Candi Sevu in the 8th century (Haque, 1998). In the ninth century, the Borobudur temple in Java was a gigantic structure in Southeast Asia that drew inspiration from the concept of Bengal’s religious architecture and flourished immensely.

In this phase, two pivotal inquiries arise: how did Southeast Asian populations adopt these borrowed architectural styles, and who were the masterful artisans responsible for their construction? It is worth noting that Bengal has long been renowned for its craftsmanship. Following the decline of the Indus Valley Civilisation, a second wave of urbanisation emerged, focusing on the Ganga Valley in the Bengal region from the 6th century BCE onwards. By the Mauryan period, this area had developed into a bustling urban centre and a pivotal trade hub within the ancient Indian subcontinent. Artisanal skills became a specialised and crucial element driving this progression.

During this era, Bengal artisans excelled in diverse forms of craftsmanship, including the creation of intricate clay artefacts such as the Northern Black Polished Ware (NBPW) and various religious pottery styles, such as RW and KW. They also thrived in cotton weaving, beadwork, pearl and diamond jewellery making, and ivory craftsmanship, each industry distinguished by its unique characteristics. Additionally, Bengal artisans demonstrated expertise in brick and woodwork, which was exemplified in shipbuilding and architectural endeavours, underscoring their proficiency in early construction techniques. This tradition of skilled craftsmanship extended to the construction of religious architecture during the relevant period. These artisans not only contributed to the architectural landscape of their time but also played a crucial role in the dissemination of architectural styles to Southeast Asia. Through their craftsmanship and expertise, Bengal artisans left an enduring legacy that influenced both regional architectural development and cultural exchanges beyond the subcontinent. In the post-Gupta period, political instability in Bengal catalysed the emergence of distinct regional identities, coinciding with

the second phase of Bengal's urbanisation and the broader third phase of urban development in India. Urban centres developed with unique characteristics, with religious and cultural norms serving as prominent indicators of Bengal's regional dimensions (Kumar, 2005-2006).

Therefore, Bengal's skilled artisans constructed significant religious monasteries such as Mainamati and Paharpur. The architectural concepts from these sites influenced the Sailendra dynasty of Southeast Asia, which adopted and adapted Bengal's architectural styles. Concurrently, Bengal artisans collaborated with craftsmen from Kalinga, Gujarat, and other regions, sharing their expertise, which also influenced artistic developments in Southeast Asia (Chuti Songs, 1996). As a result, numerous temples and stupas in Southeast Asia reflect the architectural ideas and concepts borrowed from Indian architecture, demonstrating a rich cultural exchange during this period. In this connection, Mookherji (1912, p. 103) stated about building outstanding sculptures of the Borobudur temple in Java,

...the hand of Bengali artists who worked side-by-side with the people of Kalinga and Gujarat in this building up its early civilisation” and “numerous of the bas-reliefs of that colossal temple reveal the type of ships which the people of lower Bengal built and used in sailing to Ceylon, Java, Sumatra, China and Japan in pursuit of their colonising ambition, commercial interests, and artistic and religious mission...

Hence, Bengal's significant influence on Southeast Asian society stemmed from its extensive maritime trade, which facilitated a substantial cultural influence. Alongside trade, Buddhist religious figures, architects, and various professionals from Bengal travelled to Southeast Asia, contributing to the region's cultural and architectural development (Datta, 1999; Datta, 2000). Between the sixth and eighth centuries, Bengal's maritime trade declined due to internal political instability and natural factors, including changes in river courses. Despite this decline, Southeast Asia adopted religious and architectural concepts from Bengal, influencing its artistic and cultural evolution. The reciprocal trade also enriched economic conditions in both Bengal and Southeast Asia, fostering urban development and the establishment of cultural architectures with contributions from Bengali artists alongside those from Kalinga and Gujarat (Mookherji, 1912, p. 105).

#### 4. Discussion

The Bengali diaspora, particularly traders, preachers, and artisans, along with the Sanskrit language and traditional religious and cultural norms, played integral roles in shaping Southeast Asian society during ancient times. Sanskrit, originating from India, had a significant impact on Southeast Asian socio-cultural life, particularly through its widespread use in Buddhism and the dissemination of religious teachings across the region. This linguistic influence led to the adoption of Sanskrit words into local languages, such as *raja* (ruler), *derhaka* (treason), *jaya* (success), *negari* (district, country), and *bahasa* (language). The acceptance of these linguistic elements by local populations was recognised and endorsed by the royal chancellery, highlighting the depth of cultural integration between India and Southeast Asia (Andaya & Andaya, 2017).

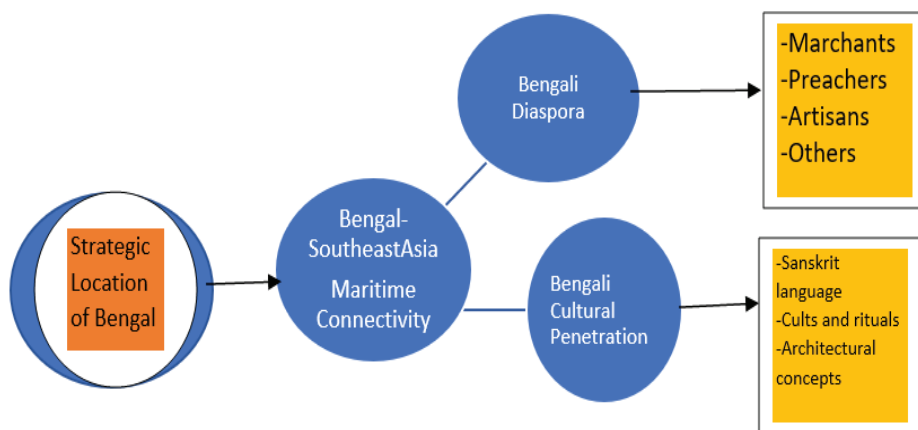
Indianised states formed during this era significantly shaped the social and cultural fabric of Southeast Asian societies, marking a profound influence on their overall way of life. Consequently, various ancient Southeast Asian territories took Indian names. These are Suvarnadwipa (Malay Peninsula), Balidwipa (Bali), Karpuradwipa (Borneo, land of Camphor), Indradwipa (Mayanmar), Yavawipa (Java), Kataha (Kedah), Srivijaya (Sumatra), Ayudhya (Siam or Thailand). In ancient Indian texts, Ramayana and *Kathasaritsagar* mentioned the Malay Peninsula as Suvarnadwipa. This assimilation, often described as 'osmosis' involved the gradual and unconscious adoption of Indian ideas and knowledge, significantly influencing the region's cultural development (Coedes, 1968, p. 16).

Along with the language infiltration, rulers began to build religious temples using the same architectural concepts as those found in the temple architecture of Paharpur and Mainamati in Bengal, in the second half of the seventh century. In this way, Palembang and Java temples, with identical structures and styles to those of Bengal, such as Chandi Sivu and Borobudur Temple, were constructed. The artwork representations of the nine ships that looked stitched contain a bipod or tripod mast and square sail, as well as the appearance of a bowsprit, a double quarter rudder and a double outrigger in the Borobudur temple, which was undoubtedly a sign of the skillfulness of the Bengali craftsmen in addition of the four most miniature ships those came without outrigger in the artwork of temple, (Pierre-Yves, 1980) Scholars have logically suggested that Srivijayan art was influenced by the Pala art of Bengal,

which dates back to about the ninth century. It may be assumed that the Srivijayan art reflected in the images of Buddha, Avalokitesvara, and others originated from Javanese art, which was likely the work of the Gupta school, representing ideas from Mahayana Buddhism. The region from Srivijaya to Java followed the Gupta art, and the Pala influence was superimposed upon this art from the ninth century (Majumder, 1935). Since the early period, trade connections between Bengal ports and Southeast Asian ports, such as Kaoh-Sam-Kheo, Oc-Eo, Takkola, Kedah, Ko-Ying, and Sunda Island, as well as other regions, have been established, as recent research by Akhtar (2023) has revealed. This study demonstrates that cultural influence was more accessible at the end of the post-Gupta period, or around the start of the ninth century. Devaprasad Ghose mentioned this style as the art developed according to the 'wave theory', followed by India and Indian colonies (Ghose D. , 1934; Ghose D. , 1936). That resulted in the crafting of the Borobudur sculpture by Indian artisans, specifically Bengali and other experts from various parts of India, who were skilled in their native art and crafts. In this way, they illustrated their religious motifs and shipping aspects that represent the maritime trading notions in distant lands like several Southeast Asian regions, and reminded the propagation of Buddhism and maritime trade contact between them.

Hence, it is essential to mention that Bengal's strategic location and its individuality became the driving force behind the 'Indianisation' process. As Bengal is a deltaic region and a resourceful alluvial plain (especially the Ganges Valley) from the ancient period, and the geographical position covered a frontier zone in the Indian geographic entity situated the middle point between India and Southeast Asia, a comparatively short distance for Indian communication from Bengal to ancient Southeast Asian regions was accessible because of the convenient maritime route through the Bay of Bengal, and thriving international transit port Tamralipti was influential at that time, all these factors strongly worked in the process of Bengali diaspora and cultural penetration towards Southeast Asia.

The above-mentioned discussion can be represented through a diagram.



**Figure 1:** Bengali diaspora and cultural penetration in Southeast Asian regions  
Source: Author's observation.

The principal importance of this research lies in its contribution to bridging the existing void concerning the impact of the socio-cultural life of Southeast Asia due to the Bengali diaspora and cultural penetration in ancient times. It has successfully pinpointed the contextual elements that underpin this diasporic process. Furthermore, this study opens up avenues for comprehensive research and exploration, given the potential for uncovering new artefactual and literary evidence through subsequent data analysis.

## 5. Conclusion

Finally, it should be noted that the Bengali diaspora and cultural penetration into the Southeast Asian region in early times, specifically from 400 BCE to 800 CE, is a significant chapter in the historical study that has impacted both regional socio-cultural lives. The strong Bengali naval force had an international merchant class, with religious preachers and others frequently travelling to this distant land and living there for a long time, which gradually increased the trade connection and then influenced Bengali culture before the Christian era. Later, the political kingship developed in the ancient entities of Southeast Asia, incorporating Indic influences. It was a slow and steady process that led to an organised cultural expansion, rooted in the Indian conception of royalty and characterised by Hindu-Buddhist cults. Indeed, the Southeast Asian region was not reticent in integrating with this development. The region's hospitable environment, liberal trade policies, religious tolerance,

fascination with architectural trends, and open cultural disposition significantly extended this process. Consequently, the indigenous populations and royal administrations of Southeast Asia embraced and effectively integrated this progression.

## Notes

1. 'Bengal' refers to the geographical region encompassing present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal, India. Historically, Bengal was a British province from the Muslim conquest in the 13th century until the partition of India in 1947. In ancient times, the region included entities such as Vanga, Samatata, Harikela, Vangala, Gauda, Radha, Pundra, Varendra, and Suhma, which were part of ancient India and varied in their political status, including periods of independence. (See Majumder, R.C. 1971, *History of Ancient Bengal*. p. 1-14 for more details).
2. The term 'Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere' (BBIS) is a crucial concept in contemporary research on early Indo-Southeast Asian interactions. A new generation of scholars has prominently adopted this term to examine the complex interplay and cultural exchanges that occurred within this region. See more in Gupta S., 2005, Gupta S., 2006, Bellina & Glover, 2004.
3. In the fourth to third century BCE, frequent references were found in *Jataka tales* regarding the connectivity between India and Bengal (specifically Tamralipti and Ganges ports) and Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnavipa. It is not identified which specific areas had Bengal connectivity with the Southeast Asian part at that time. For this instance, archaeological excavations have yielded authentic evidence (Glover 1990, Glover and Bellina) that Ban Don Ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo were important entrepots in Suvarnabhumi at that time, where remains of Bengal origin (semi-precious beads, pottery, and cotton thread) were found. Glover also provided a clue to Bengal's maritime connectivity with these two ancient entrepots of Southeast Asia. On the other hand, the archaeological excavation of Bengal's ancient port Wari-Bateshwar showed that the founding of a high-tin bronze bowl came from Southeast Asia, which was common as BDTP and KSK's remains. However, it is challenging to mention the ancient Indian name for these two ports due to the limitations of sources. Nevertheless, Asoka's envoy came to Suvarnabhumi in the third century BCE for religious propagation, identified as Nakhon Pathom in Siam, and BDTP, KSK near to this region. It may be assumed that

BDTP and KSK, also known as Suvarnabhumi in a broad sense, were named by Indian merchants. It was also significant that *Jataka* frequently mentioned the connectivity with Bengal to Suvarnabhumi, as it was a wealthy zone for commercial purposes. Hence, with the support of *Jataka*, archaeological references indicate that these two ports were connected to Bengal's maritime trading activity prior to the Christian Era.

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