

The Indic Perspective of the Pro-democracy Agitation (2020) in Thailand

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ABSTRACT—The pro-democracy agitation in Thailand, which attacked the institution of Thai monarchy, the strongest pillar of the Thai society, can be interpreted in India as an attack on the Thai branch of the common Indic civilisational roots, exemplified by the royal title Rama. There is a long history of attack on the institution of monarchy in the Southeast Asian neighbourhood of Thailand, from Laos to Indonesia, where a pattern of downfall of royalty followed by gradual weakening of the state can be observed. Thailand can be considered, within the region, as being culturally closest to India, apart from being a key player in India's extended, and geo-strategically important neighbourhood. India can therefore be justified in feeling concerned about the said agitation, its future course, as well as its geopolitical implications, at the backdrop of a perceivable dimension of an ongoing struggle between Indic and Sinic civilisations.

Keywords: Thailand; Agitation; Monarchy; Indic; Civilization

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Introduction

The pro-democracy agitation in Thailand reportedly started taking shape after the disbanding of a centre-left political party by the name Future Forward Party, in February 2020, under certain legal conditions. Students first took aim at the semi-elected government by demanding the dissolution of parliament, the resignation of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha, the creation of a new constitution among other things, leading to a series of events and protests.

Development

Later, however, the students entered an uncharted territory by demanding reforms of the monarchy itself. A student group from Bangkok's elite Thammasat University laid out a ten-point manifesto aimed at curbing the monarchy's authority, mentioning a desire for the king to be truly above politics, reducing the national budget allocated to the king, disbanding royal offices, including the historically powerful privy council, and ending public relations protocols that excessively glorified the monarchy.

All of this started happening when Thailand was no more an absolute monarchy, as it had transitioned to a constitutional monarchy in 1932 (The Diplomat, August 2020). A leader of the student agitation said in a public speech that no-one in this world was born with blue blood, nor as more noble than anyone else, in a clear challenge to the country's monarchy (BBC News, September 2020). These developments were shocking, as no such agitation in the country in the past had targeted the monarchy in this manner, since the institution of monarchy has been considered embodiment of the identity of the Thai nation. An attack on the royalty under the guise of pro-democracy agitation was too direct to be overlooked. The Thai conservatives were horrified by such attacks on an institution the constitution says is "enthroned in a position of revered worship" (The Indian Express, October 2020).

View from India

The agitation has attracted a lot of attention in India, Nonetheless, the view from India is likely to be different from the rest of the world due to the Thai monarchy's identification with the common Indic civilisational roots, exemplified by the royal title Rama. In some regards, the whole of Southeast Asia has historically been viewed as the Indosphere. Although the term is likely to be interpreted simplistically as India's sphere of influence, especially from the post-modern perspective of the discipline of political science, the same would be an inaccurate or at least an inadequate description of its true meaning.

The term Indosphere has a strong historical, civilisational context attached to it, although the sphere of influence is essentially a matter pertaining to the nation-states of the Westphalian order, and more a matter of mid to late 20th century origin. A close comparison of the term Indosphere, though not exact, may be found in the term Anglosphere (Bennett, 2004), to comprehend its meaning.

Civilisational Context

Two nations namely Thailand and Indonesia are seen to be culturally most closely attached to India, compared to the other states within the South East Asia region. While two factors - an indigenous Hindu majority community in the island of Bali, emotionally relatable to the Hindu majority of India, and possibly the most moderate form of Islam perceptibly shaped so by its Hindu-Buddhist past, prevalent on the most prominent island of Java (Coedes, 1968)⁶ – are in favour of the argument of cultural proximity with regard to Indonesia, there are a number of them pertaining to Thailand such as - abundance of Sanskrit-Pali inspired vocabulary of Thai language, the deep-rooted practice of Buddhism, traditional reverence for elephants and monkeys who are the animal-gods within the Hindu pantheon, the institution of awards in the name of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of arts, to acclaimed cine-artists for their felicitation and also the desire on the part of the Thai nation to showcase its Indic connection

by naming its new international airport (2006) Suvarnabhumi, “land of gold”, the term which ancient Indians had used to describe the whole region of today’s South East Asia in general (Majumdar, 1937).⁷ The most important matter of Indic (meaning Hindu-Buddhist) civilisational connection however, in the particular context of this article, is visible in the ceremony of the coronation of the Thai king, which is performed in the manner of the sanctifying Hindu-Buddhist practices, including sprinkling the holy water gathered from various life-giving rivers of the land to be ruled by him.

One would be able to grasp the close Indo-Thai cultural connection from the above examples, especially those attached to the monarchy. It is from this backdrop that the Indian view of the current agitation in Thailand, where the monarchy is under attack, needs to be understood.

Socio-cultural and Socio-political Angle

While India is a parliamentary democracy today, and the world’s largest one, Indians are traditionally attuned to expect Rama-rajya, rule of Rama, from their elected representatives, especially from the highest leadership. Rama, who embodies the image of an ideal king or ruler in the Indian psyche, is even adored throughout the South East Asia region, thanks to its Indic civilisational roots, that can be seen through various versions of The Ramayana in vogue in individual countries.

The Thai Ramayana is known as Ramakien (Sanskrit Rama-akhyan), meaning Rama’s story. That seems to have caused The Thai King Vajiravudh (Rama-VI) to institutionalise the title Rama for the Chakri dynasty during his tenure (1910-1925), as a matter of pride, this tradition being carried forward till the present day. It can thus be concluded that the Thai monarchy is the strongest pillar of the Indic civilisation of which Thailand is an inseparable part.

Rama-VI is known in the history of Thailand as a reformist, for having introduced several reforms in the sectors of education,

the civil service, administration and healthcare, and also as a staunch nationalist to the extent of being known as the father of Thai nationalism. He was also credited with initiation of certain democratic institutions. From backdrop, it can be argued that he had institutionalised the Rama title for the ruling kings for the purpose of strengthening the concept of nationalism, which was intertwined with its Indic civilisational roots, in view of the possibility of gradual Sinicisation of the Thai society and country under the rising population of either partial or full Chinese descent.

This argument can be supported by the King's view of the Chinese, which he had expressed openly in his newspaper article (1914), "Jews of the East", where he had expressed his dislike for the excessive "racial loyalty and astuteness in the financial matters" of the country's Chinese population (Chaloemtiarana, 2014).⁸ This cultural assertion, initiated by King Vajiravudh was carried forward in the 1930s through legislation aimed at enforcing cultural assimilation of the Chinese, who had become the dominant ethnic community in Bangkok. This obliged the ethnic Chinese to take on Thai names. Ironic as it might look, the legislation was introduced by leaders who were themselves of Chinese descent, but perhaps saw themselves as better assimilated than the majority of their ethnic brethren (Basu, 2017).⁹ It nevertheless underlines the high level of consciousness embedded in the Thai psyche with regard to the nature of their own culture and its origins.

Revival of the Connect

The Indian Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, had visited Thailand (then Siam) during the last lap of his tour of South East Asia in 1927. Prof. Sawitree Charoenpong of Chulalongkorn University mentions that Tagore made representations to the then Thai King Prajadhipok (Rama-VII), in admiration of preservation of Buddhism so well in Thailand, for hosting the Buddhism chair in his Viswa Bharati University. Prince Dhani Niwat, on behalf of the king, having been convinced about Tagore's sincerity and capabilities, had asked him to send an Indian scholar to Thailand to stay permanently there, in order to bring the two nations closer to each other in brotherly attachment.

In return, Tagore identified Swami Satyananda Puri as India's cultural ambassador, who arrived in Thailand in 1932. Puri established an institution 'Dharma Ashram' in Bangkok, and started delivering lectures, teaching Sanskrit to Thai students, and even publishing a newspaper 'Voice of the East'. He learned the Thai language quickly and published his books in Thai subsequently, including a translation of Bhagvad Gita (Charoengpong). Independent India's first Prime Minister Nehru had quoted in his book a letter written by a Thai student after returning to Thailand after completion of studies at Shantiniketan (founded by Rabindranath Tagore) in India that read, "I always consider myself exceptionally fortunate in being able to come to this great and ancient land of Aryavarta and to pay my humble homage at the feet of grandmother India, in whose affectionate arms my mother country was so lovingly brought up, and taught to appreciate and love what was sublime and beautiful in culture and religion" (Nehru, 1946).

In the recent past, Thailand hosted the 16th world Sanskrit Conference in Bangkok in June, 2015. Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, who is a Sanskrit scholar herself, was conferred the first World Sanskrit Award in November 2016 in India. She was also conferred the third highest Indian civilian award Padma Bhushan in March 2017, by the President of India.

India's Concern

Against the backdrop of strong civilisational shared history between India and Thailand, including the latter's institution of monarchy, it is only natural for Indians to feel concerned about the tone of the current agitation in Thailand that appears threatening to the Rama-rajya of the country.

Although the term Rama-rajya denotes an ideal state of governance in its truest sense, the reference to it here should be taken in its limited sense, which means rule of Rama-X, the current monarch of Thailand. The current king, as an individual, may not be enjoying high popularity in general. The biggest reason perhaps has to do with his history of spending much of the year outside Thailand, in the continent of Europe, particularly Ger-

many. The expectation of ordinary Thai citizens from the country's highest authority, who is the king himself, of being available in the country normally, excepting vacations, cannot be viewed as an unreasonable one.

Secondly, the discussion of the king's lifestyle and alleged excesses of various types as appearing in the worldwide media, have added fuel to the fire of the agitation in Thailand, sharpening its tone against the monarchy. There may be an urgent need for various reforms pertaining to the governance in the country, including, possibly, a determination of the mandatory limit of minimum number of days' presence of the king in the country. Such reforms could be brought in by all concerned without delay. Financial discipline is also a must, to ensure fair handling and distribution of country's resources in the eyes of all stakeholders, and in the overall interest of the country. Even the King has hinted at related discussions and subsequent negotiations at arriving at certain consensus, when he famously stated "Thailand is a land of compromise", while responding to questions of foreign correspondents.

History and Mystery of Agitations

There was a public agitation of similar type even before (2008), led by the 'Red Shirts', followers of Thaksin Shinawatra, a political outlaw and a fourth generation descendant of Chinese migrants, during the long serving tenure of late King Bhumibol Adulyadej (Rama-IX), which did not succeed, mainly due to the larger than life image of the king and the goodwill he enjoyed among the commoners. Having reflected on this failure, the planners of the current agitation may have thought this time to be the most appropriate to launch a fresh attack, with a probability of success. They will have considered the less than one year's tenure of the current king and the absence of a well built-up public image at his disposal or rather the presence of an adversely built-up image that is attached to his persona.

Broad Regional View

The former Indian diplomat and Director General of Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) Suryakanti Tripathi, referring to some political analysts' views, had called South East Asia as a 'cultural shatter-belt', implying that it is essentially stuck between two opposing forces, being in the sphere of competition of these larger states of India and China (2015). Although that description may sound as a bit of an exaggeration, a backdrop of an age-old rivalry between two civilizations – Indic and Sinic – playing out in the theatre of the region, cannot be ignored. The fact of emergence and spread of indigenous Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms in the region, starting from Funan in the mainland sub-region in the 2nd century C.E. and ending with Majapahit in the maritime sub-region in the 16th century C.E., and also the deep Indic influence on the indigenous societies, had led many historians to address them as Indianised kingdoms, and the region as Greater India (Nehru, 1946).

Although the Chinese or Sinic civilization is also considered as one of the oldest in the world, it was not able to produce a similar effect in the region, despite having the advantage of physical proximity with the region, compared to mainland India. In terms of the then comparative superiority of civilizations, China was placed below India. The famed ancient university of Nalanda in eastern India, that attracted students from around the Indian Ocean rim, as well as China and Central Asia, was partly funded by the Sumatra-based Sri Vijaya kings (Sanyal, 2016). This fact not only shows Sumatra (Indonesia) to be a part of then unified world of Indic civilisation but also underlines the culturally subordinate position of China to not only India but also Indonesia, recipients of knowledge and learning, like many others.

This is corroborated by another example of a Chinese Buddhist monk I-Tsing (or Yi Jing, 635-713 C.E.), who was a student at Nalanda. He, on his way to India towards the close of seventh century, halted in Sri-Vijaya for six months, and learned Sabdavidya (Sanskrit Grammar). He had written advice for the Chinese priests wanting to visit India for Buddhist learning, "to

stay in Sri-Vijaya for one or two years, practise the proper rules and then proceed to India" (Majumdar, 1944).

Chinese Assertion and Reality

China, however, had keenly been projecting power in the region through gunboat diplomacy, seen, most prominently, through the 15th century historical voyages of Chinese navy, under Zheng He. As a result, it had succeeded from time to time in reigning in submissions from the region's kingdoms, through a tributary system, though according to sinologist Friedrich Hirth (1896), it was more of an image-building or propaganda exercise, undertaken by the Chinese court than the reality. Thus, although China had succeeded in projecting an image of a power in the region, its culture lacked the power of attraction among the region's states and societies.

Secondly, there is a history of forced migration of ethnic minorities from the territories of today's south and south-western China under the pressure of Han expansion, who eventually had moved out and populated southern territories consisting of today's mainland South East Asia. The history, combined with the practice of addressing the South East Asian communities as "southern barbarians" by the Chinese (Coedes, 1968), had possibly prepared the ground for communities spurning the Sinic influence and embracing the Indic ways of life.

Having fathomed India's superior civilisational position in the region and thereby its soft power in the manner of attraction for its values, as conceptualised by Joseph Nye, and also the fact of lack of interest on India's part to leverage the same politically, in the manner of treating the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of the region as its tributary states and vehicles of outreaching power, China, it can thus be argued, seems to have worked out a strategy of filling the vacuum of the suzerain political power, and at the same time trying to weaken the Indic base of the states in the region, to gain control over them over the course of time.

George Coedes makes an important historical observation

about the campaigns of Mongol military chiefs in Champa, Burma and Java, and the policy of the court of Peking [Beijing] favouring the splitting up of the old Indianised states into small principalities, which among other things, led in the first half of the 13th century to the liberation of the Thai of the middle Menam, who had previously been under the Khmers, and to the foundation of the Thai kingdom of Sukhothai (Coedes, 1968).

Regional History of Downfall of Monarchies

From this perspective, it is interesting to examine the long history of fallen royalties in the region beginning in the 20th century. The royalties of Laos and Cambodia had been dethroned by the communist regimes in those countries, an action that had enjoyed wholehearted support of communist China.

The Laotian monarchy ended in 1975 by a government decree. The last monarch of Laos, Sri Sisvong Vatthana, was initially incarcerated within the confines of his palace by the communist government, and later moved to a prison camp, where he breathed his last. The king, the queen and the crown prince were reported by the government in 1978 as having died from malaria, within one year of having been moved to the camp. The World Press Review reported that they had suffered from the effects of forced labour and starvation.

In Cambodia, the monarchy was suspended by the Mao Zedong worshipping regime of Khmer Rouge (1975-1979) and was restored almost after two decades. While the Cambodian monarchy could stage a comeback after the fall of communist Khmer Rouge government, based on popular support, the Laotian royals were not as fortunate. They had to perish in the pest-infested prisons of the forest. Although the Cambodian monarchy has retained its constitutionally recognized position till now, it is more decorative than executive. Their neighbour Vietnam's case was only marginally different when the communist Viet, backed by China, destroyed the Indic Cham kingdom.

This pattern of fall of the monarchy and ascendance of a

communist regime extended itself even in the 21st century, and that too on the immediate borders of India; a massacre of Nepal's ruling royal family at its historical Narayanhiti palace took place on the night of June 1, 2001, where most members of the royal family were killed in very mysterious circumstances. The steady rise of the Communist Party of Nepal after the massacre, and its taking firm control of

Nepal's politics subsequently, with a tilt of Nepal's foreign policy in favour of its northern neighbour China, rather than the southern neighbour, India, gives rise to the speculation of China's involvement in the whole matter.

Other Instances of Decline

There are a number of other quoted historical instances of attacking the monarchy in various forms in various parts of the region, which were essentially rooted in the Indic civilisation, with the objective of diminishing their power through dilution of their Indic character.

The intervention with the most far-reaching implications was however the support for the new kingdom of Malacca as a counterweight to the Majapahit of Java. The Chinese would provide systematic support to Parameswara, the fugitive of Simhapura (Singapore) and the founder of Malacca, from the very outset. Malacca was encouraged to convert to Islam. This should be seen as a geostrategic move to create a permanent opposition to the troublesome Hindus of Java. It was probably also intended to create a permanent schism within Indic civilisation and prevent a future anti-Chinese geopolitical alliance. Whatever the original motivations, Malacca prospered under Chinese protection while Majapahit was steadily pushed back (Sanyal, 2016).

It would be pertinent to state the example of 'Wali Songo' here, and what role it played in Indonesia, especially Java, the seat of Indic power, and the strongest kingdom in the region, and which deserves to be rated as the prime regional power of those times, to unseat it by unseating the monarchy. Wali is Arabic for

“friend of god (Allah)”, normalised as “saint” and Sanga is Javanese for “group”, coming from Sankrit Sangha. This ‘group of saints’ is credited with propagation and spread of Islam in Java, which eventually resulted in conversion of some of the Majapahit royal family members and the flight of the rest to nearby island of Bali.

The most striking thing about the constitution of Wali Sanga was that many of its earliest members had Chinese ancestry, both paternally and maternally. This was brought to light for the first time by a Javanese scholar Prof. Muljana Slamet in his book Collapse of Hindu-Javanese Kingdom and the Emergence of the Islamic Countries in the Archipelago (1968) (1968), which was later corroborated by the Islamic scholar Ulrike Freitag in her book Hadhrami Traders, Scholars and Statesmen in the Indian Ocean, 1750s to 1960s (1997). This ‘Wali Sanga’ thus can be suspected to have played a role in the geostrategic move of the Chinese court against the Hindu Javanese kingdom, as has been argued above.

In the view of historian and India’s first ambassador to China, K.M. Panikkar, the kingdoms of Kambuja (Cambodia) and Champa (southern Vietnam) were credited with “evectional claims to the gratitude of the Indian people” for having barred the land route of Chinese expansion for a thousand years. He contended, “If ever the expanding empire of China did not extend its authority to Singapore and if the Indian Ocean remains today what its name indicates, it is due to the resistance which Kambuja and Champa put up against the continuous pressure of China”.

Clash of Civilisations in the Region(?)

Samuel Huntington had articulated in his book, The Clash of Civilisations (1993), a hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in the new world would not be primarily ideological or economic, but cultural. The principal conflicts of global politics would occur between nations and groups of different civilisations. The clash of civilisations would dominate global politics, and the fault lines between civilisations would be the battle lines of the future.

It should be noted that the purpose of this article is not to highlight a clash of civilisations, if any, between the Indic and the Sinic as such, but to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the institution of monarchy, wherever present today and wherever it was in the past, in the Southeast Asian region, has an inseparable relationship with its civilisation which is essentially Indic in nature. However, given the game of associated power politics as perceived, mentioning the identity of the concerned players as a matter of fact while discussing certain examples, is inevitable.

As a corollary, an argument, though outlandish in appearance, can also be made about involvement of a 'foreign hand' in the current agitation in Thailand. Take the proposal of Kra Canal which will cut through Thailand's Kra Isthmus to shorten a sea voyage between the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean for example. Although this project looks acceptable from the international cooperation for trade point of view, it would pose a strategic challenge to India, at the backdrop of increased presence of Chinese naval ships and submarines in and around the Andaman Sea during last few years. It therefore had sounded as music to India's ears when Thai Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-Cha declared in February 2018 that opening the said route was not on Thailand's list of priorities. Post that, in January 2020, the Thai House of Representatives agreed to set up a committee to study the canal project, perhaps because of behind the scene Chinese efforts. But despite the Chinese push, the government of Thailand eventually set aside the canal proposal, possibly taking into account the security concerns of India, and proposed an alternative route that would see a 100 kilometre highway and rail passageway linking 2 seaports on either side of Thailand's southern coast. It's understood the government has set 75 million baht aside for a study into the building of the seaports, along with a further 90 million baht to look into the feasibility of highway and rail connections between the two coasts. The project which may have been seen as a purposeful delay in some quarters. In that context, the current agitation or its aggravation may be an attempt of those with vested interests to arm-twist the Thai establishment to make things move in a certain direction.

Whatever the case may be, a common thread of being Hindu (Nepal) or Buddhist (Laos and Cambodia) or Hindu-Buddhist (central-southern Vietnam and Indonesia), and thus being the flag-bearers of the Indic civilisation was running through the fallen royalties mentioned above, all of whom were rooted in the foundation of Dharma, solemnised either by visiting Indian priests or locally settled priests of mixed heritage. A hypothesis of an agenda working relentlessly towards causing damage to, and eventually the fall of the symbols of the Indic civilisation within the Indosphere through the acquired doctrine of communism in the past, or any other new age propaganda, legitimised in appearance like democratic reforms, can very well stand.

Against this backdrop, a feeling of concern, if felt by New Delhi with regard to the current agitation in Thailand threatening the institution of Rama kings can be said to be legitimate. Whether the end objective of the said agitation is limited to downgrading the status of the monarchy or is extended to the subject of the Kra canal, it is nevertheless a threat to the Indian interests, culturally speaking in the former and geo-strategically in the latter.

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