

# **Thai and Indian Cultural Linkage: The Religious Festivities**

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## **Abstract**

There is a long history of cultural linkage between India and the Southeast Asian region. The Indian influence can be found in cultural and religious practices, arts, scriptures, and language. One of the common cultural heritages shared is the celebration of the major religious festivals. The festivals have originated in India and are widely celebrated in the Southeast Asian countries. In this paper, I am interested in examining the Indian cultural influence with an emphasis on four major annual festivals celebrated in Thailand. The major Thai festivals include Songkran, Loy Krathong, Thai-Chinese Vegetarian festival, and the Long boat race. These festivals share a common cultural heritage with Holi, Karthik Purnima & Deepavali, Navratre, and Onam. My research revisits the Thai-Indian Cultural linkage through these religious festivals that are celebrated at the same time of the year but under different names.

**Key Words:** Hindu; Festivals; Religion; Thailand; Songkran; Holi; Deepavali; Loy Krathong; Navratre; Onam

## **Introduction**

There is a long history of the connection between Hinduism and Southeast Asia.. These links date back to 2000 years and had resulted in the formation of Indian kingdoms on the Indochinese Peninsula and pre-modern Indonesia. The foundation of the first Indian settlements in this region was established with the migration of priests, traders and seamen from India to parts of South and South East Asia. This migration of Indian traders and immigrants resulted in the founding of Indian kingdoms which practiced Indian arts, religion and customs who used Sanskrit as the sacred language. Majumdar notes a number of Indian had settled and established colonies in South-east Asia. There was also political domination exercised by Indian dynasties in this area. He shows the spread of Hindu kingdoms and the victory of Hindu culture over the region and the influence in almost every part of people's life in the region. He also notes that Buddhism had importance centers and played an important role in the spread of Hindu culture in this region. (Majumdar, pp 15-16, 1955) Bose also gave evidence of Indian settlement in Thailand and the Indian influence over the Thai society. Kirsch also points out the complexity in Thai Buddhism. He has shown how the Thai Buddhism comprises of animistic, Brahmanistic, and Buddhist elements.

Thailand is a Buddhist country with almost 95% of its population practicing Theravada Buddhist. Buddhism spread from India long before the Christian Era to different parts of Asia. The Thai culture has two sources of origin, indigenous and foreign. The first comes from the ideas and inspiration of people while the later comes from the cultural contact with other civilizations like India and China. The customs, traditions, ceremonies and festivals were thus derived from these sources<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Charuwan Chareonla, *Buddhist Arts of Thailand*, pp 12-13

Therefore it is common to find Buddhism and Hinduism practiced together in Thailand. In addition even though Buddhism is the official religion in Thailand, there is a great religious tolerance for other religions. Therefore there is a mix of several practices from other religions with the Buddhist beliefs. As for the Hindu practices, they have become so common that Thais' sometimes are not being able to distinguish between Buddhism and Hinduism. It then becomes easy for them to practice both the religions at the same time. The reason behind this is that many of the Buddhist rituals and beliefs are the same as the Hindus rituals and beliefs. The purpose of this paper is thus to study this similarity with an emphasis on the connections found between the Thai and Hindu festivals.

### **Thai festivals and their linkage with Hindu festivals**

India, a country of festivals is the seventh largest country in the world and each month there is a festival celebrated in some part of the country. There is a festival to celebrate every season like harvests, commemorating historical people and events, and to express one's devotion to deities. All the festivals celebrated do have prayers, rituals, decorating homes, music, dance, and sharing feasts. As mentioned earlier there are several festivals but among those there are a few that are the most important ones and are celebrated all around the country.

Similarly in Thailand there are lots of festivals that are celebrated throughout the country. Many of these festivals are celebrated at the same time of the year as the Hindu festivals and are celebrated in the similar manner as well. For this paper I will focus on four famous festivals as the examples to show the cultural connections through religion between the two countries.

## 1. *Holi and Songkran*

### **Holi**

The festival of colors called Holi begins on Duwadashi - the twelfth day of the waxing moon of the month of *Phalgun*<sup>2</sup> or spring (the season of hope and new beginnings and marks the rekindling of the spirit of life). Phalgun is considered the last day of the year and spring starts from the next day. Thus since ancient times, this festival is considered a festival of merrymaking announcing the commencement of the spring season. The festival is generally celebrated in northern part of India. There are several different stories associated with this festival. According to one of the stories from the Puranas<sup>3</sup>, it is said that this was the day when Lord Shiva opened his third eye and the spark from his third eye burned Lord Kama (Lord of Love) into ashes. This perhaps explains the other names of this festival: Vasanta-Mahotsava and Kama-Mahotsava.

Almost 40 days before the start of this festival, a log of wood is kept in a prominent public place and people throw twigs of trees and other things that make the log grow into a big heap. This heap is then set alight on the night of the Phalguna Purnima<sup>4</sup>, along with chanting of some Mantras to ward away all the evil spirits. Singing and dancing also add to the celebration of this festival. On the next day people splash colored powder and colored water over each other. It is believed that even the enemies become friends on this day. The significance of this festival is to fill one's life with the colors of happiness and friendship. It marks the beginning of the Indian New Year.

### **Songkran**

A Thai festival celebrating the New Year is the same as the Indian festival of *Holi*. Songkran in Thailand is celebrated on the 13<sup>th</sup> April

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<sup>2</sup> Is the last month in the Hindu Calendar

<sup>3</sup> Literary texts written in Sanskrit dating from 4<sup>th</sup> Century BCE to around 1000 A.D

<sup>4</sup> Full moon day in the month of February to mid-March

every year and last for 3 days. The traditional celebration was pouring water to invite God Indra to descend to earth and bring rain for a good harvest for the farmers. The first day is known as the Maha Songkran Day which marks the end of the old year. The second day is known as the Wan Nao and the third and the last day is the Wan Thaloeng Sok which marks the beginning of the New Year itself. This festival offers valuable customs to the Thai community where every one returns home in order to celebrate the festival with their family members. Everyone gathers together to pay respect to their elders by pouring scented water on to their hands and presenting gifts. Later together everyone celebrates this festival by splashing water over each other. Perhaps the only difference that can be found in Thailand would be that people pour scented water over others while in India it is more common to use colors which are sometimes mixed with water as well. This festival originating from India is celebrated not only in Thailand but also in other Southeast Asian countries like Myanmar known as Feast of Thingyan, Bpee Mai in Laos, Chaul Chnam Thmey in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Yunnan<sup>5</sup>.

## 2. *Karthik Purnima, Deepavali* compared with *Loy Krathong*

### **Karthik Purnima & Deepavali**

*Karthik Purnima*<sup>6</sup> is an Indian festival where devotees take a dip in the holy river of Ganges to wash away all the sins and their effects. The whole month of 'Karthik' falling in around October to November according to the Indian calendar, is considered to be the most sacred among the twelve months of the year. During this month devoted Hindus refrain from non-vegetarian food. People take pre-dawn bath and visit temples as a matter of routine. The last five days called 'Panchaka' are

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<sup>5</sup>Ruchi Agarwal, *Water Festivals of Thailand: the Indian Connection*, pp11, 2009-10

<sup>6</sup>Celebrates the power of Lord Shiva who killed the demon Tripusara on this day. The month of Karthik is considered to be the holiest month of the Hindu Calendar.

considered even more sacred, in which there is wide participation and the last day is “Kartika Purnima”.

Deepavali on the other hand is the most popular and most celebrated festival of India which lasts for four days. During this festival people will light their houses with traditional diyas (oil lamps) and candles marking it as a night of enchantment. This festival falls in the holiest month of Karthik and comes 20 to 21 days after Dussehra (festival celebrated to mark the defeat of Ravana by Lord Rama). The festival of Deepavali is celebrated to mark the return of Lord Rama along with his wife Sita and brother Laxman to Ayodhya after 14-years of exile. The festival symbolizes the end of darkness of ignorance and the beginning of knowledge that enlightens the world. This festival is celebrated by people of all races and religion symbolizing unity is diversity. As part of the festivities, everyone would worship Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth) along with Lord Ganesha, play fireworks and exchange gifts and sweets among friends and family members. For businessmen, the festival marks the end of the financial year. The businesses would close their financial accounts and start with the new accounts only after worshipping Goddess Lakshmi during Deepavali.

### **Loy Krathong**

The festival of *Loy Krathong*, one of the most popular festivals of Thailand, falls somewhere in November on the full moon day of the twelfth lunar month. The practices performed in this festival are to show gratitude to the river goddess “Mae Khong Kha” (Ganga). ‘Loy’ means ‘to float’ and ‘Krathong’ is a ‘raft’. The worshippers float the Krathong in the river during the high tide at the end of the rainy season. The festival starts in the evening when people carry their Krathongs (a lotus-shaped vessel made of banana leaves) to the nearby rivers. The Krathong contain a candle, three joss-sticks, some flowers and coins. After lighting candles and joss-sticks and making a wish, each person gently places his/her Krathongs on the water and drifts it away till they go out of sight. The general belief is that the Krathongs carry away sins and bad luck, and the wishes that have been made for the new year due to start. This

festival is the same as *Karthik Purnima*, the festival celebrated in India around the same time of the year and is also known to be inspired by the festival of '*Deepavali*'<sup>7</sup>. These festivals of lights mark the end of the rainy season and the beginning of winter. The festival is also celebrated in Myanmar and is known as Tazaung-mon<sup>8</sup>.

### 3. Navaratri and Thai-Chinese Vegetarian Festival

#### **Navaratri**

*Navaratri* a festival dedicated to the Goddess Durga appearing on earth in nine materializations. This festival is celebrated twice a year, beginning of summer and beginning of winter. It is observed for 9 days all over India and each day is considered to be sacred and auspicious. The festival is devoted to the worship of God in a female form. Out of these 9 days, three are dedicated to Durga (Goddess of Energy), three to Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth), and three days for Saraswati (Goddess of Knowledge). On the eight and the ninth day, Yagna (offerings to fire) is performed in every temple to give offerings to Goddess Durga and to bid her farewell. The 10<sup>th</sup> and the last day of this festival hold a lot of significance for the Hindus. This is the day when Goddess Durga killed demon Mahishasura who defeated the gods and their king Indra and took over the throne. The defeated gods and Indra approached Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva who then decided to combine their energies to give rise to Durga who could destroy the evil demon. Even since then the day is celebrated as Dusshera or Vijaydashmi which is the victory of good over evil. Another common theme which celebrates the victory of good over evil is associated with the victory of Lord Rama over Ravana. On Vijaydashmi, Hindus all around the country burn effigies of Ravana, his

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<sup>7</sup>S.N Desai, *Hinduism in Thai Life*, p. 32-33

<sup>8</sup>Ruchi Agarwal, *Water Festivals of Thailand: the Indian Connection*, pp17, 2009-10

brother Kumbhakarana, and son Meghnath to celebrate this day. This festival of Navratre holds the same significance of cleansing ones' self as does the Vegetarian festival in Thailand. During this festival, devotees will observe a fast for seven to nine days depending on which region they come from. During this festival where they will refrain from meat, alcohol, and anything made from common salt or spices. Special meal is prepared to be consumed during this festival.

### **Thai-Chinese Vegetarian Festival**

The Thai Chinese Vegetarian festival falls at the same time as Navratre. It falls during the first nine days of the ninth lunar month of the Chinese calendar. For 9 days the Thai-Chinese community cleanse themselves spiritually and physically by abstaining from meat, alcohol, sexual encounters, lying, uncharitable thoughts and aggression. During these 9 days, the Chinese Buddhist would wear white attire and visit temples in order to be part of the merit making ceremonies. Other highlights of this festival include devotees performing incredible acts like fire-walking, climbing knife-blade ladders, and a street procession where some have their cheeks pierced and bodies spiked with sharp objects. This festival is originally Taoist rite which was introduced in early 19<sup>th</sup> century in by a visiting Chinese opera troupe to Phuket. At that time there was a outbreak of malaria which quickly spread and affected everyone in Phuket. According to legend, the troupe performed a religious ceremony which involved a strict vegetarian diet and ritual self-mutilation. This allowed the troupe to quickly recover from their illness and the attracted the locals who then sent volunteers to China to learn more about the purification routine practiced by the troupe. These rites then became part of an annual festival in Thailand since then.

#### *4. Onam Long-Boat Racing*

### **Onam**

Onam is one of the greatest festivals and most important harvest festivals of Kerala, South India and is considered as the time for sports and festivities after 3 months of heavy rains. It is 10 days festival

celebrated in the Malayalam month Chingam which falls around the end of August and the beginning of September. It is a festival to celebrate the reward of nature after a year of hard labor. During this festival people take their boats and country crafts to celebrate. Each snake boat in Kerala belongs to a village along the banks of the river Pamba and is worshipped like a deity. Only men are allowed to board or even touch a boat and that too just barefoot. The oarsmen usually dress in white dhotis and turbans singing traditional boat songs as they splash their oars in the water along with the rhythm of the songs. Women on the other hand dress up in new clothes and heavy jewelry and make elaborate yet complex designs of rangolis (most popular art forms in India) using colored rice paste and flower mat in front of their homes. This colorful festival also draws several thousands of local and foreign spectators.

### **Long-Boat Racing**

Long-Boat Racing is one of the most traditional rites that mark the end of the Buddhist Rains Retreat. The earliest records show King Ekathotsarot (1605-1610) during the Ayuttaya period held a boat race. The purpose was to train the oarsmen with the soldiers so they can be used during war. King Chulalongkorn (1868-1910) also wrote about this festival in his 'Royal Ceremonies of the Twelve Months'. He mentions the race being held in the 11<sup>th</sup> month between Samatthachai (boat of the King) and the Kraisonmuk (boat of the Queen). The race was held to predict the future. If the race was won by Kraisonmuk, the nation would enjoy abundant harvest and on the other hand if it was defeated then there would be sufferings.

In ancient times the royal race would be held in the 11th lunar month with the end of the rainy season when the Chao Phraya river was flooded annually in Ayutthaya region. Later the water level would subside and farmers could harvest their crops. However if the water level remains high, it would lead to hardship for the farmers. As a remedy to this, the king would also perform a Brahmanic rite in the 11<sup>th</sup> month to prevent floods in advance.<sup>9</sup>

The rites now take place during the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> lunar months (September or October) when the water level is at its highest. In Thailand, long –boat racing is considered a traditional annual event and is presently considered as a national sport. It is organized by provinces with major waterway flowing through like Phitsanulok, Nan, Pathumthani, Angthong, Surat thani, Ayuthaya and others. The long boat racing has historical significance as it can be traced back to 600 years. During the earlier periods, boat racing was a means to keep boat oarsmen physically and mentally strong for national defense. These races are very colorful and unique as the boats are nicely decorated and the oarsmen would wear the same dress. This race draws thousands of local and foreign spectators enjoying the event from both sides of the riverbank. This festival shares a connection with the Indian festival of *Onam* which has been discussed above.

### **Other Religious Similarities**

In addition to the festivals of India and Thailand, there are other similarities that one can find. Thai culture is deeply rooted in the traditional religious practices. The Thai cultural habits are similar to those practiced in the Hindu culture. First of all, the salutation to welcome or greet each other is *Wai*, a gesture of bowing which is very common in India where people greet each other with *Namaskar*. In fact this word is part of the Thai language and is pronounced in Thai as *Namaskarn*.

It is also important to note that the Thai national and royal emblem is *Garuna*, the vehicle of *Vishnu*. The walls of the magnificent temple next to the King's Grand Palace are painted with stories from *Ramayana*. The Hindu Gods, *Brahma*, *Vishnu*, and *Shiva* are commonly worshipped

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<sup>9</sup>Thawat Wattana, *Boat Racing in Thailand*, 2006 [http://www.thaiway-smagazine.com/thai\\_article/2310\\_boat\\_racing\\_in\\_thailand/boat\\_racing\\_in\\_thailand.html](http://www.thaiway-smagazine.com/thai_article/2310_boat_racing_in_thailand/boat_racing_in_thailand.html)

by the Thais. Also every office and even the residential areas will have a spirit house with the statue of Brahma and offerings of food, incense sticks, and flowers will be made on a daily basis.

Yet another interesting influence can be seen at the new Suvarnabhumi airport's international departure hall. A famous Hindu sculpture of Samudra Manthan (the Churning of the Ocean of Milk) is located in the passenger departure hall. The Samudra Manthan statue depicts a legend of the Hindu god Vishnu (Narayana), who took the form of a tortoise and sat on the bottom of the sea. According to the myths, Vishnu's second incarnation on earth was of Kurma, a tortoise, to help recover Amrita (nectar of immortality). Gods and demons together set about producing amrita by churning the ocean of milk, using Mount Mandara as a churning stick. The mountain along with a Vasuki (the serpent) used as a churning rope, was placed on Kurma's back by other gods in order to proceed with the task.

Another common religious practice in both the cultures is the one related to making offerings or giving alms. One is not supposed to sniff flowers, incense sticks or taste food items as that will be considered as being used already and therefore unsuitable to be used as religious offerings.

Furthermore one can find a religious similarity when a *Havana* or *Homa* is conducted in which a *Homa Kund*, sacrificial pit is sanctified by chanting mantras before the fire god *Agni* is invoked. Offering of various things are made along with chanting of mantras into the fire. During this ritual, the Brahmin will offer *ghee* (clarified butter) with a wooden stick into the fire and the leftover will be dropped in a vessel full of water just beside the *Homa Kund* chanting *Namamah* along. This means that the offerings are made to God Indra and are not for one's own self. The water is considered sacred and is sprinkled over the worshippers at the end of the fire ceremony as a blessing from the gods and also to ward away evil spirits.

A similar ritual is practiced in Thailand where the *Sangharath* (Supreme Patriarch) drops candle wax (instead of drops of oil as in Hindu

ceremony) in water which is then considered *Nam-mon* (holy water). The word *Nam-mon* has originated from the Sanskrit word *Namamah* itself. This sacred water is then sprinkled over worshippers as a blessing from God. As Nathaniel Altman mentions, water is commonly used in Thailand for ritual exorcism, which is performed by a specially trained Buddhist monk or Hindu Brahmin whose ancestors emigrated from India. The belief is that evil spirits are afraid of water and the worshippers who fear being possessed by spirits would undergo ritual bathing to ward away these spirits.

### **Conclusion**

This research paper shows the cultural linkage of Thailand with India with an emphasis on four popular festivals celebrated in the two countries. There is a long historical linkage between India and the Southeast Asian region. Therefore it is likely to find lot of similarities to show the cultural linkage in this region. The diffusion of the Hindu religious practices has been made possible by the trade links, the traders, priests, and seamen. Overtime the cultural diffusion has become an integral part of the Thai society and it is sometimes difficult to know which practices are Hindu practices and which ones are Thais.

This study compared four major Hindu festivals, *Holi*, *Kartik Purnima* and *Deepavali*, *Navaratri*, and *Oman* with the four Thai festivals of *Songkran*, *Loy Krathong*, *Thai-Chinese Vegetarian festival*, and the *Long-Boat race*. The four chosen festivals are celebrated around the same time of the year and the ways of celebration are also very similar. The festival of Holi and Songkran, the harvesting festivals are celebrated by splashing water over one another and marks the beginning of the New Year. Karthik Purnima, Deepavali and Loy Krathong are also associated with water where people wash their sins by taking a dip in Ganges in India and by floating a *krathong* in Thailand. The festival marks the financial New Year in India. The Navaratri and the Vegetarian festival mark the period of time where devotees discipline themselves by fasting, turning themselves into vegetarian for nine days. Lastly the

Onam and Long boat race are traditional harvesting festivals that mark the end of the rainy season and are celebrated by having boat races.

It is also interesting to see other cultural links between the two countries. Some include the way of greeting, the Indian *Namaskar* and Thai *Wai*, the national emblem of Thailand, *Garuna* which is the vehicle of Hindu God Vishnu, several Hindu sculptures that can be found around Thailand, and the practice of *Homa* and the beliefs related to the sacred water, *nam-mon*. More research on the cultural and religious linkage can reveal several other elements that link the two regions of India and Southeast Asia together.

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