Rabindranath Tagore in Thailand: His Visit and Its Impact

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Background

Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Thailand, then Siam, took place as part of his ninth foreign tour. This journey included visits to several Southeast Asian countries and extended to three and a half months. He sailed from Madras on July 12, 1927 and this tour ended with his arrival in Calcutta on October 27, 1927.

While Tagore was staying in Singapore, Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, a member of his entourage, informed the Siamese Consul General in Singapore, Praya Pradibaddha Bhual, that Tagore intended to visit Siam. Therefore, the Siamese Consul General in Singapore wrote a letter on July 27, 1927 to inform Prince Traidos Prabandh, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Siam, of this fact:

Your Highness,

I have the honour to inform Your Highness that yesterday Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji came to see me on behalf of Dr. Rabindranath Tagore who is now on a visit to Malaya. He informed me that Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and a party of four intend to pay a visit to Siam, leaving Penang by train on or about the 10th of August and wished to stay for about ten days, and they would like to see Ayuthia and Lopburi. During their visit to Singapore they were entertained by the Governor and stayed at Government House. It seems to me that he came to approach me in order to see what facilities could be accorded to them by way of accommodation in Bangkok. I replied that it was not within my power to make any arrangement for them. The most that I could do would be to communicate with the Authorities in Bangkok, through Your Highness, concerning their intending visit to Siam.

I beg to enclose a list of party and also newspaper-cuttings regarding their stay in Singapore.

There are four interesting points in this letter. Firstly, it shows that Tagore was not invited by the Siamese government, as claimed in some works. However, a newspaper, Lak Muang, on Monday, October 17, 1927, reported that Tagore visited Siam “at the invitation of Indian and Chinese residents here.”

Secondly, the visit to Siam was not planned ahead of time, and, in the end, he did not visit Siam in August as mentioned in this letter. Instead, he arrived in Bangkok on October 8.

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1 During the time of Tagore’s visit in 1927, Thailand was called Siam. This was changed to Thailand in 1939. However, as the time period covered by this article extends to 1945, Thailand is used in the title, while both Siam and Thailand are used in the main text according to the time period in question.

2 Letter of July 27, 1927 from the Siamese Consul General in Singapore to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Siam, National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4: “Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.”

Thirdly, Tagore must have had considerable knowledge of Siamese history and of Siamese-Indian cultural relations because he requested to see Ayuthia and Lopburi. Ayuthia, or Ayutthaya, had been the capital of Siam from the 14th to the 18th century before it was moved first to Thonburi and then to Bangkok. Its name was the same as Rama’s town in the Ramayana because the Siamese revered their kings as incarnations of Rama. Lopburi was an ancient town which had been dominated by the Khom from the 6th to the 11th century and had been under the influence of Khom art and culture. It is not necessary to define in this article who the Khom people are because it is still being debated. However, it has been accepted that the center of the Khom Kingdom was in present day Cambodia and that the Khom people were influenced by Indian civilization, both Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism. For this reason, the Khom built many impressive temples in Lopburi. Moreover, Lopburi was a second capital for a while during the Ayutthaya period, too. This is the reason why Tagore was interested in Lopburi.

Fourthly, this letter reflects that Tagore was not well-known in Siam at that time. The Consul seems to have been afraid that the reception in Bangkok might not be suitable, so he attached newspaper-cuttings with this letter. They were from the Straits Times, Wednesday, July 20, 1927. The details were about picturesque welcome scenes at the wharf, the programme in Singapore, his public address on “The Unity of Man”, and an impression of the poet from a special correspondent’s view.

Apart from Tagore, the list of his entourage included:

1. Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji, M.A. (Calcutta), D.Lit. (London), Dhaira Professor of Indian Linguistics at the University of Calcutta, Member of the Senate (Covering Body) of the University of Calcutta, Member of the Covering Body of Visva-Bharati (Rabindranath Tagore’s University).
2. E. Arian Williams, M.Ed. (Leeds), Professor at Visva-Bharati.
3. Surendranath Kar, Vice Principal, Kalabhavana (Art School) of Visva-Bharati.

Although Tagore was not invited by the Siamese government, he was treated as a “guest of the government” and a “distinguished visitor”. Therefore, the accommodation arranged for him and his party was at the Phayathai Palace Hotel, which had been the palace of the late king, King Vajiravudh (King Rama VI, 1910-1925). Tagore also received customs privileges. In every letter to those who would be Tagore’s hosts, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Prince Thaidos Prapandh, emphasized that he was a great poet of the world. Therefore, he had to be welcomed honorably.

**Purposes of the Visit**

Apart from promoting the syntheses of different cultures and raising funds for Visva Bharati – the common purposes of his visit to other countries – Rabindranath Tagore also hoped

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5 Telegram of August 2, 1927 from the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Siam to the Siamese Consul General in Singapore, National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4: “Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.”
6 Letter of October 7, 1927 from Deputy Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs to Director-General of Customs, National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4: “Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.”
7 National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4: “Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.”
that a Chair of Buddhism would be established in Visva Bharati with the support of the King of Siam, the land where Buddhism was deep-rooted. The Siam Observer reported Tagore’s interview with this newspaper’s representative on Monday, October 10, 1927:  

"...My aim is the unity of man...to bring about the internationalisation of education. We have different chairs at our university but we have no chair of Buddhism and it is essential that one should be established to fit into the scheme which we have undertaken. We greatly need such a Chair to give to students proper guidance.

You may ask why it is that I have sought to develop my scheme in India. The answer is that India in her long history has been a cultural centre... It may be said then without exaggeration that India has attracted all races and cultures to her bosom. India, therefore, is the centre for such an institution that aims at the unity of man, a unity of cultures, Eastern and Western, so necessary if the various civilisations are to have peace.

I, therefore, have come to Siam to seek your co-operation and your help in the desire to establish a chair in Buddhism, and also, if possible, to bring a message in a wider perspective..."

He also emphasized his main purpose of the visit again which was reported in the Siam Observer on Saturday, October 15, 1927, the day before leaving Siam for Penang:  

"...I hope that my visit will take the form of a permanent memorial by His Majesty’s Government establishing a Chair of Buddhism in the name of His Majesty the King of Siam."

Therefore, seeking the support from the King of Siam, King Prajadhipok (King Rama VII, 1925-1934) to establish a Chair of Buddhism in Visva Bharati was the particular purpose for Tagore’s visit to Siam. However, there was no documentary evidence confirming how the King took action for this proposal.

Rabindranath Tagore in Siam

It seems that Rabindranath Tagore placed a great deal of importance on the programme’s arrangements. Professor E. Arian Williams, Tagore’s secretary, was sent to Bangkok in advance in September 1927 to arrange the itinerary. The most important Siamese scholar with whom Professor E. Arian Williams requested to meet for discussion was Prince Damrong Rajanupap or Prince Damrong, the King’s uncle, who has also been credited as the “Father of Siamese History”.  

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8 Siam Observer, Monday, October 10, 1927 cited in Shakti Das Gupta, Tagore’s Asian Outlook, pp. 104-105.
9 Ibid. p. 114.
10 Letter of September 19, 1927 from Mr. J. F. Johns to Luang Srivilavaja, Deputy Permanent Secretary of Foreign Affairs, National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4:  
“Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.”
Moreover, Professor E. Arians Williams also requested a special coach for Tagore from and to the border between Siam and Malaya. Tagore, however, was to be responsible for his own coach fare.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Prince Damrong was the first person with whom Professor E. Arians Williams requested to meet to discuss Tagore’s programme in Siam, Prince Dhani Niwat, the Minister of Education, was ultimately the most important host for this visit.\textsuperscript{12} Phra Rajadnham Nides, the Secretary to the Minister of Education, was assigned to be the liaison to Tagore. Tagore arrived at Bangkok on October 8, 1927 and stayed there until October 16, 1927.

When Tagore arrived in Siam, he was greeted by a crowd at Hualumpong Railway Station, which the \textit{Siam Observer} reported on Monday, October 10, 1927.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{quote}
A scene without a parallel was witnessed at Hualumpong Terminus on Saturday evening when Dr. Rabindranath Tagore arrived by the International Express from Penang. The train...was due to arrive at round about 7-30, but long before that hour well over 500 people had gathered on the platform. A thing, remarkable to those who have lived in India, or to those who have given study to Indian religious, social and political questions, was that the gathering included people of different faiths who ordinarily are not too ready to mix together. But a bond of unity was provided in the desire to pay tribute to one of the few really great men of the world.

The train arrived almost on the stroke of 7-30. There was rush along the platform to the saloon. Tagore was accompanied by Prof. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, Prof. Surendranath Kar, Prof. Dhiren Krishna Deb Barman, and Prof. Arians Williams, the latter of whom in the morning had journeyed to Hua Hin, where he joined the train and made the Sage acquainted with the programme that had been arranged for his stay in Bangkok. Prof. Williams was the first to alight and this gave the signal to the members of the Reception Committee and the vast crowd who swarmed round the saloon. As the aged Poet alighted the excitement swelled and cheers were raised.

People forced their way in a seething mass round him, and it was with the utmost difficulty that a passage was made. Every yard of the way had to be fought by the advance guard...Dr. Tagore looked extremely tired... This is not to be wondered at. It was four months since he left India...He was satisfied with the arrangements made during journey and was delighted with the travelling conditions in the Siamese railways. Everything had been done for his comfort, he said, and nothing neglected by Siamese officials to make the journey as pleasant as possible.

It took half an hour to pass from the saloon to the entrance of the station.

A new Dodge car (of M/s. A.R. Salebhai & Co.), beautifully decorated and illuminated, was waiting in readiness to escort the Poet to Phya Thai Palace. Tagore was accompanied in the car by A.E.Nana...
\end{quote}

The itinerary set for him was.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{11} Letter of September 30, 1927 from M.C. Nikorndewon Dewakul to Luang Tawin Setthapanichayakarn, National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 33.6.7 / 4: Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam.

\textsuperscript{12} Sonakul Dhani, “Tagore’s Visit to Siam”, p. 306.

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Siam Observer}, Monday, October 10, 1927 cited in Shakti Das Gupta, \textit{Tagore’s Asian Outlook}, p. 103.
8 October

7:30 a.m.
Arrive at Bangkok Railway Station by southern line train.

9 October

10 a.m.
Meet Prince Dhani Niwat, Minister of Education.
6 p.m.
Meet Sankaraja, the Buddhist Supreme Patriarch.

10 October

10 a.m.
Meet Prince Boripat, Prince of Nakorn Sawan, the King’s elder brother.
11 a.m.
Lay wreath before the royal remains at the Dusit Maha Prasad and visit the Grand Palace and the Temple of the Emerald Buddha.\textsuperscript{15}
3:30 p.m.
Meet Prince Traidos Prabandh, Minister of Foreign Affairs.
5 p.m.
Have afternoon tea with Prince Damrong.
6 p.m.
Meet Prince Bhanurangsi, the King’s uncle.

11 October

10 a.m.
Visit Vajiravudh Library,\textsuperscript{16} the National Museum, and two important Buddhist temples: Wat Pran Jetupon (the Temple of the Reclining Buddha), and Wat Mahathat.
4 p.m.
Meet Prince Kittiyakorn, Prince of Chantaburi, the King’s elder brother.
5 p.m.
Join the Hindu reception.
8 p.m.
Have dinner with the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

12 October

10 a.m.
Visit Vajiravudh College\textsuperscript{17} and Wat Benjamabopit (the Marble Temple).
2:30 p.m.
Travel along the Chaopraya River and nearby canals, including Wat Arun (the Temple of Dawn).

\textsuperscript{14} Letter of October 8, 1927 from Prince Dhani Niwat, Minister of Education, to Prince Traidos Prabandh, Minister of Foreign Affairs. National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 33.6.7 / 4: “Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam”, Document of Ministry of Education. 22.4/5: “Dr. Rabindranath Tagore and his party will visit Siam” (September 30-October 13, 1927) and Shakti Das Gupta, Tagore’s Asian Outlook, pp. 91-92, 94-96, 109, 114-115.
\textsuperscript{15} Since the reign of King Vajiravudh (Rama VI), the kings had not stayed in the Grand Palace.
\textsuperscript{16} The National Library at that time.
\textsuperscript{17} The public school founded by King Vajiravudh.
13 October

9 a.m.
Meet Prince Narissaranuwatiwong (Prince Naris), the King’s uncle, visit Wat Suthat (the Temple of the Big Buddha), and the Hindu shrine nearby, Ananta Samakhom Throne Hall, and the pavilion for white elephants.

1 p.m.
Have lunch with the Minister of Education and deliver speech to an audience at Chulalongkorn University.¹⁸

5 p.m.
Join the Chinese reception.

9.45 p.m.
Led by Prince Dhani Niwat to the presence of the King at Dusit Palace.

10.00 p.m.
Deliver speech to the King, the Queen, some members of the Royal Family and high-ranking officials.

14 October

9 a.m.
Call on two high dignitaries of the Buddhist Church of Siam at two important Buddhist temples: Wat Bowoniwat and Wat Tepsirin, including a Pali language school at Wat Tepsirin.

3 p.m.
Visit “Poh Chang”, College of Arts and Crafts.

4:30 p.m.
Deliver speech to an audience at the National Museum.

7.30 p.m.
Have dinner with the German Minister.

15 October

6.28 a.m.
Visit Lopburi and Ayutthaya by train.

In the evening
Visit the Visnu temple, Windmill Road and deliver a short address in Hindustani.

16 October

In the morning
Leave Bangkok for Penang by train.

Tagore’s itinerary reflects that his main purpose in visiting Siam was cultural. This itinerary can be divided into three main activities: meeting members of the elite and scholars of Siamese society, visiting historic places and places of cultural and educational importance, and attending receptions and delivering speeches.

It is remarkable that all of Tagore’s meetings with members of the elite and scholars of Siamese society were with individuals responsible for creating outstanding cultural works. Whereas Prince Damrong was the “Father of Siamese History” and President of the Royal Institute, Prince Boripat and Prince Bhanurangsi were experts in Thai classical music, although their styles derived from different schools. Prince Naris was versatile in every kind of Siamese art, especially Siamese traditional architecture, and Prince Kittiyakorn knew Pali very well. Although these five members of the royal family were persons with outstanding cultural works, they

¹⁸ There was only one university in Siam at that time.
were all also key persons with important roles in Siamese politics at that time because they all were members of the Supreme Council of State. This means that, during this visit, Tagore met both persons with outstanding cultural works and key individuals of Siamese politics at that time. However, among these meetings, the most important one is the meeting with the King at Dusit Palace.

This meeting began with the arrival of Tagore and his party at the Palace at 9.45 p.m. Later, Prince Dhani Niwat conducted him to the presence of the King, while the rest of the party were assembled in the main hall. On this occasion, Tagore was dressed in a black robe with a white silk scarf embroidered with gold. The rest of the party were also in black Hindu costume owing to court mourning. After an audience with the King, Tagore arrived at the hall and then delivered his speech, “Asia’s Continental Culture”. He also explained some lantern slides illustrating the life and work of Visva-Bharati and the poem “To Siam” was read.

With respect to the places Tagore visited, all of the temples were royal temples of the highest class and certainly also centers of Siamese culture and civilization. All the other places, such as Chulalongkorn University, the College of Arts and Crafts, and the Pali language school, were likewise important in terms of culture and education.

There are two interesting points regarding the receptions Tagore attended and the speeches he delivered. Firstly, the topics that he chose to address were related to the audience. He gave five lectures on different subjects and different occasions:

1. “India’s Roles in the World” at the Indian reception
2. “Child Education” at Chulalongkorn University
3. “Chinese Birth” at the Chinese reception
4. “Asia’s Continental Culture” in the presence of the King and the Queen, some members of the Royal Family and high-ranking officials at Dusit Palace
5. “Ideals of National Education” at the National Museum

Secondly, with regard to the ethnic groups whom Tagore met, he not only joined the Hindu or Indian merchants’ reception, but also one given by the Chinese. It is remarkable that, in several of the major cities that he visited, Singapore, Rangoon, Java, or Bangkok, he regularly met the majority of the Overseas Chinese Associations. This positive attitude toward the Chinese is quite understandable. One important reason for it was that he focused on the importance of the East, with India and China being two of the biggest and most civilized countries from ancient times. He believed that cooperation between India and China meant power for the East. On several occasions, his speeches reflected this idea. For example, when he visited China in 1924 he said:

... The friendship and unity between China and India are the foundation-stone of struggling Asia...

... Let the dawn of this new age light up the East!

Therefore, whenever Tagore had a chance to meet the Chinese, no matter where they were, in mainland China or overseas, he always conveyed his best wishes and delivered speeches to them. In Bangkok, he joined the Chinese reception at Pei-Ying School. The newspaper Bangkok Times reported on Friday, October 14, 1927 that several hundred

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20 Siam Observer, Friday, October 14, 1927 cited in Shakti Das Gupta, Tagore’s Asian Outlook, pp. 109-111.
21 Shakti Das Gupta, Tagore’s Asian Outlook, p. 90.
businessmen and students of the Chinese community gathered in the court-yard of Pei-Ying School on Songwad Road. On this occasion, he delivered the speech “Chinese Birth” which was about the relationship of India and China since the ancient period. His words, though spoken in English, were interpreted sentence by sentence by a teacher of Pei-Ying School. One part of his speech included the following excerpt:  

"...I suppose you know that I have my Chinese name and that they celebrate my birthday in China. It means that I have had Chinese birth. I was born as their own-as their friend. It has a great significance. I had my Chinese robe that day and they treated me like a new-born child—like a Chinese child. It makes me bold in asking for your sympathy and acknowledgement of friendship. I want to assure you of my heartfelt love of your people and my greatest hope is that this great nation will come into its own, before the whole world, as it did in former days. I have the hope that China and India will draw closer together in spiritual and cultural unity which is the best that we can share, or contribute to the world..."

The itinerary and activities meant that, although Tagore and his entourage stayed in Siam for only one week, they met Siamese of several backgrounds and statuses. Moreover, both the visitors and the hosts had good opportunities to exchange knowledge of culture and history and develop better understanding of each other. A lot of gifts were given to Tagore; for example, Prince Dhani Niwat gave him a set of valuable literature in Siamese and the book written by Prince Dhani Niwat himself on the Coronation Ceremony of the present King, King Prajadhipok. Prince Damrong, from his personal art collection, also presented Tagore with a very beautiful inlaid mother-of-pearl work, describing a scene from the Ramayana. The Royal Institute made the presentation of the Siamese art work, including bookshelves and a decorated box for scriptures. 25 And by gracious permission of the King, Prince Kittiyakorn or Prince of Chantaburi presented to Tagore a complete set of the published volumes of the Tripitaka, printed as a memorial of the late King. 26 It is remarkable that most of these gifts reflected the cultural bond between Siam and India since a long time ago.

Therefore, even after Tagore had returned to India, he still kept in touch with Siam, especially the royal court. We have evidence that he sent a postcard to King Prajadhipok in 1929. The content of this card is as follows: 27

Rabindranath Tagore’s Emblem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Their Royal Highness</th>
<th>Rabindranath Tagore</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The King and the Queen</td>
<td>My salutation is to him</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Of Siam</td>
<td>Who knows me imperfect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and loves me.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Santiniketan
Founders’ Day

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24 Bangkok Times, Friday, October 14, 1927 cited in Shakti Das Gupta, Tagore’s Asian Outlook, pp. 99-100.
27 King Prajadhipok’s Museum, Photographs, and Documents during the reign of King Rama VII, 09, “Lottery and Postcards.”
7th Paush, 22nd December 1929

As for the Siamese, Tagore was still in their remembrance. On the occasion of his centenary in 1961, there was also a celebration in Thailand. At least we have evidence that “Chitra”, one of his most famous plays, was performed as part of this celebration.  

**Rabindranath Tagore’s Impressions of Siam**

Before leaving Bangkok, Tagore asked Phra Rajadharm Nides to convey his thanks to Prince Dhani Niwat and all concerned for the kind reception accorded him. His message ran:  

_The Princes I have met are the most cultured in the East. My conception of Siam is that she still has a living Kingship, Righteousness and Religion. I shall always cherish the memory of my most pleasant stay. I shall treasure the privilege of giving a lecture before the First Eastern Monarch. The programme drawn up by Prince Dhani has been marvelously accomplished to the letter, and I must say I have been greatly impressed by the warm hospitality accorded me by the Thai people as a whole._

Tagore also wrote two poems which could reflect his impressions of Siam. One was entitled “To Siam” which was read before the King and the Queen at Dusit Palace. First of all it was read in the original Bengali and then in the English version. These, in Tagore’s own manuscript, and also printed on blue satin, encased in Benares brocade, were presented to the King. Below is the poem’s content:

1. _When the great prayer of the Three Refuges_
   _rang from sky to sky across deserts and hills and distant shores,_
   _the awakened countries poured their rejoicings_
   _in great deeds, and noble temples,_
   _in the rapture of self-dedication_
   _in mighty words,_
   _in the breaking of the bond of self._

2. _At an unheeded, unconscious moment,_
   _that prayer, wafted by some wandering breeze,_
   _touched thy heart, O Siam, lived in thy life_
   _and shaded it with a branching wealth of well-being._

_A centre to thy revolving centuries,_
_an end to thy endeavours, which is Freedom of Spirit—_
_it helped to bind thy people in a common bond of hope,_
_to strengthen them with the power of a single-pointed devotion_
_to one Dharma, one Sangha, and one immortal Teacher._

_Let these words, potent with an inexhaustible creative urge,_
_ever direct thee to the adventures of new ages._

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29 *Bangkok Times*, Monday, October 17, 1927 cited in Shakti Das Gupta, p. 103.
30 Shakti Das Gupta, p. 128.
light up new truths with their own radiant meaning,  
and in one single garland string all the gems of knowledge newly gathered.

I come today to the living temple that is one with thee,  
to the altar of united hearts  
in which is seated on His lotus seat Lord Buddha,  
whose silence is peace, whose voice consolation.

I come from a land where the Master’s words  
lie dumb, in desultory ruins, in the desolate dust,  
where oblivious ages of the pillared stones,  
the records of a triumphant devotion.

I come, a pilgrim, at thy gate, O Siam,  
to offer my verse to the endless glory of India  
sHELTERED IN THY HOME, AWAY FROM HER OWN DESERTED SHRINE,  
to bathe in the living stream that flows in thy heart,  
whose water descends from the snowy height of a sacred time  
on which arose, from the deep of my country’s being,  
the Sun of Love and Righteousness.

This poem shows that Tagore appreciated the presence of Indian culture which had been preserved very well in Siam, especially Buddhism which had not played a significant role in India since the age of the Muslims some 7 centuries ago. Thus, he compared India to a “deserted shrine” whereas Siam was still “the shelter to the endless glory of India”. This poem was also translated into Thai by Phra Rajadham Nides.

Another poem, “Farewell to Siam,” offers a message of farewell as follows:  

The signet ring of a primaeval friendship  
had secretly sealed thy name, O Siam, on my mind, in its unconscious depth.  
This is why I felt I had ever known thee,  
the moment I stood at thy presence,  
and why my traveller’s hasty hours  
were constantly filled with the golden memory of an ancient love,  
and centuries’ silent music overflowed  
the brink of the seven short days  
that surprised me with the touch  
of an immemorial kinship  
in thy words, worship and aspiration,  
in thy numberless offerings to Beauty’s shrine  
fashioned by thy own hands,  
in thy fragrant altars  
with their candles lighted  
and incense breathing peace.  
To-day at this sad time of parting  
I stand at thy courtyard,  
gaze at thy kind eyes,  
and leave thee crowned with a garland from me.

31 Ibid., p. 129.
whose ever fresh flowers had blossomed ages ago.

This poem shows that Tagore appreciated not only the preservation of Buddhism in Siam but also the Siamese language. Taken together, these two poems reveal that he was impressed by at least two aspects of Siamese culture that derived from India: religion and language. Moreover, the willingness of the King and the Minister of Education at that time, Prince Dhaní Niwat, to revive the ancient cultural ties joining India and Siam meant that Tagore’s visit had influence beyond the seven days that he stayed in Siam. In other words, the impact of his visit lasted longer, at least until the end of the Second World War—most prominently the impact on culture and politics.

Cultural Impact

Pandit Raghunath Sharma\textsuperscript{32} recounted that the King and Prince Dhaní Niwat requested Rabindranath Tagore to send an Indian scholar to stay permanently in Siam because they wanted to bring these two nations closer to each other in brotherly attachment through the said scholar. Based on the perspective reflected in the two poems mentioned above, Tagore was impressed by the aspects of Indian heritage, Buddhism and language, which had flourished in Siam since ancient times. However, as Buddhism had been eclipsed in India for a long time, it is understandable why language was chosen as the medium of rapprochement between India and Siam. Consequently, after returning to India, Tagore located a scholar who was very keen on language and sent him to Siam as an Indian Cultural Ambassador. This scholar was Swami Satyanandpurī, who proceeded to Siam in 1932 at Tagore’s insistence.\textsuperscript{33}

Swami Satyanandpurī was born in Bengal on 3 March 1902. His real name was Prafulla Kumar Sen. He got his first M.A. in Philosophy from Calcutta University and a second M.A. in Sanskrit from Benares Hindu University with the most outstanding marks. Then he worked as a lecturer at Calcutta University. Later he was ordained an ascetic (\textit{sanyasi}) and received the name Swami Satyanandpurī. From the second day of his arrival in Bangkok, the Ministry of Education appointed M.L. Pın MalaKul\textsuperscript{34} to teach him the Thai language.

Swami Satyanandpurī established an \textit{ashram} with the name “Dharm Ashram” and tried to expand his field of activities by delivering speeches at local associations and societies, publishing a monthly paper under the name “Voice of the East”, and teaching Sanskrit to students, especially students at Chulalongkorn University. Through his excellent knowledge of Sanskrit, he was able to understand the Thai language perfectly well within a short period of time. After studying Thai for only two years, he started to write and publish books in Thai. During his ten years in Siam, he produced more than ten books in Thai, in addition to many lectures and articles. Some examples of his outstanding works are a translation of the \textit{Bhagavad Gita} and biographies of Mahatma Gandhi and Guru Gobind Singh.\textsuperscript{35}

During his time in Siam, Swami Satyanandpurī’s \textit{ashram} became a center of the Indian community in Bangkok. These Indians—traders, office workers, doctors—would come to the \textit{ashram} and discuss issues concerning Indo-Siamese relations. The topic of most interest was the necessity of establishing a permanent organization to promote Indo-Siamese cultural

\textsuperscript{32} One of Swami Satyanandpurī’s colleagues. He was one of the guests invited to the welcoming function in honour of Tagore at the PhyaThai Hotel. Later, he was one of the founders of the Thai–Bharat Cultural Lodge in 1940 and the President of Indian National Council after Swami Satyanandpurī’s death in 1942.
\textsuperscript{34} A Siamese scholar who later became Minister of Education.
\textsuperscript{35} Pandit Raghunath Sharma, “Satyanandpuriji’s Early Life,” p. 47.
relations. Therefore, the Thai–Bharat Cultural Lodge was founded in 1940. Swami Satyanandpuri was declared the Founding President of the Lodge which remains in operation to this day.

Although Swami Satyanandpuri’s main purpose in coming to Siam was cultural, as the years passed, he became one of the leaders of the Indian community. His role as a leader of the movement for Indian freedom became more distinguished, too, especially during the Second World War. This was the second major effect of Tagore’s visit: the political impact.

**Political Impact**

In Siam, the movement for Indian freedom began with the Ghadr Party, which was a Sikh movement. They came to complete their secret mission in Siam in 1914 during the First World War.\(^\text{36}\) During this same period, there was another Indian who had, in 1912, thrown a hand grenade at the British Viceroy in Delhi and fled India to seek refuge in Japan. He was Rash Behari Bose (1886–1945), who still had high ambitions for the fight for Indian independence. With the support of Japan during the Second World War, Rash Behari Bose made contact with the Sikh movement in Siam\(^\text{37}\) and later a political organization named the “Indian Independence League” was founded.\(^\text{38}\) Japan supported Rash Behari Bose in becoming the leader of this organization and treated the Indian Independence League as the representative of the whole movement for Indian freedom in this region.\(^\text{39}\)

Swami Satyanandpuri did not fully agree with this movement because he did not want to be dominated by the Japanese. Swami Satyanandpuri tried to combine cultural activities with political goals. Therefore, he founded the “Indian National Council” as a political organization separated from those Indians who were then under Japanese influence. This organization was inaugurated in the grand hall of Silpakorn Theatre or National Theatre with the cooperation of the Thai government. Swami Satyanandpuri got permission from the Broadcasting and Publicity Department to broadcast news and commentaries in the Hindustani language through the Thai Radio Station.\(^\text{40}\) Moreover, he wanted to get in touch with one of the most prominent leaders of the Indians, Subhas Chandra Bose, who was then in Berlin. With the assistance of the German Legation in Bangkok, Swami Satyanandpuri and Subhas Chandra Bose communicated with each other in many long telegrams. This telegraphic system continued for a long time. Therefore, it means that until the early stages of the Second World War, there were two Indian organizations in Bangkok—the Indian Independence League composed mostly of Sikhs, and an Indo-Thai cultural organization centring around Swami Satyanandpuri.

Meanwhile, the Indian Independence League, under the leadership of Rash Behari Bose, decided to call a conference in Tokyo in March, 1942 and invited delegates from all Asian countries and from all organizations. Naturally, Swami Satyanandpuri, as a leader of the Indians in Thailand, was invited as well. Instead of proceeding straight to Tokyo, he left Bangkok for Singapore to meet up with other delegates. The purpose of this meeting was to decide the proper basis for their resolutions at the Tokyo conference. Swami Satyanandpuri revealed his intention to invite Subhas Chandra Bose to be the supreme leader in this region, whereupon the other delegates agreed with him and promised to vote for this proposition.

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\(^\text{36}\) National Archive, Document of Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Thailand). 97.1 / 7 file 2: “Indians tried to show their opposition to Britain.”


Later, he boarded the military plane bound for Tokyo. However, two days later, nervous Japanese authorities arrived at the Indian National Council in Bangkok and informed them that Swami Satyanandpuri’s plane had had an accident in the Bay of Ise, Japan, and that there were no survivors. 41 This was the end of the role of Rabindranath Tagore’s successor, both culturally and politically. In the following year, 1943, Subhas Chandra Bose actually became the supreme leader of the Indians in this region, as Swami Satyanandpuri had intended.

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