

**Cultural Contacts between BIMSTEC Countries and Japan:
An Historical Survey**

Sanjukta Das Gupta

CSIRD Discussion Paper: 7/2005

November 2005



Centre for Studies in International Relations and Development (CSIRD)

167-B, S. P. Mukherjee Road, Kolkata 700026, India
Phone: (9133) 24630884, 22483769, Fax: (9133) 22483769
Email: csirdindia@yahoo.co.in, Website: www.csird.org.in

CSIRD Discussion Papers intend to disseminate preliminary findings of the research carried out at the institute to attract comments. The feedback and comments may be directed to the author(s). CSIRD Discussion Papers are available at www.csird.org.in

Cultural Contacts between BIMSTEC Countries and Japan: An Historical Survey

Sanjukta Das Gupta*

Abstract

This paper makes a broad survey of cultural links between Japan and BIMSTEC countries over the ages. It has two major sections. The first deals with the rise of Buddhism in India and its spread to other countries of Southeast and East Asia, including Sri Lanka, Thailand and Japan, and also discusses the Buddhist heritage and its impact upon Japan in particular. The second section analyses Japan's cultural ties with South Asia and Thailand from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries and indicates contemporary efforts to promote such linkages. Though the BIMSTEC countries have vastly different histories and have followed different trajectories of development, there is much in common in their way of life and in their understanding of each other's people. This has heightened today due to increased tourist movements. It is to be hoped that this foundation of cultural solidarity will be strengthened in the days to come.

1. Introduction

The pristine white Japanese Peace Pagoda soaring to the skies amid dark cryptomeria forests in Darjeeling, a popular hill resort of eastern India, stands as an eternal symbol of South Asia's cultural contact with Japan. The scene represents grace, beauty, tranquility, dignity and calm reflection, qualities that South Asia has learnt to associate with Japan. Above all, the Buddhist cultural influence, which the monument largely symbolizes, underlines the cultural ties which link together the BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral and Technical Economic Cooperation) countries and Japan. Buddhism may be considered to be one of the most significant common links between these nations. Although the religion originated in India, Buddhism flourished in Southeast and East Asian countries long after it had been marginalized in India and had a tremendous impact on the cultures and ways of life there. Besides Buddhism, some other factors such as geographical and societal similarities and the heritage of rice producing economy had imparted a similar lifestyle to most countries of this region.

This paper makes a broad survey of the cultural links between Japan and BIMSTEC countries over the ages. It has two major sections. The first deals with the rise of Buddhism in India and its spread to other countries of Southeast and East Asia, including Sri Lanka, Thailand and Japan, and also discusses the Buddhist heritage and its impact upon Japan in particular. The second section analyses Japan's cultural ties with South Asia and Thailand from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries and indicates the contemporary efforts to promote such linkages.

* Reader, Department of History, Calcutta University, Flat 1C, 14 Ballygunge Station Road, Kolkata 700 019, Email: sanjuktadasgupta@yahoo.com

2. Buddhism and its impact in BIMSTEC Countries and Japan

Buddhism, the religion founded by Gautam Buddha in the sixth century BC, gradually developed to become the prevalent religion of Asia. In the sixth century, Siddhartha, a young prince of the tribe of the Shakyas resolved to discover the means of salvation through meditation and on the forty ninth day of his meditation he received enlightenment and understood the cause of suffering in this world. He therefore became the Buddha, the Enlightened One. Buddhist teachings incorporated the Four Noble Truths (that is, the world is full of suffering, suffering is caused by human desires, the path to salvation lies in the renunciation of desires and this salvation is possible by practicing the Eight-Fold Path) and the Eight Fold Path which consisted of eight principles of action, leading to a balanced moderate life (right views, resolves, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, recollection and meditation, the combination of which was described as the Middle Way). Buddhism today is divided into two major branches known to their respective followers as Theravada, the Way of the Elders, and Mahayana, the Great Vehicle. Followers of Mahayana refer to Theravada using the derogatory term Hinayana, the Lesser Vehicle.

Over the years that followed Buddhism gradually underwent many changes both in the country of its origin and in course of its spread to other parts of Asia. In the third century BC, missionaries dispatched by the Mauryan King Ashoka introduced the religion to southern India and to the northwest part of the subcontinent. According to inscriptions from the Ashokan period (268-31 BC), missionaries were sent to spread the faith to countries along the Mediterranean, although these did not achieve much success. Missions to Sri Lanka were more successful in their venture. Ashoka's son Mahinda and daughter Sanghamitta were credited with the conversion of Sri Lanka. Since then Theravada has been the state religion of Sri Lanka. According to Buddhist tradition, Theravada was carried to Myanmar from Sri Lanka during the reign of Ashoka, but no firm evidence of its presence there appears until the fifth century AD. From Myanmar, Theravada spread to the area of modern Thailand in the sixth century. The people adopted it when they entered into the region from Southwest China between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. With the rise of the Thai Kingdom, it was adopted as the state religion. Similarly in Laos Theravada was adopted by the royal house during the fourteenth century. Sources indicate that both Mahayana and Hinduism had begun to influence Cambodia by the end of the second century AD. After the fourteenth century, however, under Thai influence, Theravada gradually replaced the older establishment as the primary religion in Cambodia.

As Romila Thapar points out in India Buddhism introduced philosophical speculation wherever it had to contend with the Brahmanical religion. Thus the original, simple exposition became much more involved (Thapar 1983: 67). There was also a similar assimilation of local religious beliefs and the Buddhist doctrines in the countries of Southeast Asia, Sri Lanka, China, Korea and Japan, imparting regional specificities to the Buddhist traditions in these countries. When Buddhist missionaries went to China they carried with them manuscripts, paintings and ritual objects from India, and for many centuries the Chinese monasteries maintained a close and lively interest in the development of Buddhism, both in China and India (Thapar 1983: 164-65). Buddhism also spread to Southeast Asia with the expansion of India's trade in the region, and the Indian influence permeated the local pattern of life, particularly in Thailand, Java and Cambodia during the fifth century AD. Although initially both Buddhists and Hindus visited and settled in Southeast Asia, the tradition of Hinduism gradually became dominant when the court circles adopted the Brahmanical rites and ceremonies and the use of Sanskrit. In later centuries, Hinduism declined in Southeast Asia, but Buddhism persisted. According to Romila Thapar, the distinctions between Hindu and Buddhist also became hazy in Southeast Asia over time (Thapar 1983: 164). Thus, the Thai court at Bangkok employs, even today, Indian Brahmans for all court ceremonies, although the state religion of Thailand is Buddhism Nevertheless the Theravada Buddhism, which was prevalent in Southeast Asia in the seventh and eighth centuries AD, was modified

by local influences. In Myanmar, there are a considerable number of religious, legal and grammatical texts written in Pali, the oldest of which originates from the neighbourhood of modern Prome and dates back to the seventh century or earlier. A rich Pali literature, commentaries from Buddhist texts, law books, etc. was written in the court of Pagan in Central Burma from the end of the twelfth century.

Of the main branches of Buddhism, it is the Mahayana or "Greater Vehicle" Buddhism which found its way to Japan. Buddhism was imported to Japan via China and the friendly Korean kingdom of Kudara (Paikche) in the sixth century AD. It was known to the Japanese earlier, but the official date for its introduction is usually given as 552 AD during the reign of Emperor Kimmei (539-71 AD) when an image of Buddha and some copies of the Buddhist scriptures were brought to the Japanese court by a representative of the Korean king (Sarkar 1978: 743). The new faith did not meet with immediate acceptance, but eventually its success was assured with the victory of the pro-Buddhist group in the royal court. In 594 AD Prince Shōtoku proclaimed Buddhism to be the state religion of Japan. Although it was welcomed as Japan's new state religion by the ruling nobles, it did not initially spread among the common people due to its complex theories.

Though Buddhism was introduced in Japan in the sixth century, it was during the eighth and ninth centuries that the assimilation between Shintoism and Buddhism took place. It is interesting to note that the Buddhism of the late eighth and early ninth century in Japan was an amalgamation of Brahminism and the Buddhism in India. It was during this time that many Brahmanical deities were introduced in the Buddhist pantheon in Japan (Sankarnarayan *et. al.* 1998: 152). This was also a period when Buddhism was at its height in many parts of India, such as South India and Bengal. In the Pallava kingdom in South India, Buddhism was given equal status with Hinduism, together with Saivism. In Bengal, the Pala dynasty patronized Tantric Buddhism, which is also referred to as Vajrajana Buddhism. Kalpakam Sankarnarayan argues that it was in this form that Buddhism spread in Tibet, China and from there to Japan (Sankarnarayan *et. al.* 1998: xii). Vajrabodhi, a Buddhist monk from the Pallava kingdom, played a key role in propagating tantric Buddhism in China.

The years 710–784 AD was a period of great prosperity in Japan and the Buddhist monasteries were well endowed with estates and treasure. The clergy enjoyed imperial favour and Buddhism gave a new impetus to all human activities. Many Buddhist priests were themselves artists, whereas Shinto had little in way of architecture. Copies of the *Tripitaka* were supplied to each monastery. An anthology *Manyōshū* was compiled during the Nara period (710-94 AD) of Japanese history. The sovereigns and ecclesiastics of the time did not limit their interests to the capital but wished to spread the Buddhist religion throughout the period. In 784 the Emperor Kwammu shifted his court from Nara to Nagaoko, and in 793 to a new locality which later developed as Kyoto (Latourette 1947: 25). Kyoto became the centre of Japanese Buddhism, though the indigenous traditions occasionally endeavoured to assert their claim. During this period, the famous sects Tendai and Shingon, were founded, respectively by Saicho and Kukai, and these had a strong influence on Japanese culture. These doctrines offered paradise to everyone who tried to obtain it, whereas the older Nara sects denied the possibility of such higher destinies to the common man. Tendai and Shingon were different in origin. Tendai was a Chinese attempt to found an eclectic form of Buddhism, but accepting the Lotus Sutra as its crown and quintessence. The Shingon, on the other hand, was really a form of tantric Buddhism, which had been popular in China, Tibet and Java, albeit with their own local peculiarities.

All early divisions within Japanese Buddhism however derived from Chinese rather than Indian prototypes (Latourette 1947: 22). The so-called "Six Schools" which flourished during

the Nara period aspired to imitate their Chinese counterparts¹. The two most popular sects of the ninth and tenth centuries, Shingon and Tendai, were introduced in Japan by monks who had accompanied the Japanese Embassy to China in 804 AD. In Japan, as in South and Southeast Asia, popular Buddhism tended to absorb the cults of the indigenous gods, and Shinto deities came to be regarded as local incarnations of the Buddha and Bodhisattvas. However, in the tenth century, Japanese Buddhism began to diverge from Chinese Buddhism. While in China, neo-Confucianism, the principal religious inspiration of the upper classes, replaced Buddhism, in Japan, Buddhism became more and more popular. Native Japanese monks who had never visited China became the important leaders of Japanese Buddhism (MacNeill and Sedlar 1971: 255).

Several important new sects of Buddhism developed and flourished in China and Japan, as well as elsewhere in East Asia. Among these, Ch'an, or Zen, and Pure Land, or Amidism, were most important. Instead of meditation, Pure Land stressed faith and devotion to the Buddha Amitabha, or Buddha of Infinite Light, as a means to rebirth in an eternal paradise known as the Pure Land. Rebirth in this Western Paradise is thought to depend on the power and grace of Amitabha, rather than to be a reward for human piety. Devotees show their devotion to Amitabha with countless repetitions of the phrase "Homage to the Buddha Amitabha." Nonetheless, a single sincere recitation of these words was considered sufficient to guarantee entry into the Pure Land. A distinctively Japanese sect of Mahayana is Nichiren Buddhism, which is named after its 13th-century founder. Nichiren believed that the Lotus Sutra contains the essence of Buddhist teaching. Its contents can be epitomized by the formula "Homage to the Lotus Sutra," and simply by repeating this formula the devotee may gain enlightenment.

It would be instructive to analyze why Buddhism appealed to people of every class in Japanese society. As MacNeill and Sedlar argue, the different Buddhist sects had something to offer to almost all sections of Japanese society (MacNeill and Sedlar 1971: 255). Most Japanese emperors from the seventh century onwards were devout believers. Buddhist institutions were provided generous financial support by the imperial family and the aristocracy. At the Japanese court the most influential Buddhist sect was the Tendai. Using the Lotus Sutra as its principal text, Tendai Buddhism attempted to harmonize the divergent doctrines of the different Buddhist sects, classifying them as different, yet valid, levels of truth. Together with its catholicity, Tendai Buddhism won the support of the ruling class as its elaborate rituals and magical prayers provided a religious counterpart to the ceremonial functions of the court. The provincial warrior class on the other hand was attracted to Zen Buddhism, with its stress upon personal probity, a simple life close to nature and direct communication between teacher and pupil. This provided an appropriate religious underpinning for the military code of honour which emphasized personal bravery, austerity, uncomplaining endurance of hardship and the total loyalty of vassal to lord. The peasants and artisans were attracted by Buddhist texts that emphasized salvation through faith in one of the Buddhas or Bodhisattvas. The outstanding personality in this popular Buddhism was Genshin (942 – 1017 AD), a Tendai monk who believed that simpler doctrines and an easier method of salvation had to replace the severe discipline of the older Buddhism. He taught that rebirth in Paradise could be achieved solely through the grace of Buddha Amida and that a believer needed only to demonstrate his faith by calling upon Amida's name (the practice known as *nambatsu*).

¹ During the Nara period the study of Buddhist scriptures included the study of the Vinaya as well as the *Abhidharmakosa* of Vasubandhu, the *Satyasiddhi* of Harivarman, the works of Nagarjuna and Aryadeva, besides works on Buddhist idealism like Dharmapala's *Vijnaptimatratasiddhi* and the *Avatamsaka* or *Buddhavatamsaka Sutra*. These have been designated as the 'Six Schools of the Ancient Capital'. The first three belong to the Hinayana school of thought, while the others to the Mahayana.

Thus, the initial cultural-religious contact between Japan and India was indirect, with China and Korea serving as intermediaries. Since the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, Japan had been aware of India, yet India in the same period remained ignorant of Japan. The first Indian to go to Japan was Bodhisena (704-760 AD), a Buddhist monk. Born in a Brahman South Indian family, Bodhisena got mystical inspiration from Manjusri Bodhisattva and he went to China. From there he undertook a trip to Japan on the request of the Japanese in 736 AD. He found there a number of Buddhists and was surprised by the knowledge they showed of the Indian alphabet (Thapar 1983: 164). He was cordially received by the imperial family and was appointed as archbishop. Bodhisena did not return to India but died in Japan.

Nevertheless, despite the indirect connection, Japan was greatly influenced by Indian culture and civilization. Along with Buddhism, the worship of various Hindu deities was introduced into Japan as part of Buddhist rituals. The study of Buddhist scriptures in Sanskrit became fairly extensive in Japan since the sixth century AD and was an important feature of Japanese cultural life. Ancient Sanskrit manuscripts in Brahmi characters, dating from the first half of the sixth century AD, have been found preserved at the Horyuji monastery (Nakamura 1961: 3). Prince Shotoku often discoursed at the Horyuji temple on the Mahayana sutras, particularly on the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* and the *Maladevi Simhanada Sutra*. His commentaries are still extant. In the seventh century Hetuvidya or Buddhist logic was also introduced into Japan. It is said that Dosho went to China around 700 AD to study the *Vijnaptimatratra* (i.e. Buddhist idealism) as well as the system of Buddhist logic under Hieun Tsang (Sarkar 1978: 744). He taught Buddhist logic from the Genkoji temple on his return to Japan in 661 AD. In the Nara period the study of the subject received further impetus when Genbo went to China in 716 AD to study Buddhist logic. On his return he discoursed on the subject from Kofukuji temple. Hajime Nakamura has pointed out the bibliography provided in *Immyo-Zuigenki* ('The Origin of Buddhist Logic'), which was written by Hotan in the first half of the eighteenth century, had listed eighty-four Japanese works on the subject. Many of them were undoubtedly studied in earlier times (Nakamura 1961: 52).

Indian texts current in medieval Japan, however, are not well-known. However, judging from the writings of Jogan (1632-1702 AD) and Jiun or Onkwo (1718-1804 AD), it may be surmised that their range had been considerable. The corpus of study included, in addition to Buddhist texts, many Sanskrit dharanis, stotras, gathas, grammars and lexicons. Sanskrit study in Japan was energized by the writings of Jogan, who was a great Sanskritist himself. He wrote a book called *Shittan-sanmitsu*, which is an authoritative text on Sanskrit studies in the country. Jiun was another Buddhist scholar. One of his important works, *Juzen-hogo*, contains his sermons to the royal family on the ten fundamental virtues of Buddhism (Sarkar 1978: 745).

The study of Sanskrit provided inspiration for the development of a Japanese syllabary and Indian legends found a place in Japanese literature through Buddhist scriptures. The forty-seven letters of the Japanese alphabet are said to have been devised after the pattern of the Sanskrit alphabet by the Japanese Buddhist saint Kobo Daishi (774-835 AD). The arrangement of the Japanese syllabary based on the Sanskrit system is also attributed to the influence of Bodhisena in Japan, which, according to Riri Nakayama, "will continue as long as the Japanese language continues to exist" (cf. Lal 1959: 48). The Indian Siddham script, which is known as Shittan in Japanese, gained currency in Japan since the eighth century.

Buddhism had a role not only in the written language but also in education. The Buddhist temples were not simply religious institutions but served as centres of learning as well. Till the Meiji government established a system of public education in the nineteenth century, elementary education was handled by schools affiliated with Buddhist temples (Tripathi 2001: 14). Customs and manners of Indian origin were adopted, and Indian influences survive to this day in Japanese cremation customs and ancestor veneration practices (Viswanathan 1983: 288). Buddhist influence on fine and performing arts is pronounced. Savita Viswanathan

believes that Japanese art forms such as fresco paintings share a common Buddhist origin with the Ajanta cave paintings in India (Viswanathan 1983: 288). The Japanese produced in great numbers pictures of Gautama Buddha and of the various sacred episodes. Music, both instrumental and vocal was adopted as a constituent of Buddhist rituals. Japan's traditional court dance and music still preserve some of the forms introduced by Bodhisena into Japan.

Japanese scholars who were engaged in the study of Sanskrit and Buddhism idealized India and felt awe and a great longing for the country they could not visit. However, by the twelfth century, during the Kamakura period, these sentiments had weakened considerably and the Japanese Buddhists, under such leaders as the priest Nichiren, considered that the Japanese should take the initiative to carve out a special role for themselves in propagating Buddhism.

2. Relations with BIMTEC since the 16th Centuries

2.1 India

With the arrival of Chinese missionaries and traders from Europe in the 16th century, the geographical position of India was better understood and knowledge about India trickled down to Japan. This however did not encourage Japanese merchants to visit Indian ports in course of their trips to Southeast Asia. Japan had during this time extensive trading relations with Southeast Asia, particularly with Sumatra and Java. In 1583, four Japanese Christians visited Goa on their way to Rome. However, they did not evince any particular interest in India. It is interesting that India was included in Toyotomi Hideyoshi's plans for the conquest of the world in 1591 (Viswanathan 1983: 288).

In the Edo period (1600-1868) criticism of Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries aroused a general antagonism against India because of its identification with that religion. Some scholars such as Arai Hakuseki however tried to approach India from another framework. Arai's *Seiyo Kibun* (1715) contains accounts of Mughal rule in India and life in Indian ports, such as Goa, Cochin and Nagapatnam, which had been gleaned from European merchants.

The opening of Japan to the world in the mid-nineteenth century saw increasing contact of Japan with Thailand, India and Southeast Asia. In the mid 19th century contacts with India was governed by Japan's relations with Great Britain. Japan agreed to Britain's right to consider India to be within its own sphere of influence and agreed to protect British interests there under the terms of the revised Anglo Japanese alliance of 1905. Later in the nineteenth century when it was feared that Japan would be the target of European imperialism, efforts were made to learn about the modes of subjugation employed by the British in India so that Japan could evolve effective means to counter them.

Japan's victory in the Russo Japanese war in 1905 was a source of inspiration to Indians engaged in the freedom struggle. Indian revolutionaries and freedom fighters hoped that Japan would help in the Asian resistance to the West. There was much excitement among the Indian students in Japan. Japan formed the base for Indian revolutionaries and they looked to Japan as a refuge. Indian leaders such as Rash Behari Bose and Lala Lajput Rai were actively encouraged and helped by influential Japanese nationalists, such as, Toyama Mitsuri, who dreamed of putting an end to Anglo Saxon dominance in Asia. During the 1940s, Japan helped to create the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhash Chandra Bose, which however, retained its independent command. The wartime experience promoted a close relationship between the Indians and the Japanese without leaving a legacy of hatred.

To the Indian intelligentsia Japan was the example to be emulated as it retained its independence and succeeded in modernizing itself at the same time. In 1892, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) visited Japan on his way to the World Congress of Religions, which was held at Chicago in 1893. He declared that Indians had a lot to learn from Japan and

urged the Indian youth to follow the example of the Japanese. Okakura Kakuzo in Japan and Rabindranath Tagore in India played a positive role in the exchange of students and scholars between Japan and India. While the tradition of Indian studies based on Buddhist philosophy and Sanskrit was revived and encouraged, modern Indian studies including languages was also given an impetus. Baron Okakura visited India in 1902. His plea that Asia was one and that the basic ideals of all Asian countries were identical was a source of inspiration in the political and cultural life in India. Okakura was a pioneer among the Meiji artists and belonged to the Japanese school of art. He arranged for the visits of leading Japanese artists to India. Two among them, Yokoyama Taikawa and Hishida Shunso, who lived with Tagore's family for a couple of years, had a great influence on the modern art movement in Bengal under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore, the exponent of the famous Bengal school of art. Okakura's influence was not merely limited to the sphere of art. He also sent *jiu jitsu* experts to Santiniketan to impart training in the Japanese martial arts. Under the student exchange programmes, Indian students visited Japan for training in industries, especially, ceramics, textiles, and they set up industrial units in India on their return.

Tagore was enthusiastically welcomed in 1916 as the first Asian to win the Nobel prize in literature, but his idealism did not strike a responsive chord among the Japanese intellectuals who were critical of India's inability to throw off the British yoke and to modernize herself (Viswanathan 1983: 288). Tagore again visited Japan in 1924, and wrote *Japan Jatri*, which set down his impressions about the country. Besides Tagore, another Indian leader who greatly impressed the Japanese was Gandhi. In the 1930s, Japanese scholars visited India, including the poet Yori Nogudi delivered lectures at Calcutta University, and also Nosu, a famous painter, who executed a series of frescoes on the life of Buddha at the vihara at Sarnath.

In 1956 the India-Japan Mixed Cultural Commission was formed in 1956 as per agreement between Government of India and Japan for promoting cultural relations between the two countries. The function of the commission is to enhance cultural relations between the two countries by promoting cultural events in Japan and India including dances, exhibitions etc., distinguished visitors programme, exchanges of scholars and artists, JET programmes etc. The last meeting of the Commission was held on 8th February, 2005. This engendered a growing familiarity with Japanese art and literature in India and vice versa. Japanese scholars in particular have shown interest in the study of medieval, modern and contemporary India. Centres have been opened in both countries for teaching language courses. Japanese studies centres have been opened at various universities in India, notably in Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi University and in Visva Bharati, Santiniketan. Today there is scope for greater cooperation and exchange in the fields of science, technology and engineering. The establishment of a leprosy treatment centre at Agra in 1965 by the Japanese Leprosy Mission for Asia (JALMA) has been highly appreciated by India.

2.2 Thailand

Thai people form the large majority of Thailand's population, and most of them practice Theravada Buddhism. Other ethnic groups within the population include Chinese, Malays, and indigenous hill peoples, such as the Hmong and Karen. Thailand is known for its highly refined classical music and dance and for a wide range of folk arts. Traditionally based on agriculture, Thailand's economy began developing rapidly in the 1980s. Japan and Thailand share a natural affinity – a heritage of a rice-based economy, Buddhist religion and culture and a history of independence from colonial domination.

Japan began trading with Thailand in the seventeenth century. Early in the 17th century a settlement of Japanese merchant adventurers led by Yamada was established in Ayuthaya, the then capital of Siam. Such Japanese communities were known as *nihommachi* and these were self governing colonies of Japanese settlers active in trade and local politics. These had

developed all over South East Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries with the growth of the Vermilion Seal Ship Trade. This took Japan to almost every part of South East Asia at the time. At the same time, the internal religious policy in Japan also facilitated the settlement of Japanese abroad. Various edicts against Christianity since 1585 resulted in the exodus of many Japanese Christians. Ayuthaya in Thailand was one of the largest settlements of Japanese in South East Asia. With the National Exclusion Policy in the 1630s these overseas communities gradually lost contact with Japan and lost their separate identity, being assimilated within the local population. The *nihommachi* at Ayuthaya was burned down by the Siamese authorities in 1630 shortly after the death of Yamada (Kenjiro 1983: 20). During the period of Japan's National Seclusion (1639-1858) Siamese goods were brought into Japan by Chinese merchants.

In the mid-nineteenth century Siam and Japan were engaged in treaty negotiations with Western powers. Siam and Japan Declaration of Friendship occurred in 1887. However, Siam lagged behind Japan in its attempts to modernize. At the turn of the century Siam invited Japanese advisors to update its legislation, medical science, railway technology, silkworm cultivation and arts and craft (Kenjiro 1983: 20).

Thailand was allied to Japan during World War II and although post war relations was strained by controversies over war reparations and continuing Thai fears of Japanese economic domination, relations between the two countries increased in scale and importance since the 1970s. In 1979 the Japanese government promised to provide increased aid for the economic and social development of Japan.

2.3 Myanmar

Before World War II relations between Japan and Myanmar, or Burma as it was then known, barely existed (Toru 1983: 221). Japanese businesses have been interested in Burmese natural resources since the beginning of this century. Rice, cotton and lead were initial exports from Burma to Japan, and cotton clothes were imported. At the beginning of the 1920s, a Japanese consulate opened in Rangoon, and Japanese guesthouses, shops and restaurants were started. Some Japanese -even went as Christian missionaries. During the 1930s, the volume of trade increased, but it never exceeded 4 percent of Burma's total trade. In 1933, the Japan-Burma Association was established by Japanese businessmen. They did not work to develop an economic relationship but instead functioned as a propaganda bureau for Japanese culture and goods. Two years earlier the Japanese army had invaded China and occupied Manchuria, setting up the puppet regime of Manchuria. They were preparing their move southward to establish the "Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere." In Burma, at that time a British colony, the Japanese who lived there were spreading propaganda about Japan's good intentions towards Asia.

In November 1936, an election for the lower house of the Burmese Parliament was held. Keneko Toyoji, a diplomat at the Japanese consulate in Rangoon, supported the candidacy of U Saw Oo, who had visited Japan and was pro-Japanese in policy; Kaneko donated large sums of money to his campaign. Japanese military intelligence was also involved in the transaction.

As the Second World War proceeded, Japanese intelligence activities in Burma, based around the Japanese consulate and the Japan-Burma Association, increased. Intelligence operatives secretly tried to forge relationships with Burmese nationalists to subvert the British administration, and they supported the popular movement against colonialism, promoting the idea that Japan was the potential liberator of Asia. The long-term aim of these activities was to cut the Burma route and isolate the Chiang Kai-Shek regime. Japan expressed sympathy for Myanmar independence together with that of Indonesia at the Greater East Asia

Conference in 1943. Nevertheless the period of Japanese occupation fostered a general anti-Japanese feeling in Myanmar as it had happened in Indonesia.

In December 1991, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The secretary-general of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) in Japan at the time, Sakamoto, issued a statement saying that Japan welcomed the fact that Suu Kyi had won the prize. However, to those disgruntled with Myanmar's military rule it seems that Japanese policy towards Burma actually gives the opposite impression. They argue that Japanese support for the SLORC is maintaining the present situation of civil war and human rights abuse.

There are now about 3,000 people from Burma living in Japan, mainly young people, and almost all of them have overstayed their visas but are too scared to return to Burma. About 600 have joined the pro-democracy Burmese Association in Japan; another organisation is the All-Burma Youth Volunteer Association (ABYVA). At present, only three individuals have been granted refugee status by the Japanese government. Since 1989, several Japanese support groups for Burma have been formed. Their membership includes citizen's groups, Buddhist groups and a women's group. In 1991, they joined with the Burmese Association in Japan, the ABYVA and the Japanese section of Amnesty International to form the National Network on Burmese Issues. The network's activities include campaigns against Japanese ODA to Burma, demonstrations outside the Burmese embassy, street campaigns and efforts in general to raise the consciousness of the Japanese people. It also supports students and refugees on the Thai-Burma border, sending medicine, clothes, food and mosquito nets.

2.4 Sri Lanka

Japan and Sri Lanka share cultural and historical affinities arising largely from a common Buddhist cultural tradition. Japan and Sri Lanka celebrated their golden jubilee of diplomatic relations last year. The two countries have maintained warm and friendly relations over the past fifty years. Apart from that, Sri Lanka's (then Ceylon) appeal for the international community not to ask for war reparations from Japan at the San Francisco peace conference in 1951 has made Japan's relations with Sri Lanka special. This relationship has prompted Japan to be generous in aid to Sri Lanka and to maintain links in cultural, technical and educational fields. Today Japan has come forward to extend a helping hand to Sri Lanka.

In his policy speech in 2003, the Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi emphasized Japan's determination to support the Sri Lankan peace process. The Japanese government appointed Yasushi Akashi, a former United Nations Under-secretary General, as the special envoy for the peace process. The visit of the Japanese Foreign Minister Yuriko Kawaguchi in the same year gave further weight to Japan's commitment to the peace process. Kawaguchi visited the once war-torn north of the island and then met with Indian political leaders in New Delhi to discuss the peace process. Sisira Edirippulige comments that the emergence of Japan as a leading player in the negotiations to end nearly 20 years of civil war and in the post-war reconstruction plans is underscored by a decision by Tokyo last month to provide a aid package worth US\$270 million².

3. Conclusion

Recently Japan agreed to provide financial aid to create better facilities at major Buddhist sites across India that will draw more pilgrims and tourists from Asia. Launching their project for the promotion of Buddhist tourism in India, the Japanese Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC) has agreed to extend a loan of Rs.5.4 billion (\$115 million)

² Edirippulige, Sisira, 'Speaking Freely: Japan's Role in Sri Lanka's Peace Process', *Asia Times Online*, March 19, 2003

for infrastructure development at Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh, a major Buddhist pilgrim centre near Varanasi, where the Buddha gave his first sermon.

India's relations with Japan were again in focus in India when the foreign minister of Japan, Yoriko Kawaguchi, visited India in January 2003. There was complete agreement on strengthening the UN, on working together to counter international terrorism and on the importance of strengthening the principles of democracy, good governance, human rights and international politics. India was supportive of Japan providing economic assistance to Sri Lanka, including its Tamil regions to galvanize the process of reconciliation between Tamils and the Sinhalese. India also took note of more activist orientations in Japan's foreign and defence policies.

Japan and the BIMSTEC countries have had a long history of cultural ties fostered through the spread of Buddhism and a common geography which has given rise to a way of life which place considerable value on the importance of the family, obedience and respect towards the elders and filial responsibilities. Though these countries have had vastly different histories and have followed different trajectories of development, there is much in common in their way of life and in their understanding of each other's people. This understanding of the different cultures has heightened today due to the increased tourist movements to each other's lands. It is to be hoped that this foundation of cultural solidarity will be strengthened in the days to come.

References

- Edirippulige, Sisira, 'Speaking Freely: Japan's Role in Sri Lanka's Peace Process', *Asia Times Online*, March 19, 2003
- Kenjiro, Ichikawa, 'Thailand and Japan', *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan Vol. 8* (Tokyo, 1983)
- Lal, Chaman Lal (ed.) *India and Japan: Friends of Fourteen Centuries* (Hoshiarpur, 1959)
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott, *The History of Japan*, (New York, 1947)
- Nakamura, Hajime, *Japan and Indian Asia* (Calcutta, 1961)
- Sankarnarayan, K. Yoritori, M. Ogamo, I. *Traditional Cultural Links between India and Japan during eighth and ninth centuries* (Mumbai and New Delhi, 1998)
- Sarkar, H.B. 'Indian Literature Abroad: Korea and Japan', in Suniti Kumar Chatterji (ed.) *The Cultural Heritage of India*, Vol. 5, Part 5, Section 2, (Calcutta, 1978)
- MacNeill, William H. and Sedlar, Jean W. (eds) *China, India and Japan: The Middle Path*, (New York, London & Toronto, 1971)
- Thapar, Romila, *A History of India, Vol. 1* (Penguin, Great Britain, 1983)
- Toru, Ono, 'Burma and Japan', *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan Vol.1* (Tokyo, 1983)
- Tripathi, Harish Chandra, *Indo Japanese Relations: A Cultural, Political and Economic Analysis* (Patna and New Delhi, 2001)
- Vishwanathan,, Savita , 'India and Japan', *Kodansha Encyclopedia of Japan Vol. 3* (Tokyo, 1983)