



## **BRIDGES OF FAITH: THE CULTURAL NEXUS BETWEEN INDIA AND MYANMAR SPREAD THROUGH BUDDHISM**

**DR. PRASHANT DHAGE**

*Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School, Nagpur,  
Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune, India  
[prashantdhage149@gmail.com](mailto:prashantdhage149@gmail.com), +91 9168844198*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Through the lens of Buddhism, this abstract investigates India's significant and persistent cultural bond with Myanmar. Buddhism, which originated in India and flourished throughout Asia, had a particularly deep impact on Myanmar. This article looks at the historical, cultural, and religious exchanges that have influenced these two countries' relationships. The study begins with the ancient linkages that date back to the transmission of Buddhism from India to Myanmar via missionaries and traders and looks into the impact of Indian Buddhist philosophy on Myanmar's religious and cultural landscapes. It examines important historical characters including King Ashoka, whose missionary efforts helped spread Buddhism beyond India's borders, including Myanmar. It also underlines Indian Buddhism's architectural and creative impacts on Myanmar, which can be seen in the country's countless temples, stupas, and statues. These cultural contacts not only improved Myanmar's religious practices, but also cultivated a strong spiritual bond with India. Furthermore, the abstract investigates the current importance of this cultural connection, taking into account how both countries continue to commemorate and protect their shared Buddhist legacy. It covers contemporary cultural exchange and religious tourism activities aimed at strengthening India-Myanmar ties. It emphasizes the long-lasting importance of Buddhist cultural linkages between India and Myanmar, emphasizing their role in forming both countries' identities and fostering mutual understanding. It paves the way for future research into the precise historical events, cultural objects, and contemporary trends that continue to characterize this unique relationship.*



**KEYWORDS:** Theravada, Mahayana Bodhisattvas, Golden Land, Southeast Asia, Greater Vehicle, Samsara, Pali

## **INTRODUCTION**

Southeast Asian nations started to feel the full impact of Indian civilization in the first century CE. Trade routes extended from India to Java, the modern-day middle and southern regions of Vietnam, as well as to central and southern Siam, the Malay Peninsula, and Sumatra. Numerous urbanized coastal communities emerged in that area, and several small political structures replicated one another as Hindu civic organizations began to proliferate in the area. As a result, over a millennium, the influence of Indian Hindu-Buddhists was significant and helped several states in the region experience some degree of cultural fusion. Due to their direct link to sacred books and Indian literatures like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata epics, Sanskrit and Pali languages, Indian scripts, and Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Brahmanism, and Hinduism were also widely disseminated. Southeast Asia saw the expansion of several wealthy and powerful colonial empires between the fifth and thirteenth centuries, which proved to be incredibly active in the creation of Hindu-Buddhist art and architecture. In terms of sheer scale, design, and artistic achievement, some of these artworks and architectural creations even rival or unexpectedly surpass those created in India. The most notable examples are the Angkor Wat structures in Cambodia, the Bagan temples in Central Myanmar, and Borobudur in Java. The Shrivijaya Empire to the south and the Khmer Empire to the north fought it out for control of the area.

## **AREA OF STUDY**

It encompasses several key areas of study within the broader context of Buddhist history, Spread of Buddhism, Architectural Heritage, Literary and Linguistic Influence, Cultural Practices and Rituals, Modern Interpretations and Contemporary Relations, Impact on Society and Identity, Challenges and Preservation Efforts, Comparative Perspectives and cultural exchange. Exploring these areas of study enables you to present a full retrospective analysis of the Buddhist cultural relationship between India and Myanmar, giving light on its historical significance as well as its modern relevance.



## **METHODOLOGY**

This study used historical, observational, and analytical approaches. A range of photographs from books, papers, essays, and monographs were examined to detect any noticeable deterioration or modifications and to interpret pertinent information. theoretical frameworks, approaches, and gaps in the existing literature that your study intends to address.

## **DISCUSSION**

The topic of Buddhist cultural linkage between India and Myanmar is rich with historical, cultural, and religious significance, spanning over two millennia of interaction and exchange. This discussion revolves around how Buddhism, originating in ancient India, spread to Myanmar and influenced its culture profoundly, creating enduring ties that continue to shape both countries to this day. The Buddhist cultural linkage between India and Myanmar represents a dynamic exchange of ideas, beliefs, and artistic expressions that have profoundly shaped the religious and cultural landscapes of both countries. It underscores the enduring legacy of Buddhism as a unifying force across diverse cultures and civilizations, highlighting the importance of cultural continuity and mutual respect in the modern world. As both nations continue to evolve, their shared Buddhist heritage remains a cornerstone of their historical identity and a testament to the power of cultural exchange to foster understanding and cooperation.

The spread of ancient Indian Vedic/Hindu and Buddhist thought and culture throughout Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaya, Myanmar, and Siam is illustrative of the cultural tie between India and Southeast Asia. It appears that Southeast Asia is home to a variety of Indian scripts. India has had a long history with Myanmar, particularly in terms of cultural contacts that included Buddhism and the Burmese alphabet, which was based on the ancient Indian script. For millennia, Theravada Buddhism, in particular, has had a significant impact on Burmese society and culture, with 90% of the population still practicing the religion (Haspelmath, 2005).



## ANCIENT BUDDHIST HISTORY

From its birthplace in India, Buddhism has expanded rapidly both as a religious tradition and an accompanying philosophy, influencing cultures as diverse as those found in Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and the west. It follows that there isn't much that can be said about what Buddhist thought is all about in general. Indeed, a wide variety of perspectives on topics like the nature of perception or the existence and makeup of a persistent substratum underneath the transitory consciousness that is our everyday existence can be found within the philosophical tradition.

But Buddhism can be generally split into two rival schools that are nonetheless strongly related to one another. "The Way of the Elders," the "Greater Vehicle," and the Theravada and Mahayana schools are these (Buswell, 2004). The Buddha is cited by both schools in all of their varied forms as the source of their claims, whether they are based on what is known about him from the dialogues and related interpretive texts known as the *akāśa* or, more controversially, on what he must have meant or believed but refrained from saying in order to keep his listeners from becoming confused. Nonetheless, there is a strong element of rationalism in Buddhism, in that the concepts presented in its philosophical treatises are meant to stand on their own—quite apart from the Buddha's authority—to reason, to be consistent with what is actually observable of the outside world and (through introspection, supported by meditation techniques) of the nature of human consciousness.

In northern India in 563 BCE, Siddhartha Gautama gave birth to the Buddha, also known as "the Enlightened One" (Basham, 1967). It is appropriate to compare his thoughts with those of the conventional Hinduism of his era, which had come up with its own theories about spiritual redemption and human nature. The Buddha rejected nearly every fundamental aspect of Hinduism, even though he continued to adhere to the doctrine of *Samsara*, or the cycle of life, death, and rebirth (Bischoff 1995). In fact, all dependence on revelation or conventional wisdom must be abandoned, and both external and inward observation must take their place. The "three marks of reality" according to the Buddha are impermanence, no consciousness, and suffering, in contrast to Hinduism's view of reality as a permanent being, consciousness, and happiness. A key component of the Buddha's explanation of personhood is the second



"mark," or the absence of any permanent seat of our transient thoughts, feelings, volitions, and so forth in what we can perceive of ourselves. We are nothing more than a stream of constantly shifting ideas, emotions, physical components, and so on; we are not eternal souls that journey through a series of incarnations to an ultimate Moksha.

Significant psychological implications, as well as moral and societal ones, are believed to follow from this examination of the essence of human being. The first thing that will happen is that we will generally change the way we see ourselves after realizing that we are temporary beings. We will stop being conceited and start acting kindly toward others. The goal will be to reach Nibbana and put an end to suffering, which is the third "mark" of reality (Buswell, 2004).

### **THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISM IN MYANMAR**

Myanmar, often known as Burma, is the largest and westernmost country in mainland Southeast Asia. The majority of Burmese people, regardless of ethnicity, practice Theravada Buddhism as their traditional faith. This religion has such a strong influence on Myanmar's people that it is frequently argued that being Burmese is synonymous with being Buddhist. Indeed, historically, it was Theravada Buddhism more than any other force that drew the many peoples of Myanmar together into a single civilization, so much so that even non-Buddhist citizens of the country acknowledge the centrality of Theravada ethical, social, and political conceptions to the fabric of Myanmar life.

The Buddha, according to Burmese chroniclers, personally converted the people of Lower and Upper Myanmar, which is how Theravada Buddhism came to be practiced there. The Mon and the ancient Pyu people, who were the ancestors of the present-day Bamar and the ethnic groups most strongly linked to the development of Burmese Buddhism, originated in these areas. Additionally, according to Burmese sources, the Pyu-Bamar homeland is identified as Aparanta, and the Mon homeland is identified as Suvannabhumi (Brian, 1997). These identifications enable them to claim two missions from King Asoka (c. 300–232 BCE) for their nation. A reflection of a long-standing rivalry between the two cultures, the same sources stress that while the simultaneous single Asoka mission to Sri Lanka merely established Theravada Buddhism on the island for the first time, the two missions restored an established



Theravada tradition in Myanmar. The monk refers to the renowned Pali commentator Buddhaghosa as a local son as a last attempt to establish his supremacy.

Despite the fact that Theravada Buddhism has a lengthy history in Myanmar, not much is known about it prior to the fourth century CE. Furthermore, the information that has been discovered contradicts the conventional wisdom that characterizes early Burmese Buddhism as exclusively Theravada. Instead, it displays a diverse range of customs that included native animist cults, Brahmanism, and various types of Buddhism. For example, Buddhist inscriptions in Pali and Sanskrit, as well as statues of Visnu and Mahayana Bodhisattvas, were discovered during excavations in the ancient Pyu capital of Shrikshetra. Chinese travelogues from the 7th century mention that the Pyu followed the tradition of ordaining all adolescents as novices in the Buddhist religion and that the city supported monks such as Sthaviravada (Theravada), Mahasanghika, Mulasarvastivada, and Sammat.

Though significant ties were also kept with Sri Lanka, South India was the main source of cultural influences that Myanmar acquired during this early period. Bengal emerged as a key source of Indian influence in the region starting in the ninth century, by which time the Bamar had started to displace the Pyu in Upper Myanmar. During this time, a great deal of locally produced and imported Buddhist votive tablets with Mahayana iconography and Sanskrit inscriptions in north Indian script were produced. The Muslim conquest of north India resulted in a decline in Bengali influence by the twelfth century, which facilitated the growth of Burmese connections with Sri Lanka. The relationship with Sri Lanka made it easier to introduce new reformist branches of Sinhalese Theravada Buddhism, which eventually became the dominant tradition in mainland Southeast Asia. This process took place gradually, and it took until the seventeenth century for it to be finished in Myanmar.

Three broad categories, or routes, can be distinguished within Burmese Buddhism as a method of salvation. The first and most common of these is the path of merit making, in which one tries to gain merit (Pali, punna) by following the Precepts (Pali, Sila), carrying out meritorious deeds, and performing acts of Dāna (Giving), which are specifically directed toward religious figures and objects like monks and pagodas. The purpose is to accumulate merit for a blissful rebirth as a human or god, with Nirvaṇa (Pali, Nibbana) or complete emancipation as a distant goal in the practitioner's mind. The majority of Burmese Buddhists, both lay and ordained,



chose happy rebirth as their primary objective, a practice that has been common among Buddhists in Myanmar since the Pagan period.

The second system is the insight meditation route known as Vipassana (Sanskrit: Vipasyana). When Vipassana meditation is skillfully done, one can reach Nirvaṇa and Bodhi (Awakening), or enlightenment, either in this life or in a future life not too far off. When on retreat, Vipassana practitioners in Myanmar usually attend meditation centers and meditate in seclusion. It is believed that living a moral lifestyle and abiding by the commandments are essential prerequisites for insight practice (Kawanami, 2021). Early in the eighteenth century, Vipassana meditation was resurrected in Myanmar, and by the late twentieth century, it had become generally accepted across all socioeconomic strata in the nation.

Vijja dhara, often known as the path of the Buddhist magician, is the name of the third salvation method. This is a formidable occult sciences esoteric system that requires master initiation. The path's objective is to become a Vijja dhara, a sort of semi-immortal magician or miracle worker. In order to serve the faithful until the arrival of Maitreya (Pali, Metteyya), the Vijja dhara makes a pledge to stay in this world until then. Either that, or he will reach nirvaṇa and make a vow to become a perfect Buddha himself. He serves as a teacher to human disciples, teaching them in the arts of alchemy, reciting spells, casting runes, and Samatha (Sanskrit: samatha, or serenity meditation) (Kawanami, 2021). In general, Vipassana meditation is avoided by Vijja dhara practitioners because they believe it may prematurely bring them to Nirvaṇa. The Vijja dhara bears remarkable resemblances to the medieval Bengali tantric Buddhist Maha Siddha tradition in terms of tactics and objectives (Goh, 2014). In certain cases, religious authorities view the Vijja dhara with mistrust since it puts forth a different soteriology than that found in Pali literature.

Nowadays, approximately 89% of people are followers of Buddhism, primarily from the Theravada School. As a result, Buddhist institutions, practices, and philosophy have a significantly greater influence on people's attitudes and ways of thinking than they do elsewhere. Other religions such as Islam, Hinduism, and Christianity have also held significance. Their total number of followers is significant, accounting for 11% of the population. Among them, Christians have done better than Hindus and Muslims in maintaining their status and traditions; they are mostly found in border regions such the states of Karen,



Kachin, Shan, and Chin. Despite being a minority faith, Hindus and Buddhists get along well since nearly all Hindu temples have an image of Lord Buddha. Islamic adherents fared poorly because of historical and political (Jagarlankara, 2017).

### **CULTURAL TIES BETWEEN MYANMAR AND INDIA**

It is crucial to consider the big picture of their historical development in order to understand the actual character, scope, and depth of the cultural ties that exist between India and Myanmar. Then and only then will one truly understand how deep and varied these connections have been for so long. The first and most important thing to stress is that the relationship between India and Myanmar is a part of a wider phenomenon, which is the outflow and spread of Indian influences in the area east of India, which stretches from Burma to Bali and beyond.

Following his declaration that China and India possessed "the oldest continuous cultural traditions in the world," Basham made the definitive claim in his seminal work that "the majority of Southeast Asia's culture originated in India." Although China and the Islamic world had some effect on the area, "the primary impetus to civilization came from India." This resulted from a historical sequence that started well in advance of the Christian era.

As Panikkar explained, in China and other countries where Chinese civilization was dominating, Indian impact was mostly on religious beliefs rather than social or cultural institutions, however in Southeast Asia, it was more fundamental and resulted in the formation of a new civilization. He did, however, add that 'it is the brilliance of the local people that contributes to it its specific qualities and distinctiveness.'

Indians in the past, who included traders, monks, priests, artisans, and temple builders, traveled by land or sea to the east for a variety of reasons, including trade, adventure, skill sharing, and religious spreading. They faced risks and perils, yet they were successful in founding "colonies." These individuals, however, were not colonialists in the Western sense; they were distinct from the colonialists who came much later, the Portuguese, Dutch, British, and French, who rode the might of better weaponry. The Indianized kings of the area were native chieftains who had absorbed the lessons India had to offer. The Indian "colonies" were peaceful. The only things that those who left India had to give were their skills as craftsmen, their knowledge of religion or spirituality, and a few thoughts. They also had a strong desire to discover



Suvannabhumi, or greener pastures, as much of the East was then known to them. They discovered welcoming environments and communities in the local civilizations, ready to accept and integrate newcomers while assimilating "the good" they brought with them. Multiple layers of the influence of Indian thought, art, architecture, culture, philosophy, and religion become evident as we delve deeper to appreciate the contemporary civilization of nations like those of Indo-China or CLMV (i.e., Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam), Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia (Lopez 2018). It is another question entirely whether or not this connection is completely recognized today.

Given this overall context, it seems only sense that India's impacts would have a noticeable impact on the land next to it. People could trek into what was Upper Burma and the Arakan region from the former Bengal (which was divided into two parts, one in India and the other now forming Bangladesh), Assam, and the border region. There was also a migration from Burma to India. In addition, individuals sailed to the southeast and southwest coasts of Burma from the coasts of Bengal, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh in order to start interacting with the people of Lower Burma and the coastal region through trade, culture, and religion.

Anthropologists and historians that study the history of human settlement in Burma frequently mention the influx of strangers from three different directions: China in the north, Cambodia, Malaya, and Siam in the east, and India in the west and south. Some argue that the resulting interplay or collision of civilizations on Burmese land favored ancient Indians over others. The Indo-Chinese peninsula became into a theater of conflict between the Chinese and Indian civilizations, as stated by Hall. Even though there was considerable mingling, Indian culture ultimately won over everywhere but Annam and Tongking. India is heavily indebted to Burma (Walton, 2016).

Some regions of the East were referred to in ancient India as Suvannabhumi or Suvarṇadvīpa, which means the "Land of Gold" or the "Island of Gold," respectively (Basham, 1967). Although the precise boundaries of the mythical region are impossible to pinpoint, this usage suggests that the area was well-known in antiquity for its propensity to produce gold, precious minerals, and other valuable items. Subsequently, historians kept referring to Burma as the "Golden Land," but they offered at least two further justifications: first, the region was replete



with pagodas draped in gold, and second, it was endowed with rice plants that turned golden brown as crops grew. Burma as it exists today is still distinct as "the Golden Land."

The age of the relationship between India and Burma is a topic of much discussion among academics. When evaluating the past, most Indian scholars have a very long-term perspective, although some choose to adopt a restrictive stance and emphasize the necessity of using concrete, verified data. The former school would likely contend that it is incorrect to think that exchanges started just 1,500 years ago given that Indian civilization is at least 5,000 years old (Lopez 2018). They like analyzing mythologies, histories, customs, and tales found in Hindu and Buddhist texts to come to the conclusion that there were connections dating back to pre-Christian and even pre-Buddhist times. Majumdar, who epitomizes this camp, contended Burma, being the nearest to India and readily accessible by land and water, has long drawn Indian traders, merchants, missionaries, and more ardent military spirits. There is no doubt that by the first century CE, and most likely much earlier, substantial Hindu colonies existed both along the coast and in Burma's interior. He added: 'On the whole, we shall be justified, on these grounds alone, in dating the beginning of Hindu colonization in Burma certainly before and probably long before, the beginning of Christian era.'

Harvey put out the opposing viewpoint. The records of events in the chronicles dating back to 850 BCE are erroneous because writing was uncommon even as late as 500 CE. His assertion that history "cannot be remembered unless it is written" refuted narratives derived from oral traditions that were ostensibly handed down through the generations. Thus, he concludes that "these accounts contain, at most, a substratum of truth up until 1044 CE."

Harvey and a few other historians think that, by the fifth century CE, trade, cultural exchanges, and human migrations had already been largely entrenched. As per Hall, there is a noticeable Indian influence seen in the earliest archaeological remnants found at Sri Kshetra, Halingyi, and Mrohaung in Arakan, as well as other locations in Burma.

The cultural ties between India and Burma were deeply ingrained. Jesse stated, "The Coromandel Coast Indians brought their script, which dates back to the second century, to Burma. The Burmese learned it from the Talaiings and still use it today." Despite covering a relatively small region, excavations in Burma produced sufficient artifacts, including pictures,



terracotta tablets, gold plates, and architectural pieces that attested to Indian influence in the first several centuries following the birth of Christ (Keck, 2015).

The traditional belief that the connections started later, when Burma incorporated Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism into its borders, was refuted by them. Before giving rise to what finally became the distinctive Burmese culture, these streams of influences mixed for millennia with indigenous values, beliefs, and practices (such as animism). Ultimately, there is no doubt that Theravada Buddhism prevailed as the religion embraced by the majority of people, although it was never able to eradicate the strong influences of Indian Hinduism.

Even though the reasons why Myanmar is significant to India are frequently discussed in talks about the cultural ties between the two countries, one can start by looking at the kind and extent of India's significance to Myanmar. People still remember the interactions and trades that took place between the two countries on a philosophical, spiritual, cultural, and commercial level.

Ethnicity and religion can be thought of as having the biggest influence in this situation. It is clear to those who live in Yangon and are so exposed to the core of Bamar or Burman (i.e., the majority ethnic group) culture that the Buddhist connection has proven to be the strongest and enduring link between the two civilizations. The Shwedagon Pagoda is said to have strands of Lord Buddha's hair that he gave to two Burmese businessmen buried inside of it. This tradition has persisted over time.

Many people hold the views that Buddhism began in India, that King Asoka erected pagodas there, and that Buddha actually visited the region. The aspiration of a typical Buddhist in Myanmar is to travel to Bodh Gaya, Bihar, the location where Siddhartha attained enlightenment and, more than 2,500 years ago, became the Buddha, at least once in their lifetime. History reveals that the eleventh-century importation of Buddhist scriptures, monks, and Buddha relics from Sri Lanka later on aided in the resurgence and dissemination of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism emerged as the most popular religion. Because of this, Sri Lanka is also considered a close friend and partner of the Burmese, although India continues to hold the top spot as a truly precious land.

## CONCLUSION



As mentioned previously, Myanmar has a highly sophisticated, remarkably varied, and intricate society. History and religion have a profound impact on its culture. Its rich and varied culture, which permeates its people's daily lives, was explained by this. It further suggested that Indian socio-cultural influences would continue to pour in and shape Myanmar society. The effect of it has been clearly apparent. Thus, in terms of religion, culture, arts, clothing, cuisine, and manner of life, Myanmar society mirrored these ancient influences and linkages. That being said, it would be incorrect to say that this country is just an extension of Indian life. Over the years, Myanmar has demonstrated an incredible talent at taking in and combining outside influences to create a distinct, autonomous style all its own.

In conclusion, ethnic ties have persisted for millennia between the inhabitants of western Myanmar, especially the Chins, Kukis, and Kachins, and the people of four Indian states that border Myanmar: Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, and Mizoram. These ties transcend religion and philosophy. These connections were established long before India and Myanmar became independent nations. They were strengthened by linguistic affinity or similarity, familial and tribal ties, customary commercial exchanges, similar lifestyles, and rivalry and collaboration between rulers. The relationship between India and Myanmar will undoubtedly grow and persist in the future. To summarize, the Buddhist cultural and religious tie between India and Myanmar remains strong today, generating mutual respect, understanding, and cooperation. It acts as a link between their histories, cultures, and peoples, contributing to regional harmony and worldwide cultural variety.

In the midst of fast urbanization and development, both nations confront difficulties in maintaining historic Buddhist places and artifacts. To guarantee these cultural treasures' long-term preservation, efforts must be made. Myanmar's advantageous location between India and other Southeast Asian nations gives its diplomatic and cultural ties a geopolitical component that influences regional cooperation and stability.



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