

## **Asian Heritage – Shared Experience of Cultural Interface**

**Choodamani Nandagopal<sup>1</sup>**

Asian heritage is characterised by the uniqueness of embracing the new ideals and encountering new situations that promoted the cultural interface between the countries small or big in size. The inflow and outflow of people and their mission created corridors and path ways on which the cross-roads were formed. While standing at the cross-roads, when looked around, one factor emerges clearly that cultural dissemination has taken place through these corridors. Religion as one of the primary components of culture has extended and expanded from its place of origin to the lands around with deeper ties and greater adaptability to the new situations. Visual Arts and performing arts are the creative expressive components of culture move from their place of origin to the lands around in a more appealing way than the political or trade relations. Literature in the form of scripture and epics, language and script as the means of communication made ways with far-reaching and meaningful interactions between the countries. Scientific and technological development reached the lands through better trade transactions, architectural achievements and progress in the field of agriculture and sericulture. Such trajectories through land and sea route comprehended the dynamics of cultural dissemination in bringing the Asian people into one cultural matrix of Asian Heritage.

Cultural interface is a consequential phenomenon in the history and civilization of the world where certain factors exert a deep and everlasting influence on the countries which are at the receiving end. The immediate extension of cultural factors is normally through geographical proximity. Sometimes it is also due to political imperialism, or because of the inevitable trade connections where the people of different countries come across each other and benefit mutually. This is visible in the deliberate efforts of interactions where the countries engage in mutual transactions. ( Choodamani Nandagopal, Cultural Interface of India with Sri Lanka, Ed: Anupa Pande & Parul Pandya Dhar, Cultural Interface of India with Asia, 2003: P. 121) The present day societies across the world and in particular Asia are the result of such shared experiences of the cultural interface between the centuries. The resources both natural and built in are the most pervasive inheritances of the past recognized widely as the treasures of heritage.

### **Basic Information and Placement of the Continent Asia**

Asia is the largest continent with over 3.8 billion population composed of different ethnic groups, vibrant cultures and layers of history, geographically covers 8.7% of the Earth's total surface and 29.5% of its land area. In the west, Asia is bordered by Europe, In the east,

---

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences, Jain University, Bangalore, India.

bordered by the Pacific Ocean, northern border, with arctic Ocean while the Indian Ocean covers southern borders, along with a series of bays, gulfs and seas, as well as extensive chains of both inhabited and uninhabited islands.

Though the countries on the western part of the main land of Asia are known as Middle east, they are still considered as the part of Asian continent, similarly the Russian landmass towards east of Ural Mountains is also considered as part of Russia. Over 50 countries are located in this vast stretch of land. They are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Brunei, Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, China, East Timor, Hong Kong (territory), India, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, Lebanon, Macau (territory), Malaysia, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, Korea, Oman, Pakistan, Palestinian (territories), Philippines, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Taiwan, Thailand, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, Yemen. (sources – World Atlas)

### Landmark Events in the Asian History

as far as the historicity of the Asian heritage is concerned, it is marked with several events that stand as the milestones in holding these fifty odd countries into one continental entity. The unbroken continuity of the chronological accounts that are found in the form of writings, legends, epigraphic records, narrative traditions, paintings, sculptures, textile traditions and other decorative arts have enlivened through 3-4 millenniums. It is a unique phenomenon of an involvement through a gradual process of evolution, development, integration, assimilation and cultural transformation that finds place in the history of the Asian continent. Layers and layers of historical records that are significant in this regard have substantiated the directions and the conceptual framework of Asian historiography. To understand the conceptual framework, a few of the landmark events may be referred here.

Trade and cultural interactions took place between Indus, Chinese and Mesopotamian civilizations during the age of Civilizations. Then followed with the development of Vedic civilization, which has witnessed the advancement in literature, agriculture, farming, animal husbandry, weaving, warfare, building of towns and cities, civic life and administration. The sixth century BC is the era of landmark in the life of Asian people because the founders of great religions, Buddha, Mahaveera, Confucius and Zarathustra had given their sermons and their teachings were consolidated during the subsequent centuries.

One of the historically recorded event that brought significant changes in the lives of the people of Asia is Alexander's invasion and the aftermath settlements, which opened the cross-cultural dialogues between Greek and the Asian countries such as Iran, Iraq, India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Trade, commerce, economy, warfare, political ambitions and governance, religious pursuits, language, literature, philosophy, art and practices of agriculture were exposed to the superimposition of influences and counter influences. This was the first historically recorded cultural interface of Greek with the Asian countries. The kingdom of Kushanas under the king Kanishka from Takshashila, Peshavar to Pataliputra, Mathura and Bharhuth had established Buddhism as state religion. The expedition of Dharma by the emperor Ashoka to send his son Mahendra and daughter Sanghamitra has created the cultural interface between India and Sri

Lanka and through all the South East Asian countries. Prakrith, Sanskrit, Pali, Brahmi, Kharoshti, Parthia, Chinese scripts were the means of communication in the ancient historical phase of Asia.

The life and teachings of Jesus Christ in first century CE and Prophet Mohammad in the sixth century CE have significantly changed the directions of interface culturally. The invasion of Hunas and Shakas in 6<sup>th</sup> century CE had brought the cultural contact of Central Asia and Mongolia towards Himalayan countries and the Indian subcontinent. The movement and migration of Fahien, Huentsang and other Chinese pilgrims to India during the different phases of history has established the vital cultural link among Asian countries. Buddhism was officially introduced into Korea during the period of three Kingdoms in fourth century CE. and Maitreya cult was formulated in this country and then spread to all other Asian countries.

In the sixth century CE Buddhism was officially proclaimed as the state religion in Japan and very soon Japan adopted the centralized system as a *Buddha-kshetra*. Later the Shinto and Zen faiths emerged as off-shoots of Buddhism. The south east Asian countries like Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore and Philippines were vying for supremacy amongst themselves through historical phases but commonly shared the Buddhist and Vedic experiences. Similarly Bhutan, Nepal, Afghanistan and countries of northern frontiers were lands of extended Buddhist culture. Another historical fact is the expansionistic phase of Islam throughout all the countries of Asia, which originated from Saudi Arabia and very soon became the state religions of west Asia including Iran and Syria. Thus the historical records display the formation of Asia with significant landmark events that contributed to the cultural interfaces between the countries of Asia.

### Cultural Interface – Roads of Dialogue

*“Since time immemorial, the movement of peoples and intellectual exchanges have played a critical role in the evolution and transformation of human civilization. At a time when cultural identities are being freely defended in many parts of the world, a look into the past shows that these identities have been gradually forged through influences from elsewhere. Such influences have marked the different civilizations deeply in doing so have helped to fashion all present day societies”.* –

Federico Mayor Director General UNESCO, Integral Study of the Silk Road – Roads of Dialogue

The trade routes have great significance in the history of human civilization. They are the corridors of dialogue and established vital links between the cultures. It relates to over thousands of years, covers thousands of kilometres across land and sea. The land route that existed between Mediterranean region passing through the middle east countries and Himalayan lands connecting China where the major transaction was the silk and was known as Silk Road. It was also known as Caravan route or Oasis route, which had many interior connecting trade routes. Steppes Route in Central Asia, connected Europe with Asia. The Spice Route, where the spices were transacted through sea, which connected all south west and east Asian countries. Incense Route or the aromatic path passed through Arabia and Israel connected the Mediterranean

region, where the aromatic goods were traded. This network of trade routes through land and sea provided opportunities to spread religions through commercial, cultural and ideological communications between India, China and the rest of Asian countries besides the west.

The re-discovery of the cultural heritage of Silk Roads has acquired a prime place in the international research studies. Under the aegis of UNESCO many projects of multi-disciplinary approach are trying to throw light on this highly dimensional area of research. Many times natural hazards and political interruptions created the disturbance for the activities on the Silk Road. But the natural passion for the east and west encounter has discovered many channels for establishing the links between the countries encompassing the Silk Road.

Under the umbrella of 'Silk Road Studies' eminent scholars have undertaken various areas of research. The studies in the fields of Archaeology, History of Art, History, Philosophy, Religion, Architecture, Music system, Social sciences and medical sciences have widely touched upon many interesting aspects of life and activities on entire network of Silk Roads. Prof. Hirayama from Japan made a huge endowments as Fellowships. (The Hirayama Fellowship for Silk Road Studies in Art History was awarded to the author) The studies related to the trade have highlighted the different types of transactions held between the east and west. Silk, the major commodity from China was highly regarded in exchange to precious stones, gold, ivory and other expensive materials. India expanded up to present Afghanistan having Gandhara as its major city connected China with the Mediterranean world. India played a strategic role in this trade route. Alexander the Great and Marco Polo treaded this pathway. Chinese scholars like Fahian and HuenTsang walked miles after miles to visit and experience the land of Buddha.

Highways that helped shape history; the Silk Roads were conduits for conversion as well as for commerce and conquest. Monks in saffron robes, Vedic scholars and Arab merchants disseminated two of the world's most wide spread religions, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam by exploring the means and ways of taking the philosophy, art, literature and ideology through the Silk Roads on land and Spice Route on water.

Craftsmen, scholars, entertainers and official emissaries from far-off lands travelled the Silk Roads too, and many languages were spoken, many cultures blended, in the glittering cities that grew up along them. Inevitably these routes formed a cultural causeway, carrying new ideas, new philosophies, and new artistic styles over vast distances.

Dunhuang, an important Silk Road town, bears witness to the cultural diversity, the exchange of ideas and the vibrant trade in ancient times. Among its outstanding artifacts are a great number of textiles showing an incredible breadth of colours and textures. The textile legacy of Dunhuang, in particular the silk paintings, banners, sutra wrappers and other silk-made works of art, are an inexhaustible treasure house yet to be fully explored. However, due to their extreme

vulnerability, little research interest and attention has been given to the conservation of textiles from Dunhuang.( IDP News No. 44, Autumn 2014)

## Shared Experience of Asian Heritage - UNESCO Initiatives

*Mankind has left numerous examples of cultural heritage, both tangible and intangible, throughout its history. Cultural heritage represents irreplaceable properties that cannot be retrieved once they are lost. It is our strong belief that all nations and their citizens have a duty to protect and to pass on the world's cultural heritage to future generations.*

(UNESCO - Xi'an Declaration 20.Nov 2002)

The layered experience of intrinsic value is shared among the countries of Asia and that successfully carried them beyond the narrow frontiers. Under the umbrella of UNESCO the socio-cultural facets which shaped the human endeavour is brought under two categories: The Tangible Cultural Heritage and The Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Tangible Cultural Heritage encompasses, the monuments, sites, written records and other things which has the nature of permanency that are survived over the centuries reflecting the history, life-style, technology, concepts, executive skills and the capacity of using the natural resources available in the context of time and space.

UNESCO has declared more than 450 sites as the World Heritage Sites. Some of the countries like Sri Lanka, Greece, Italy, France and Cambodia have developed their World Heritage Sites receiving guidance from UNESCO and reaping the benefits in a big way through the Industry of Tourism. To mention a few, the Cultural Triangle Project of Sri Lanka is one of the best examples through which the important archaeological sites are researched, site museums developed, monuments were restored according to the UNESCO standards, included in the itinerary of the world tourists and the infra-structure developed through the corridors connecting all the sites. The Angkor Wat in Cambodia, the massive World Heritage property is restored by facing the challenges of conservation, technology, man power, finance and continuous warfare. Today the entire world is heading towards this wonderful paradise of art and cultural heritage of Asia. Among the south east Asian architectural marvels, Ananda Coomaraswamy takes delight in writing on the Borobudur monuments as ' Borobudur is like a ripe fruit matured in breathless air: the fullness of its forms is an expression of static wealth, rather the volume that denotes the outward radiation of power'. (1 Coomaraswamy, *History of Indian and Indonesian Art*, P. 19 )

Similarly the exquisite site, Ayutthaya of Thailand radiates with old charm of Buddhist culture. The Shwedagon Pagoda of Myanmar, is a massive structure plated with 8,688 slabs of solid gold, the spire is studded with 5,448 diamonds and other precious stones is truly a wonder. (Alistair Shearer, *the Spirit of Asia* P. 138) It is guarded for its wealth and sacred presence. Bodh Gaya in India is the Garden of Enlightenment, where the Master sought his great enlightenment under Mahabodhi Tree. So also the Nalanda heritage site where thousands of disciples enlightened under the tutelage of scholars. The All seeing Buddha of Bodhnath Temple Nepal is true to the name but is unfortunately damaged badly in the recent earth quake, The Tashilunpo of Tibet is the seat of Panchen Lama is the pride of Tibet, the Great wall of China and its lofty pagodas in wood and decorated with jade artifacts, Koya-San of Japan the holy Buddhist place on holy mountains,

and the beautiful Zonks – the monasteries of Bhutan are some of the Buddhist monuments and sites that form a greater part of Asian heritage. The paradise gardens and library structures in Petra and other sites of Jordan, the massive structural splendors in the form of mosques in Arab world, Iran, Turkey, Syria, Tajmahal and other monuments from India showcase the Islamic heritage of Asia. Though the Jaina monuments are confined to Indian territories, the exuberant temples at Dilwara, Girinar, and Shraavanabelagola and many shrines nestled all over India give a message of simplicity and peace.

Hinduism, considered as the oldest religion has contributed greatly in extending its culture through its scriptures like Bhagavatgeeta and epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata in India and all neighboring countries. The Ghats of Ganga at Varanasi, this city at the moment is a happening city, the constituency of Indian Prime minister Narendra Modi is receiving all the attention, the Ganga is getting cleaned and very recently UNESCO has considered as the Creative city. Kanchipuram, Hampi, where the entire town is deemed as heritage town, Ellora, Ajantha, Konark, Tanjaore and many temple towns are vibrant with the Hindu marvels. The rare and fine structures and ritual system are followed in places like Pashupatinath Temple, Nepal, temples and sculptures belonging to Khemer period in Cambodia, and some of the temples built in Sigapore, London, California, Sydney show the vibrancy of the presence of Hindu faith. Wherever the colonial rule has taken place, the churches stand as the testimony of Christianity across the countries of Asia.

The Intangible Culture can be defined as non-physical cultural heritage, something unable to be touched. But it has a relevance of socio-cultural practices are value based. It is experienced through the senses both strong and fragile, as it relies on 'community to pass it on'. It has symbolic relevance so it is intangible symbolism inlaid. For example, if the silk or cotton saree is tangible, the weave, pattern how it is handed over is intangible to fully appreciate the rich history of the weavers of the country. The intangible culture is the element least often written down. It is also an aspect of culture most easily lost in turbulent recent past. It is also the one that gives a vital extra dimension to the projects we can see and preserve as monuments and museums. Intangible culture is the living culture. The intangible culture is also known as soft culture is in most of the places in the endangering state and needs immediate concern from the Government agencies and citizens participation to care and revive.

What can be done for the preservation of these particular forms of the cultural heritage of humanity is (a) to record their current form on tape, in writing or on visual media and (b) to facilitate their survival by helping the persons concerned and assisting transmission to future generations. To take up community based studies to work on more details and revive the treasures of cultural traditions. The revival of the roots and recreating the cultural fabric through the sources of intangible culture would take a significantly outstanding position from the point of view of tourism perspectives.

Asian heritage, in many respects owes its development, survival and sustainability to the Indian subcontinent. Throughout Asia rapid economic and social change means the region's heritage is at once under threat and undergoing a revival as never before. As societies look forward, competing forces ensure they re-visit the past and the inherited, with the conservation of nature and culture now driven by the broader agendas of identity politics, tradition, revival,

rapid development, environmentalism and sustainability. In response to these new and important trends, are emerging specific analyses to examine heritage in inter-disciplinary and critically engaged terms, encompassing the natural and the cultural, the tangible and intangible heritage. (Patrick Daly and Tim Winter, Routledge Hand book of Heritage in Asia )

The second part of 19<sup>th</sup> century has seen the movement 'Save Heritage', in European countries like France, Britain and Italy and the same has extended to America and Asian countries which were under the European rule. As a result, preservation, restoration, conservation and excavation of historical sites and art objects received attention and many scholars entered the profession of serious writing on art and archaeology. Asia offered great scope to scholars with new discovery and excavations. On the basis of this research official reports, monographs and research contents were published. Many British archaeologists, artists, linguists, officers in civil and military services were interested in the cultural heritage of Asia. Though their reports and interpretations were true to the facts, their agenda was to show the world that they were civilizing the Asians.

At this juncture Asia needed a scholar who would write on pan Asian perspective. Asia and Asian artistic heritage found to its great fortune Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, a great Art historian from Sri Lanka, who was the staunch traditionalist to write earnestly and relentlessly for five decades and his writings established a distinct place for Asian art in the world art history. He researched initially on Sinhalese art and architecture and later dealt extensively on Indian, Indonesian and other south east Asian artistic heritage. Since then a huge body of literature on Asian heritage is built up focusing on shared experiences of cultural interface. Archaeological survey of India maintains nearly 3,700 monuments and archaeological sites in India and extended its efforts to countries outside India. Important among these are the excavations conducted by ASI in Egypt, Nepal, Bahrain, conservation of paintings in Bhutan, major temples in Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, Thiruketeeswaram Temple in Sri Lanka, My son group of temples in Vietnam and Apravasi Ghat in Mauritius. (Ed: Himamshu Prabah Ray, Mausam Maritime Cultural Landscapes across the Indian Ocean P 20-21)

In the year 2003, National Museum Institute New Delhi in collaboration with the Indian council for Cultural Relations had organized a four day International seminar on Cultural Interface of India with South, Southeast and East Asia: Philosophy, Art and Architecture. Many scholars from the Asian countries contributed their research writings to Conference Proceedings. One of the issues that have drawn the attention was 'to stop looking at the west for progressive development. Instead to look at our own resources and Asia is potential in science and technology, maintaining good international relations, in building up cultural linkages, trade and commerce, education and industrial growth'. This is realised in present times too and knowing the strategic position of India in the conceptual framework of Asian heritage, is striving to build up the cultural networking and linkages by walking to the door steps of many of the countries of Asia, share the common issues and enhance the mutual respect. The Prime minister of India Sri Modiji, is not leaving any stone unturned in establishing the cordial relationships through careful foreign policy and multi-lateral relationships across the Asian countries. These continuous and sincere efforts are yielding towards meaningful interactions and reaffirmation of bonds between the various countries constituting the Asian Heritage.