

## Sketching the Tactical Position and Maritime Connectivity of Bengal with Malay Archipelago (321 BCE-750 CE)

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### Abstract

This study examines the geographical and strategic proximity of Bengal and the interplay between the Bengal and Southeast Asian regions which two entities had a linkage and a great bonding from 321 BCE to 750 CE concerning maritime activities. At that time, Southeast Asia; mainly the Malay Archipelago was known as the Golden Chersonese. Despite having infinite reciprocal geographical and maritime significance, their tactical positions and strategic factors that impacted inter-linkages are seriously marginalised and infrequently looked at from the historical perspective. The study adopts historical research method in analysing the accounts of ancient Greek-Roman geographers and Chinese travellers, ancient texts, and archaeological documents qualitatively to unfold the contextual geographical factors between these two regions. The findings of this study show the strategic proximity of Bengal and its role in creating linkages with Southeast Asia through ports and maritime connectivity. It also demonstrates the socio-cultural impacts on the Southeast Asian regions created by the Bengal's contacts during the ancient period.

**Key words:** Bengal, Southeast Asia, geographical position, connectivity, ancient.

### Introduction

The geographical entities, strategic locations, natural richness, and various ethnic elements are responsible for establishing a good relationship between the two regions. In this connection, Bengal and Southeast Asian connectivity in the early period is a significant issue for historical research. A few number of scholars worked in the areas related to the maritime trade, and cultural linkages of Bengal-Southeast Asia<sup>1</sup>, but Southeast Asian physical features as a significant factor behind the

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<sup>1</sup> See Abdul Momin Chowdhury, "Bengal and Southeast Asia: Trade and Cultural Contacts in the Ancient Period", In: Amra Srisuchat (ed.), *Ancient Traders and Cultural Contacts in Southeast Asia*, Bangkok. 1996, pp. 96-101; Ashok Datta, *Bengal and Southeast Asia-Early Trade and Cultural Contacts*, Bengal Art, Vol. 5, 1999, pp. 49-60; Shahanaj Husne Jahan, *Excavating Waves and Winds of (Ex) change: A Study of Maritime Trade in Early Bengal*, (Oxford: John and Erica Hedges Ltd.2006).

connectivity remained largely unexplored. Moreover, Bengal's geographical factors were also overlooked, although these factors created Bengal's proximity to the major ports of Southeast Asia. To better understand historical events, the historian should consider the merits of linking history and geography from a long-term perspective.<sup>2</sup> In line with the *Longue duree* approach, Braudel mentioned that such linking is essential for making historians more geographically aware and geographers more historically sensitive.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Wallerstein showed in his world-system theory that rather than a nation-state or a united political unit an organised human society has emerged with the progression of the updated sciences and capitalism that creates a longstanding history. Such development happened just because of universal networking or connection like the ancient maritime-based contact. According to the location theory of Weber,<sup>4</sup> 'optimal location' is essential to maritime trade. The trade network connects 'market-places' which can be conceived in 'nodal points' within the network. Hence, strategic location, geographical aspects, routes and settlement-related information can help illustrate the connectivity of regions. The objective of the study is to examine the geographical and strategic proximity of Bengal and the interplay between the Bengal and Southeast Asian regions. Additionally, it analyses the multifactual capacity of Bengal and its impact on the Southeast Asian region in the ancient period, especially from 321 BCE to 750 CE concerning maritime activities. The issues have been described based on its littoral position and movement of the people, geographical connectivity, and the bilateral and combined forces that interacted in the process of the maritime relationship between these two entities.

## 2. Research Methodology

This study adopts historical research methods in explaining the strategic elements of the advantageous location of Bengal and the Southeast Asian region that created maritime connectivity between both regions. Data and information were collected from ancient literary texts such as *Arthashastra*, *Jataka*, *Kathasaritsagara*, archaeological excavation reports analysis, classical and Chinese geographers and travellers accounts. Visiting the National Museum of Malaysia author gathered some authentic information regarding the maritime connectivity of Bengal and Southeast Asian regions such as Buddhagupta's inscriptional document, Indian semi-precious

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2 Alan Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging and Divide*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 22.

3 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Vol. 2, (California: University of California Press. 1995), pp. 1-3.

4 Alfred Weber, *Über den Standort der Industrien* (Theory of the location of industries), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press.1909), pp. 29, 34.

beads and pottery sherds. Hence, this study has been carried out by using both primary and secondary sources through archival and library research.

### 3. Geo-Political Features of Bengal

‘Bengal’, in this research, refers to the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. It was a British province called by this name from the Muslim conquest of this territory in the 13th century. In the ancient period, the Bengals’ territory covered the geographical entity or the ancient Indian township of Vanga, Samatata, Harikela, Vangala, Gauda, Radha, Pundra, Varendra, Suhma etc. At that time, these townships were part of ancient India and occasionally, some townships were independent. All these ancient townships were under the geographical area of present Bangladesh and West Bengal of India. From the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE to the partition of India in 1947 it was known as Bengal.<sup>5</sup> Though the word Bengal is derived from Vanga, the latter was sometimes bigger or smaller than the Bengal of pre-partition days, in relation to its expansion and contraction under different ruler’s authority. Regarding Vanga and Bengal, D. C. Sircar referred to Vanga country including parts of the central, eastern and southern parts of Bengal that referred to most of the area of Bengal. Ancient texts *Arthasastra* of Kautilya and *Milindapanha* mentioned Vanga as denoting a territorial unit. In this research, Bengal refers to a period before the name Bengal came into existence. As a name, to take ‘Bengal’ perhaps is more convenient than denoting the territory where the Bengali language is spoken today. According to Majumder<sup>6</sup>

It comprises the Indian state of West Bengal and the whole of East Pakistan and some Bengali-speaking tracts included in the Indian States of Bihar and Assam, and Indian Union Territory of Tripura.

Bengal’s geographical location played an important role in its international connectivity since ancient times. The geographical position of Bengal corresponds to the highland boundary in the north, eastern and western borders. The area of this region is almost entirely plain land and silt alluvial as a result of overwhelming streams of the river system of northern India. This riverine-tangled network is the largest delta<sup>7</sup> in the deltaic region and was divided into the sub-montane Terai, the western border (Rajmahal hills) of the Indian Peninsular block, the Ganga-

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5 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*. (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co.1971). pp.1-14.

6 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*, (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co.1971). pp.1.

7 Kanan Gopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944), p. 37, Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Changing Face of Bengal: A Study in Riverine Economy*, (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1938), p.120.

Brahmaputra para delta, the Surma-Meghna valley and the Sylhet and Chittagong hills and plains, and the delta core region in the south. It had the sharing of the mountainous border with ancient Burma on the south edge rather than the other parts were the ancient Indian territory and an extension of the ancient block of Peninsular India. It regarded an entity that was close to the early Southeast Asian region<sup>8</sup> in terms of maritime communication.

Moreover, the seafarers of Bengal knew the sea involving wind, water currents, tides, and weather conditions since the third millennium BCE. The geographical settings of the Indian Peninsula support all along its coastline from the majority of the rivers of India, and their distributaries are suitable for navigation and ports developed along the estuarine mouths. The inhabitants of Bengal unquestionably dealt with boats and ships as seafaring nature. Based on Mulvaney's study,<sup>9</sup> before 40,000 BCE, the proto-Australoid people<sup>10</sup> had sailed from Southeast Asia to Australia, the earliest Bengal settlers. Through the anthropological study, Ray<sup>11</sup> argued that the descendants of these people are still familiar as Mundas and the Santals (indigenous people) who live in present-day Bangladesh and West Bengal.

It should be mentioned here that ancient Bengal had a 4000-year-old civilisation that thrived between the banks of the Ganges to the Brahmaputra and sustained itself with the riches of the Ganges Delta where these two rivers acted as a geographical marker of the region. This geographical network provided a unique environment throughout the early history of Bengal, but it also linked Bengal to the larger Ganga<sup>12</sup> and Brahmaputra valley networks on the one hand and the east coast and Bay of Bengal systems on the other.

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8 Harunur Rashid, "The Geographical Background to the History and Archaeology of South East Bengal", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1979-81, pp.157-178.

9 Derek Jhon Mulvaney, *The Prehistory of Australia*, (London: Penguin Books, 1975), p.81.

10 Different Indian sub-divisions have been populated by diverse indigenous peoples. Among them, the Proto-Australoid sect has a sort of racial affinities with Australian Aborigines. Specifically, eastern Bengal is strongly suggestive of mixed Mongoloid and Proto-Australoid strains. Alongside Eastern Bengal, they lived in Bihar, Orissa, Madhya and Andhra Pradesh of India, mainly the Mundari-speaking tribes. They are classified as Munda, Santal, Ho, Juang, Saora and others, and are known as the Austro-Asiatic language group. From the eastern part of India, a group of this large family migrated to Mainland Southeast Asia and scattered throughout parts of Burma, Siam, Laos, Malay and Southern China.

11 Niharranjan Ray, (1994). *History of the Bengali People (Ancient Period)* translated. Calcutta: Orient Logman. pp.32-34.

12 Ganga is the big river of India. according to Ptolemy after passing these the course turns again to the east, and if sail with the ocean to your right and the coastal far to your left, you reach the Ganges and the extreme of the continent towards the east called Khrys (The Golden Khersonese). The river of this region called the Ganges is the largest in India, it has an annual increase and decreases like the Nile.

### 3.1 The Core Region of Bengal

The 'Gangetic Valley' was the core area of Bengal, and the parts of lower West Bengal (including its coastal area) and western sections of coastal Bangladesh included in the early centuries in a country called *Ganges* (Ganga) in foreign sources, and *Vanga* in ancient Indian texts.<sup>13</sup> According to *Periplus*,<sup>14</sup> the name Gange was not only familiar as a river but also a country and its capital was located near the principal mouth of the river and the bank of this river was also considered a market town as Gange. So, the name 'Gange' was known as a river and the capital of a region that was considered as Bengal. Through this place, some trading goods like malabathrum and Gangetic spikenard, and pearls used to take away beyond Bengal. Another product was Bengal's muslin of the finest sort which is called Gangetic Muslin exported through this port.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, the name *Gangaridae* is sometimes taken as a Greek corruption of the Sanskrit *Ganga-rastra* (the country of Ganga), *Ganga-radha* (the heart of Ganga) or *Ganga-hrdaya* (the heart of Ganga). Moreover, *Gangaridae* refers to the people Gange or Ganges, which simply means Gangian people and the particular area of Bengal that was inhabited by the *Gangaridae* mentioned both in the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (80 CE) and the *Geography of Ptolemy*<sup>16</sup> (140 CE). The people called the Ganges received their name from the Ganges also a river and a city. The Ganges people lived in lower Bengal and were considered a powerful group of people to the foreign writers. As a whole, this region was also the same as Vanga and Bengal.

Ancient *Vanga* is the heartland of the Ganga Delta that is situated in the Ganga Valley. Bagchi confined this deltaic region within the limits of the two farthest distributaries of the Ganges Bhagirathi-Hoogli and the Padma-Meghna rivers.<sup>17</sup> Though it is hard to determine its exact boundary, it corresponds to the land to the

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13 Vanga is frequently referred to in the ancient Indian texts Aitareya Aranyaka, Baudhayana Dharmasutra, Arthashastra of Kautilya, Mahavasya of Patanjali, the Ramayana, the Raghuvamsa of Kalidasa, several Buddhist texts. See more. Bratindranath Mukherjee, "The Territory of the Gangaridai", *Indian Journal of Landscape Systems and Ecological Studies*, 1987, pp.65-90.

14 *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century* (trans.), W.H. Schoff, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 1995). p. 94.

15 Sharmin Akhtar, Bengal's Perspective on Maritime Connectivity with Major Ports of Southeast Asia, 321 BCE- 750 CE, PhD thesis (Unpublished), (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya, 2023).

16 Gerolamo Emilio Gerini, *Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia (Further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago)*, (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1909), p. 98.

17 Kanangopal Bagchi, *The Ganges Delta*, (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1944), p. 35; H. Blochman, Contributions to the Geography and History of Bengal, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 1873, p. 211.

east and beyond the Delta of the Ganges.<sup>18</sup> The earliest definite reference to Bengal is found in the classical accounts of Alexander's invasion and interpreted as equivalent to Gangadha, Gangarid or Gangarastra.<sup>19</sup> It should be stated that Bengal was encircled by the sea, washed by the Ganges and the Brahmaputra rivers, and many of their tributaries and distributaries. It appears to have attained fame for naval and maritime activities.

The Bengal coast is a significant area of study of maritime trade that is a unique *asamudrahimacala*<sup>20</sup> zone that stretches from the Himalayas to the sea. From here, Inland riverine communication was considerably facilitated by numerous rivers in the Ganga delta.<sup>21</sup> At the Danananda's time (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), *Gangaridae* and *Prasii* were his steady provincial state, which was mentioned in ancient Greco-Roman accounts. Several modern scholars have located *Gangaridae* in the Ganges Delta of Bengal. It has also been identified as the area of Chandreaketugarh of West Bengal. *Periplus of the Earythrean Sea* (1<sup>st</sup> century C.E.), and the *Geography* of Ptolemy mentioned the 'Ganges Country' on the Bay of Bengal to the east of Desarene (coastal Orissa) or ancient Kalinga as having the river Ganges around or all sides of it. The Gange Valley and Prasii were under the Maurya empire Chandragupta Maurya (324-297 BCE), and Pataliputra was the capital of the Maurya empire.

### 3.2 Uniqueness and Individuality of Bengal

Bengal belongs to its own 'distinct entity' and geo-feature in India's entire subcontinent. Its strategic location, geological settings and climatic conditions are appealing.<sup>22</sup> The geographical situation constructs its identity, socio-cultural attitudes, economic life, and commercial connections with several regions beyond this land.

The period dealt with in this research is from the earliest time to the seventh century CE. Then, Bengal's physical existence depended mainly on the river system in that period. Over time, rivers change their courses differently, and their considerable effect is shown upon the history and civilisation of this region and localities. For

18 Narottam Kundu, *Cast and Class in Pre-Muslim Bengal* (Studies in Social History of Bengal), PhD Thesis, (London: SOAS University, 1963). Upham, Edward, 1776-1834. *The Mahāvānsi, the Rājā-Ratnācari and the Rājā-Vali*, from the sacred and historical books of Ceylon: also, a Collection of tracts illustrative of the doctrines and literature of Buddhism; tr. from the Singhalese (Vol. 2), (Parbury, Allen and Co. 1833).

19 Himanshu Prava Ray and J. F. Salles (eds.), *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contact in the Indian Ocean*, (Singapore: ISEAS, 2012), p.24

20 It is a Sanskrit word, used for the area of the Bengal coast that extends from the Himalayas to the Bay of Bengal.

21 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade and Traders in Early Indian Society*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002), p.19.

22 J.P. Morgan and W. McIntire, *Quaternary Geology of the Bengal Basin, East Pakistan and India*, *Bulletin of the Geological Society of America*, Vol. 10 (No. 3), 1959. pp.319-342.

instance, the principal river was the Ganges, which divides itself into the branches of the rivers of Bhagirathi and Padma. Though formerly the Bhagirathi was in the more important channel of the Ganges running almost due south, the Padma was flowing in a south-easterly direction. Nowadays, the enormous volume of the Ganges' water is carried mainly by the Padma, while the upper part of the Bhagirathi has shrunk to a very shallow stream.<sup>23</sup> Other essential streams were the Sarasvati flowing into an estuary near modern Tamluk, the Yamuna (Jamuna) running course southeast down its present bed, and the Bhagirathi proper.

The frequent changes in rivers' course have been responsible for ruining many old places.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes these changes cause the decline of established port cities. For example, Tamralipti, Gange (Chandraketugarh), Wari-Bhateshwar, and Kotalipara were the thriving seat of civilisation and centres of sea-borne trade and commerce. The Kalyani inscription stated that Bengal's occupancy colonised the settlement in Suvarnabhumi and Tamralipti played a key role in this process. As an important international port of the Indian subcontinent since the early historic period, it flourished from the third century BCE to the eighth century CE. Many foreign travellers, pilgrims, and geographers remark about the port of Tamralipti as a famous and bustling one and a religious centre on the eastern coast of India or Bengal. It also became an indispensable and prominent port in the Maurya Empire in maritime trade with overseas destinations

Though it is hard to get a definite chronological and political history before the Gupta period, there is sufficient evidence of this region's trade and commerce at that time. Ancient Indian literature, religious texts, and Greek and Roman (Classical) accounts referred to some important clues about the glorious economic activity of the Maurya and Gupta period of Bengal. Their references prove that the overseas trade of a large part of North India passed through Bengal. Since Bengal was a riverine and deltaic<sup>25</sup> region from the early times, most of the ports and cities were built beside the river as well. *Gangaridai* was such a prominent Bengal kingdom, known as the trading centre, Gange.

Some archaeological discoveries proved a strong and vital relationship between Bengal and Southeast Asia. Among the archaeological clues, the Kharosti and

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23 Ramesh Chandra Majumder, *History of Ancient Bengal*, (Calcutta: G. Bharadwaj & Co. 1971), p.6.

24 *Ibid*, p.1,2,6.

25 Bengal is the largest Delta in the world.

Kharosti-Bramhi inscriptions<sup>26</sup> found from U Thong<sup>27</sup> in Lopburi province in Thailand, Sembilan in Bali (Indonesia) and Oc-Eo in Vietnam are important. Because of this significant evidence, this trade connection proved factual.

#### 4. Geo-Features of Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia is a geographical entity between India and China bounded by Australia and the Pacific Ocean. The culture, nature, and politics of the Southeast Asian region are diversified with plain land and island areas called mainland Southeast Asia and maritime Southeast Asia, respectively. Its physical geography contained beaches, gulfs, bays and inlets. The mainland territory comprises Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar and has contact with India and China and is called Indochina. Maritime Southeast Asia consists of Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, East Timor, and the Philippines and is surrounded by water bodies.<sup>28</sup> Two major sea routes along the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea were linked to India and China's great markets.<sup>29</sup>

However, in ancient times, the Southeast Asian classical kingdoms were located in the Red River delta of Vietnam, Pagan in Myanmar, Angkor in Cambodia, Sukhothai in Thailand, and Majapahit in Java.<sup>30</sup> During the ancient period, the whole of the Malay Peninsula was under Siamese predominance.<sup>31</sup> The early maritime activities and handling goods transportation across the areas now include the Indochina region, the Andaman Gulf or the Gulf of Siam and the Strait of Malacca or Sunda, between the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra, or Sumatra and Java as well as in a broad scale between India and China. Hence, the mainland area of ancient Southeast Asia covered from the Irrawady to Yagzi and has been confined to consist of the valleys of the main rivers like the Red River, Mekong and Chao Phraya and the mediating

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26 Bratindra Nath Mukherjee, *Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India)*. Mukherjee, B. N. *Indian Museum Bulletin*, XXV,1 1990. pp. 9-80. ... *Currency Systems of the Maurya and Post Maurya Period*, In B, N, Mukherjee (ed.), *Coins and Currency Systems of Early Bengal (up to c. A.D. 500)*, (Calcutta: Progressive Publication, 2000). pp 43-45.

27 The texts of this inscription are the native of lower Bengal.

28 Royal Berglee, *World Regional Geography: People, Places and Globalization*, (Kansas: University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing, 2012), pp. 925.

29 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017). p. 16.

30 Craig J. Reynolds, *A New Look at Old Southeast Asia*, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 54 (No.2), 1995. p.107.

31 Georolamo Emilio Gerini, *Researches on Ptolemy's Geography of Eastern Asia (Further India and Indo-Malay Archipelago)*, (London: Royal Geographical Society, 1909), p. 79.



territory. The whole region is attractive to extend the area of the islands of Southeast Asia and surface to the north to west, including the uneven nature.<sup>32</sup> Scholars used the terms ‘Greater India’ or ‘Further India’ or ‘India beyond the Gange’s to refer to the whole region.<sup>33</sup>

#### ***4.1 Natural Recourses and Attractive Landscape of Southeast Asia***

The ancient cities of Southeast Asia were rich hubs that provided a multitude of products to exchange. The jungle, sea and riverine water bodies were the sources of those material products. The jungle-covered landscape and rainforest supplied aromatic woods, resins and rattans, exotic birds, and animal products for which the Malay world became renowned. Hence, the surrounding warm and shallow seas provided an ideal breeding place for marine products.<sup>34</sup>

The prime reason and motivation for inbound travellers of the ancient Southeast Asian region was the emergence of profitable international maritime trade. This region produced materials and items from its natural resources that met the demand of the overseas merchants, and they used to make a profit adequately. International traders crowded the port cities of Southeast Asia to exchange export-import products.<sup>35</sup> In this way, Southeast Asia has been in touch with various international markets throughout Asia and Europe, and their economic development materialized by depending on this trade connection.<sup>36</sup> Historically, the entity of Southeast Asia engaged in intra-Asian and regional trade. India and China were the bases of intra-Asian trade activities that had a long history, spanning more than two thousand years. Contracts with the Indian subcontinent over a longer period are reflected in India's cultural penetration and influences over Southeast Asia. During the first millennium CE, the skills of merchants and sailors both from India and the Southeast Asian maritime world synchronized together which made a close tie of trade relationship.<sup>37</sup>

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32 Charles Higham, *The Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia (From 10000BC to the Fall of Angkor)*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp.1-3.

33 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968), pp. 15-16.

34 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017), p.16.

35 Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells. And Jhon Villiers, *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 23.

36 Rytuo Shimada, *Southeast Asia and International Trade: Continuity and Change in Historical Perspective*, In *Paths to Emerging State*, (Chapter.3), (Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2019). pp. 75-81.

37 Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*, (London: Palgrave, 2017), p.16.

## 5. Bengal-Southeast Asian Connectivity (321 BCE-750 CE)

Siam-Malay Peninsula and Indochina were closely related to Bengal from the Maurya to the Post-Gupta period (321 BCE-750 CE) as part of the transaction with ancient India. The Pre-Gupta period was an excellent example of this contact (Law, 1954) proved by archaeological research and some ancient texts and classical literature. It may be noted here that ancient sources *Jataka*<sup>38</sup> (Vol.VI, 22) and *Arthashastra*<sup>39</sup> show the Bengal trade connectivity with Suvannabhumi. However, Bengal-originated archaeological material such as semi-precious beads, sherds identified as NBPW (Northern Black Polished Ware), Rouletted ware, circular seals with Brahmi and Kharosti letters of the second century<sup>40</sup> and ivory comb<sup>41</sup> found in the different excavations from several archaeological sites in Southeast Asia that bore authentic hints of Bengal maritime connectivity with this region. On the other hand, ancient Indian literary sources *Arthashastra* of Kautilya,<sup>42</sup> *Jataka's tales*,<sup>43</sup> *Kathasarit Sagara*<sup>44</sup> and other Greeko-Roman classical texts such as *Periplus of the Erythrean Sea*<sup>45</sup> Chinese accounts<sup>46</sup> frequently mentioned some clues of cultural and commercial linkages of Bengal and Southeast Asia. In those sources, the Southeast Asian part was known by different names, such as Suvannabhumi, Suvannadvipa, Dipantara or Golden Khersonese. It should be stated that though Bengal was a small part of the ancient Indian subcontinent, its proximity constantly echoed in various sources regarding the linkages of India and Southeast Asian regions.

### 5.1 Kra-Isthmas Zone and Bengal Connectivity

The ancient Thai region, especially the Kra Isthmus zone, was historically significant as an aerial of India's early commercial and cultural contact (Map: 2). This zone

38 The Mahajanaka Jataka ( no.539), The Jataka or Stories of Buddhists Former Birth -Translated from the Pali by Various Hands (Vol. VI). Cowell, E. B., Rouse, W., & Little, M.E. Cowell, (Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907).

39 The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part II, An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes. Klange, R. P. (Bombay: T.V. Chidambaran, University of Bombay, 1963). Pp. 102,115,119-120.

40 Aung Thaw, Report on the excavation of Beikthano, Rangoon, 1968, pp. 4-6.

41 B. Bronson & G. f. Dales, Excavations at Chansen, Thailand 1968 and 1969: A Preliminary Report, Asian Perspectives, Vol. 15, 1970, pp. 15-46.

42 The Kautiliya Arthashastra, Part II, An English Translation with Critical and Explanatory Notes, R. P. Klange, (Bombay: University of Bombay, 1963).

43 The Jataka or the Buddha's Former Births (translated from the Pali by various hands), E. Cowell, (London: Luzac & Co. 1957).

44 The Ocean of Story being C. H. Twaney's translation of Somadeva's Katha Sarit Sagar, N. M. Penzer, Vol.2,3, (London: Chas.J. Sawyer Led. 1924, 1925).

45 The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea: Travel and Trade in the Indian Ocean by a Merchant of the First Century (trans.), W. H. Schoff, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publisher, 1995).

46 S. Beal. Travels of Fah-hian and Sung-yun, Buddhist Pilgrims from China to India (400 AD and 518 AD), (London: Trubner and Co.1868).

provides the early historical data for Bengal connectivity with this region. Bengal-originated archaeological evidence made this region more significant. Regarding maritime connection, Ban-Don-Ta-Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo these two port-sites are essential concerning Bengal trade linkage. These sites were important for trading activity from the fourth-fifth century BCE and Bengal's contact was identified by Glover's<sup>47</sup> excavation. Jahan's<sup>48</sup> study also provides the same statement. Glover's Study (1990) defines trade contact between India and Southeast Asia from the third century BCE based on founding etched semi-precious beads, Northern Black Polished Ware, Roulleted Ware and other artefacts in Ban Don ta Phet and Khao Sam Kaeo. He also indicated these products originated in the Bengal or Gange region. The founding of artefacts offers a clear indication that trade communication using the Bay of Bengal network was not occasional rather than regular voyages.

### **5.2 Kedha-Tamralipti Connection**

In the legacy of the maritime connectivity of Bengal with Southeast Asia in the early period, some ports were maintaining their earlier promptness during the Gupta period (320 CE-520 CE) of Bengal. The ancient Kedah of the Malay Peninsula was one of the most hectic ports that had close contact with the Bay of Bengal and the most vibrant Bengal port Tamralipti alongside the other active ports. The early history of Kedah can be traced from the prehistoric archaeological site of Bujang Valley<sup>49</sup> of Lembah Bujang. It was the early maritime trading centre, which had a connection with India and Bengal, Persia, and Arab and Chinese territories. It was located in the northwestern part of Peninsular Malay. It supplied tin, and jungle products such as rattan, resin, honey, beeswax, elephants, ivory, areca nuts, sebang wood and black woods in ancient times. It used to profit from tax collections. From 110 CE, it was established as a trade route for maritime activity with India and China. The Indian merchants already came to this area before the first century CE. However, the discoveries in Bujang Valley also made the ancient Kedah the oldest civilisation in Southeast Asia.

The *Kathasaritsagara* (XIII, 74) refers to merchants embarking at Bengal's port Tamralipti on ships bound for Kataha, which has been identified with ancient Kedah on the Malay west coast Peninsula. As late historical data, the archaeological material Buddhaguptas inscription is the more authentic proof regarding the Bengal

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47 Ian Glover, *Early Trade between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of a World Trading System*, (Hull: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990), p. 4.

48 Shahanaj Husne Jahan, *Maritime Trade between Thailand and Bengal*, *Journal of Fine Arts*, Vol. 3(2), 2012. pp 205-228.

49 Richest archaeological site in Malaysia.

connectivity with the Malay Archipelago. Bengal's *Mahanavika* (great sailor) Buddhagupta sailed from Tamralipti to the Malay Peninsula for the business depicted in a fragmentary stone inscription of Buddhagupta and with the quotations in the *Sagarmati-pariprccha* discovered by Dr. Wales from Bujang valley, Kedah (Wheatley, 1961, p. 193) of about the sixth century CE.

### **5.3 Bengal's Connectivity with Oc-Eo and Ko-Ying**

Moreover, under Indo-China, the Funan Kingdom was famous in ancient times for Indian contact as an important Indianized state of early Southeast Asia. The Funan capitals were at Vyadhapura (today's Baphnom) and Narabaranagara (Angkor). It was the gateway for the local maritime traveller, and it was used as the most crucial place for South Asian and Middle Eastern merchants, sailors and pilgrims. Sa Huynh society played a significant role in trans-regional exchange networks. Desirable exotic materials were imported from India for local consumption and exported their distinctive products. Austronesian settlements existed in the coastal region because of the harbour.<sup>50</sup> The first sign of the port city of Funan was Oc-Eo, which flourished as a major trading centre for Bengali merchants. Now it is an important archaeological site. This port was well known for trading activity with India and Bengal from the first to the seventh century. Oc-Eo may have been the port known to the Romans Kittigara as well. This name Kittigara was probably derived from Sanskrit *Kirti-Nagara*, a renowned city or 'strong city'.<sup>51</sup> Oc-Eo was a part of the Funan culture, a pre-Angkor society based on international trade with an extensive network of canals. Trade goods flowing through Oc-Eo came from Rome, India and China. It was never a capital city but served as the economic power for the rulers in the ancient period.

The Southeast Asian ports with which Bengal established its maritime trade in the Gupta period Ko-Ying was one of them. Even since the Maurya and Post-Maurya period, this port was connected with Bengal for trading, especially horse transaction. This port is situated in the Malay Peninsula's littoral and identified its position as the coastal port of the Malay Peninsula<sup>52</sup> whereas Wolters showed its location in the middle of the southern Malay Peninsula and the southern coast of Sumatra<sup>53</sup> near the Sunda strait. The ancient Chinese people assumed that the commercial centres on

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50 Li Tana, A View from the Sea: Perspectives on the Northern and Central Vietnamese Coast, *Journal of the Southeast Asian Studies*, 2006. pp.83-102.

51 Narendra Nath Bhattacharyya, *Encyclopedia of Ancient Indian Culture*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1998), p. 413

52 B. N. Mukherjee, *Kharoshti and Kharoshti-Brahmi Inscriptions in West Bengal (India)*. *Indian Museum Bulletin* (1990), XXV, 9-80.

53 O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins Srivijaya*. (London: Cornell University Press. 1967). p. 56.

the Sumatran coast near the Sunda Strait as Ko-Ying. This vital trade centre enjoyed a strategic location between the Java Sea region and China. In the sixth century, Chinese documents mentioned Ko-Ying and remarked as a cut-off place from China. Because of the changing phase in the international trading route in the early fourth century, the Funan legacy in trade diminished during the third century, and it had control over the commercial points on the Malay coast and dominance over the commercial flow in Southeast Asia.<sup>54</sup>

#### **5.4 Bengal Connectivity with Srivijaya**

Srivijaya was a famous city-state or kingdom of early Indonesia. It was based on the Island of ancient Sumatra.<sup>55</sup> The inscription of Kedukan Bukit mentioned the existence of Srivijaya since the 4th century. It was the first unified kingdom to dominate much of the Indonesian Archipelago. Srivijaya's power is based on its control of international maritime trade. In the seventh century, this place became familiar to the Malay people as a famous kingdom that was situated near Jambi in Sumatra. In the nearby Palembang, Indonesia, it was later consolidated as a powerful and more extensive empire.<sup>56</sup> Srivijaya became a strong kingdom with colossal trade and commercial hegemony in the Southeast Asian region.<sup>57</sup> During the seventh century, Srivijaya achieved fame as more significant, richer in terms of maritime trade and a centre of Buddhist religion-cultural primacy.<sup>58</sup> The most archaeological vestige is a statue of Buddha in Amravati style found from the west of Palembang. This statue is made of granite that is unknown in Palembang. Scholars assumed, perhaps it came from Bangka, an island off the east coast of Sumatra, which if Bangka identified with the Vanga mentioned in the Pali Mahaniddesa, was certainly frequented at an early date by Indian seamen.<sup>59</sup> It also proves the Bengal penetration in this region.

Srivijaya was the most significant entrepot and had regular connectivity with India and Bengal in terms of international maritime trade activities. After the fifth century, Srivijaya started to come into position in the region when the economic situation of

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54 R. K. Hall, *A History Early Southeast Asia: Maritime Trade Societal Development 100-1500*. (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2011). p. 38.

55 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968). p. 54.

56 M. S. Yaapar, *Malay Navigation and Maritime Trade: A Journey Through Anthropology and History*. *IJUM Journal of Religion and Civilisational Studies*, 2019. 2(1), 53-72.

57 O. W. Wolters, *Early Indonesian Commerce: A Study of the Origins Srivijaya*. (London: Cornell University Press. 1967). pp. 417-424.

58 Jeyamalar Kathirithamby-Wells. And Jhon Villiers, *The Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 48.

59 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (1968). p. 54.

Ko-Ying faced challenges from the western Java commercial centre of Ho-lo-tan. A new Southeast Sumatra commercial centre replaced both places. With the demise of the strategic position of Funan, Srivijaya dominated maritime in the western Java Sea realm<sup>60</sup> from 670 to 1025 CE in the Southeast Asian region.

The most connected ancient townships and ports from the Southeast Asian end such as; Takkola, Ban-Don Ta Phet, Khao Sam Kaeo, Krittinagara or Oc-Eo, Kataha or old Kedah, Ko-Ying and Srivijaya (Map. 1) were also linked with Bengal's ports Tamralipti, Gange and Wari-Bateshwar.



**Map 1: Major Ports of Southeast Asia (321 BCE-750 CE)**

Source: Produced by Author.

60 K. R. Hall, *Maritime Trade and State Development in Early Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1985). p. 39.

## 6. Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS)<sup>61</sup>

The maritime trade contact of Bengal with the Southeast Asian region was part of the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS) since the prehistoric period. The activities orbiting the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere were mainly functional from 1000 BCE to 500 CE. Scholars assume that the historical material makes Southeast Asian participation responsible in the far-distance maritime transactions since the early period of the first millennium BCE. This region was much more functional as the second phase of ancient Indian urbanisation with the techno-cultural expansion. In addition, it comes with the riverine skilfulness of its dwellers who had the experience and knowledge in navigation, and boat to operate maritime trade activities with international destinations. However, the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere broadly comprises the area of littoral tracts surrounding the Bay of Bengal. The eastern part of the Indian subcontinent was included in remote areas of this realm that covered the areas of present-day Sri Lanka, the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, West Bengal, Assam and Bangladesh. From the Southeast Asian end, its western part participated in the maritime activities of this sphere were the ancient land of today's Myanmar, coastal Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Islands of Sumatra and Java.

Moreover, some indications of the activeness of the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere are found in the archaeological finds like the Bengal-originated beads and pottery. These archaeological items were mainly exported to Southeast Asian regions from the Gangetic Valley<sup>62</sup>. As the actions orbited the Bay of Bengal interaction sphere, the items imported to ancient India and Bengal from Southeast Asian regions were gold,

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61 'Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (BBIS) is an essential term of recent research on early Indo-Southeast Asian interplay by a new generation of researchers. See more... in Sunil Gupta, *The Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere (1000 BC-AD 500)*. Indo-Pacific Prehistory Association Bulletin, 2005, 3(25), 21-30. S. Gupta, (2006). *Early Indian Ocean in the Context of Indian Relationship with Southeast Asia*. In G. Pande ed., *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilisation*, Vol. I, Part-3. (New Delhi: Centre for Studies in Civilisation, 2006). pp. 111-142. B. Bellina & I. C. Glover, *The archaeology of early contacts with India and the Mediterranean World from the fourth-century BC to fourth century AD*, In I. C. Glover & P. Bellwood (eds.) *Southeast Asia, from the Prehistory to History*, (London: Routledge, 2004). pp. 68-89.

62 P. Bellwood, *Southeast Asia before History*, Cambridge History, Vol. I, 1992, pp. 55-136.; I. C. Glover, *Archaeological evidence for early maritime contacts between India and Southeast Asia*, in *Tradition and Archaeology: Early Maritime Contacts in the Indian Ocean: Proceedings of the International Seminar, Techno-archaeological Perspectives of Seafaring in the Indian Ocean, 4th Cent. BC-15th Cent. AD*. Himanshu Prabha Ray and Jean-Francois Salles (eds.), (New Delhi: Manohar, 1996). pp.126-158.; Q. Higham, *Archaeology of Mainland Southeast Asia*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). p.330.

high-tin, and high-tin bronzes<sup>63</sup> These littoral interactions were significantly prominent in cross-cultural and bilateral trading within these two regions, Bengal and Southeast Asia.<sup>64</sup>

Furthermore, the maritime connection of the Bengal region with Southeast Asia is sometimes signified by the involvement of other coastline activities like the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea with the Bay of Bengal.<sup>65</sup> Bengal was fortunate because of its position in the mid-point, between the region of South India and Sri Lanka at one side and Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia at the other.

Monsoon wind is a crucial and predominant factor for voyaging through the sea. Sometimes weather disturbances occur during the pre-monsoon, monsoon and post-monsoon periods when travellers refrain from sea voyaging. Sometimes they use monsoon winds and currents to sail towards any distant land. Tripathi and Raut mentioned that sailors on the east coasts of India were the first to obtain knowledge on the use of monsoon winds and currents for maritime trade. The ancient people were knowledgeable about monsoon wind and they passed it on from one generation to another. The knowledge of using monsoon wind may be passed down, and Tripathi and Raut showed that there is no change in the seasons of monsoon over around past 2000 years.<sup>66</sup> Throughout the Bay of Bengal route and sphere, in the early period, the voyagers determined their movement time-table by using and sensing the monsoon winds, and blown breezes on sea and land during the monsoon period (August-September) for sailing to Bengal from Sri Lanka and South India and the period of November to April for voyaging towards Southeast Asia from the Bengal region.<sup>67</sup>

The evidence for the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere activities is found through archaeological findings and the classical texts that show the trade relations between Bengal and Southeast Asia from the earlier Maurya Era and such a maritime connection possibly initiated from the fourth century BCE. After the Kalinga War of Asoka (261 BCE), maritime trade between these two regions increased rapidly. Though Coedes opined that the Indian cultural influence incepted towards the ancient

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63 Himanshu Prabha Ray, In search of Suvamabhumi: early sailing networks in the Bay of Bengal, in *Indo-Pacific Prehistory*, P. Bellwood (ed.), (Indo-Pacific Association Bulletin 10,1991), pp.357-365.

64 B. Bellina & I C. Glover, *The Archaeology of Early Contact with India and the Mediterranean World, from the Fourth Century BC to the Fourth Century AD.* (2004).

65 Ranabir Chakravarti, *Trade in Early India*, (New Delhi: Oxford India Paperbacks, 2001). p. 34.

66 S. Tripathi and L. N. Raut, Monsoon wind and maritime trade: A case study of historical evidence from Orissa, India, *Current Science*, Vol. 90 (6). 2006. pp.864-871.

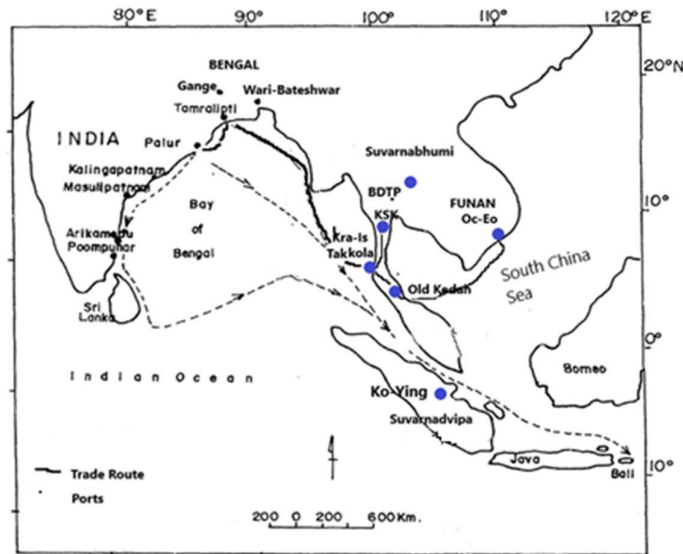
67 S. H. Jahan, Rouletted Ware Links South and Southeast Asia through Maritime Trade. *SPAFA*, Vol. 20(3), 2010. pp. 5-16.



Southeast Asian regions during and after the Christian era,<sup>68</sup> and other scholars mentioned the period of 400 BCE about this connectivity based on the archaeological remains.

Therefore, the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere was a broad network for an interplay of maritime activities between Bengal and Southeast Asia and other coastal regions. The trade and consequential cultural contact between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia worked as a bridge from the Neolithic period to the early Christian Era. Strategically, the location of the Bay of Bengal was significant as it was in the middle point of both of these regions (Map2). As a result, it plays a moderating role in creating critical contact between these two regions. Most importantly, as the Indian eastern coastal region, Bengal was in an advantageous position that facilitated gaining the opportunities derived from the maritime interactions sphere that made Bengal the rising sun in the Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere before the Christian Era.

**Map 2: Connectivity of major ports of Bengal and Southeast Asian regions (321 BCE-750 CE) and the domain of BIBS**



Source: Reproduced by Author from the source of Tripathi (2017).

68 I C. Glover, *Early Trade Between India and Southeast Asia: A Link in the Development of A World Trading System*, (Hull: Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, 1990). p.1.

### 7. Geo-Proximity of Bengal and Socio-cultural Impact on Southeast Asian Regions

The cultural norms of India were injected into Southeast Asian society and influenced its culture hugely. This cultural impact was created by the maritime trade activity that was primarily initiated from Northwest India, later from the eastern coast (Bengal) of India and South India. Compared to India, Southeast Asia has traditionally been considered cultural and political motionlessness and the people of this region were habituated to receiving the foreign culture rather than creating their histories and legacies. For this instance, based on diffusion theories, Southeast Asian civilisation was influenced by the external forces of ancient India and China. For instance, Yasodharapura (Angkor) in Cambodia, Pagan in Burma and Borobudur in Java all incorporated religious motifs from India, especially Bengal. On the other hand, Vietnamese rulers had religiously and meticulously copied Chinese administrative forms.<sup>69</sup>

As a result, an organized cultural expansion happened with the Indian conception of royalty. Since the Indian people believed in the mythology of Puranas and their language was Sanskrit, they demonstrated cultural superiority through the Sanskrit language in the Southeast Asian region. That's why the domination of Indian culture in that region is named 'Sanskritisation'.<sup>70</sup> Indian culture continued from the early historic to the late historical period in Southeast Asia. In this scholarly issue, Coedes opined, that people from Northwest India and its eastern coast frequently travelled to Southeast Asia through the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal to operate the maritime trade and religious propagation since before the Christian era. Using the established bilateral relationship, Indian people started to extend their staying period in Southeast Asia which aided in enhancing Indian influence in the people's daily lives in that new region. *Jataka* referred to Bengal's merchant class known as *Sresthies* and *Banik*, the big dealers in the early times who went to this distant land.

These merchants were involved in this process since it was the flourished centre for overseas merchandising. In this way, Indian people set up the first kingdom in Funan, a part of Cochin-China, located on the lower course of the Mekong delta which was in touch with ancient Bengal. It assumes that the Mekong was the modified vision of Ma Ganga (Mother Ganga) encompassing Southern Vietnam and the central Mekong,

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69 G. Carter Bentley, *Indigenous States of Southeast Asia*, Annual Review of Anthropology, Vol.15, 1986, pp. 275-305.

70 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, (Honolulu: The University Press Hawaii, 1968), pp. 15,16.

a large part of Menam Valley and the Malay Peninsula.<sup>71</sup> And, gradually, various ancient Southeast Asian territories took Indian names like Suvarnadwipa (Malay Peninsula), Balidwipa (Bali), Karpuradwipa (Borneo, land of Camphor), Indradwipa (Myanmar), Yavawipa (Java), Kataha (Kedah), Srivijaya (Sumatra), Ayudhya (Siam or Thailand).

As a part of Indianisation, ancient culture penetrated the area of Southeast Asia at that time by the spreading of Indian original culture along with Hinduism and Buddhism.<sup>72</sup> This process is also called Farther India or India beyond the Ganges. From this viewpoint, 'Indianization' is a crucial term to understand the vastness of the migration of the Indian people in ancient Southeast Asia, with which Bengal was also actively connected. The archaeological elements prove this connection and the impact of Indianization.<sup>73</sup> Bengal-originated seals and potteries with Kharosthi-Brahmi scripts, Buddhagupta's inscription, Northern Black Polished Wares, Rouletted Wares, Beads and many other archaeological remains are the prudent evidence that shows the drastic influence of Indianization in the society of Southeast Asian regions.

Indianisation was the development of a systematised culture that originated upon the Indian notion of royalty, which was characterised by Hindu or Buddhist Cults, the mythology of the Puranas, and the compliance of Dharma Sastras. All these norms were injected through the Sanskrit Language, and possibly, the 'Sanskrit Civilisation' of Bengal and Tamil countries was blown out by sea due to the connection of maritime trade.<sup>74</sup>

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71 Radha Kumud Mookherjee, *Indian Shipping: A History of the Sea-born Trade and Maritime Activity of the Indians from the Earliest Time*, (Bombay, Calcutta: Orient Longmans, 1912), p.75.

72 Ibid, p.28.

73 Indian links with Southeast Asia can be traced back to the prehistoric times. However, the early centuries of the Christian Era witnessed definite forms of interaction and an overwhelming Indian civilisational influence on the region. The early references Ptolemy (1st-2nd century CE) about Southeast Asia in terms of 'trans-Gangetic India', 'Indian countries beyond the Ganges' (Raffel, as quoted in Kulke, 1990, p. 28), 'Farther India' (Coedes, 1968, p-XV) are symptomatic that for centuries together the large parts of present Southeast Asia remained under intensive Indian influence in terms of political, social and cultural value systems, trade and agriculture, rise and growth of urban centres and imperial kingdoms. Such a tremendous influence could not have been possible without the migration and settlement of people from the Indian subcontinent. This is also corroborated by hectic trading activities across the two regions with all the major port cities strewn with large Indian settlements.

74 George Coedes, *The Indianized State of Southeast Asia*, pp. 15,16.

## 8. Discussion and Conclusion

In conclusion, it must be stated that some vibrant factors were causal behind the East-West connectivity of Bengal and Southeast Asia in that early period. Firstly, Bengal's geographical location and socio-economic individuality worked significantly in this connection. Bengal was used as a corridor for the merchants from several regions of India and created linkages with distant lands like the Malay World in maritime activity. The Bengal-engrossed Sea and river system helped the Bengal territory connect with Southeast Asia. 'As the world's largest and tide-dominated delta encircled by the sea and the triangle river system by the Ganges, Brahmaputra and Meghna rivers, and many of their tributaries and distributaries, Bengal was at an advantageous position to dominate the domestic and international trade, especially with the Southeast Asian regions.

Secondly, Bengal's maritime capacity played a contributory role in the 'Bay of Bengal Interaction Sphere.' This Sphere broadly comprises the area of littoral tracts surrounding the Bay of Bengal. Along with ancient Sri Lanka and different provinces of India, Bengal was the leading entity in this domain on one side and ancient Myanmar, coastal Thailand, Peninsular Malaysia and the Indonesian Islands of Sumatra and Java on the other.

Thirdly, in terms of the connection of Bengal's ports with the ports of Southeast Asia enhanced the opportunities for moving cargo from one place to another, whether regional or internationally, the entity of ancient Bengal facilitated these linkages that were possible because of the strategic position of Bengal. As a wealthy geopolitical entity under the ancient Indian administration, Tamralipti and Gange were its two main international seaports alongside many other internal ports of Bengal that all connected with the Bay of Bengal. These two ports were linked with Southeast Asian ports like Ban-Don Ta-Phet, Khao-Sam-Kheo, Oc-Eo, Kedah, Ko-Ying and Srivijaya from 321 BCE to 750 CE.

Fourthly, Bengal's proximity and the assimilation and expansion of culture to Southeast Asia are other factors that worked behind this linkage. Through maritime connectivity and as a part of the Indianisation process, Bengal's culture penetrated into the Southeast Asian regions. Similarly, the strategic location of the Southeast Asian region was significant in terms of its overseas maritime connectivity and the geographical configuration of this region and ports dedicated to bringing rich tradition and keeping an undisputed role as 'cultural brokers'.<sup>75</sup> In such a way, a sort of cultural meeting and mingling materialised between Bengal and Southeast Asia.

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<sup>75</sup> J. Kathirithamby-Wells and J. Villers, Introduction and Overview, In: J. Kathirithamby-Wells (ed.), *Southeast Asian Port and Polity: Rise and Demise*, (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 1990), p. 3.

Therefore, the process of ancient Indian tactical connectivity was mostly dependent on Bengal, and the Southeast Asian connection was tremendously prominent. The geographical and strategic position of Bengal was proactive in maritime trading and cultural reciprocation. In terms of cultural and societal reciprocity, the Indianisation process expedited the stream through its collective force of maritime traders, religious preachers and individual intellects in which the Bengal elements and potency were foremost and preeminent.