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THE RIMLAND OF SHARED INDIAN HERITAGE

1. India has a palimpsest heritage consisting of layers upon layers of diverse civilizations, diverse religions, diverse languages, diverse cultures, diverse customs and diverse beliefs.
   If you look back, India is the font for civilization for many cultures in South Asia and South East Asia.

   The Indosphere, therefore, is unique.

   "But why India?" What makes it special?
   Especially when you consider that despite its abundant identities, religions, languages and cultures, India as a landmass was unified as a state with political authority only under the British Empire in the mid 19th Century.

   Today, India's diversity makes it a continent; And the Indian Constitution makes it a modern democratic state.

2. Your heritage goes back to the Harappan civilization of around 2500–1700 BCE with its flourishing external trade.
   While dates are mere estimates, land and sea routes used by traders connected the Indus Valley with the bronze age Nile and the Mesopotamia civilizations.
   The ancient port of Lothal, still well preserved, was a mega- port of the Harappans - according to the Archaeological Survey of India.

   Land routes to the interior connected the Indus Valley with Bactria, today a part of modern Afghanistan.
   The Harrapans also traded with the East Coast of India and the Bay of Bengal.

   The Austronesians sailed to the Bay of Bengal from South East Asia establishing maritime connectivity with the region and China as well as the Middle East and Egypt – the then known world.
   The revolutionary discovery of the cyclic nature of monsoon winds possibly by mariners of Odisha (way before the records of Hippalus) enabled sailors to take advantage of these storms and airstreams and to reduce the time taken to sail between the Western and Eastern worlds making way for India to become the centre of maritime trade in Asia.

3. The decline of the Harappan civilization in the 2nd millennium BC witnessed the migration of the Indo Aryans to the Indus region, finally settling down between the Ganges Valley and the Himalayan foothills by establishing new agricultural settlements.

Megasthenes in the 3rd Century BC described the Ganges as follows:
“India ... possess many rivers ... having their sources in the mountains which stretch along the northern frontier, traversing the level country, and a few of these after uniting with each other, falls into a river called the Ganges”.

This waterway connecting the heartland of Northern India with the Bay of Bengal brought about a brisk expansion of trade.

4. This expansion of commerce on the Ganges River led to the formation cities on its river banks, which swiftly became trading centres by the 1st Millenia BCE.

From these urbanized settlements there emerged traders and artisan classes dissatisfied with the prevailing Vedic system.

And from within these societies, we can witness the advent of new beliefs and new religions.
It would not be incorrect to say that there were over 500 religious sects in India and many of them (such as Ajivika with Makkhali Gosala, Sanjaya Bellaththaputta, Alara Kalama and Uddhaka Ramaputhra) are no longer in existence.

Intense religious debates took place over the next millennia. Many deliberations and disputes of the Vedic and Sramana sects focused on the origins of truth – Where did truth lie?

Was it in the Rig Vedas where – (I quote)
“there was neither death or immortality then.
No distinguishing sign of night or day”

Or the Upanishads – (and I quote)

“From evil lead me to good
From darkness lead me to light
From death lead me to immortality”

Or the Dhamma - (and I quote, again)

“Impermanent are all formation
They arise and pass away
Having arisen they come to an end
Their coming to peace is bliss”

From these contestations and controversies emerged three of the world’s great religions - Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.

The arrival of Alexander the Great a few centuries later brought about the confluence of Greek and Indian philosophies,further enriching the religious discourse.

We now know that Alexander, a pupil of Aristotle, had a famous meeting with ten Indian gymnosophists on the banks of the Indus.
The traders travelling both by land and sea spread these Indian religions and philosophies to lands outside of India.

The best known amongst these traders were Trapussu and Bhalluka - sons of the caravan leader Pokkharavati who carried the Buddhist message, and eight strands of Buddha's hair to Sri Lanka.

The Girihandu Seya in Trincomalee in Sri Lanka contains an inscription in Sanskrit stating that the stupa was founded by Trapussa and Bhalluka.

Emperor Ashok's Buddhist missions to the rulers of the other kingdoms and empires transformed the then known world - making Buddhism a world religion. However, it must be noted that the Emperor honoured all religions as set out in his rock edicts.

"The faith of others all deserved to be honoured."
His propagation of Buddhism did not become an obstacle to the spread of other religions. In fact, the propagation of all faiths received the encouragement of the Emperor.

5. It is interesting that these merchants and missionaries played a major role in sharing India's religious discoveries with the outside world.
The formation of Indian Merchant Guilds a few centuries later gave a further impetus to this process.

The Indian Merchant Guilds were the forerunners of the VOC and the British East Indian Company.
These traders from different kingdoms banded themselves as Merchant Guilds managing their own affairs with their own financial capital.

As a result, the guilds were beyond the control of individual rulers in both in India and abroad.
The most active of these guilds were located in South India and looking back we can say that the Pallava, Pandyan, Chera and Chola kingdoms were all Thalassocracies.

These guilds traded in elephants, horses, gems, spices, sandalwood, camphor, musk, saffron, grains, and other non-perishable food items, clothes, perfumes and drugs.

The most powerful amongst them was The Five Hundred Lords. They operated in Southern India (including Sri Lanka) and Southeast Asia, and traded in salt, areca, iron, cotton yarn, and cloth.

They were governed by the Code of the Noble Merchants (Veera Banaju Dharma).
The Code set and maintained standards for the quality of goods and the integrity of trading practices in each industry; and maintained stable prices for their goods and commodities amongst other principles.

Other guilds included Ainnurruvar and the Nanadesis.

The guilds were prosperous enough to lend money to the rulers of kingdoms.

Sena and Guttika were two horse traders who invaded Sri Lanka as part of a Merchant Guild in 237 BCE.

Coins issued by the Nanadesis Guild have been found in the deep interior of Sri Lanka.
The Irukkavel Guild played a leading role in the Chola invasion of Sri Lanka in 10th Century AD.

The Kangvape Guild operated both in the ancient cities of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka.
Similarly, Ayyavolu provided mercenaries for the Chola invasion of Sri Vijaya in modern day Sumatra.

6. However, the shared heritage of India and Sri Lanka goes back even further to pre-history starting with the Ramayana.
Ravana is today the best known of all Sri Lankans whether mythical or real.

It is said that Lord Rama, bestowed the island of Lanka to Vibhushana, the brother of Ravana which consolidated Sri Lanka's separate identity as a kingdom.
On the other hand, Sri Lanka's Mahavamsa chronicles trace the island's origins back to Vijaya - a prince from Kalinga of North India who arrived in 6th Century BC. However, archeologists have found evidence of well-developed settlements in Lanka dating back to the 1st Millennium BC.

The Mahavamsa is Sri Lanka's great epic poem, written in Pali around the 5th Century AD, which sought to emphasize the island's identity as being separate from that of the Tamil rulers who invaded the kingdom from South India. These chronicles sought to link Sri Lanka with the superior culture of the Mauryan Empire of Asoka the Great.

This shared heritage connects Sri Lanka to Madhya Pradesh since Arahath Mahinda, son of Emperor Asoka set out for Sri Lanka from Sanchi, a city 230 km from Indore.

7. Arhath Mahinda headed Emperor Ashoka's Buddhist mission to Sri Lanka bringing along the Doctrine of the Buddha which had been purified at the recently concluded 3rd Buddhist Council in 250 BCE in Pattaliputra (modern Patna).

These Pali Canons of Theravada Buddhism were preserved, protected, and promoted by the Maha Vihara in Anuradhapura Sri Lanka long after Buddhism disappeared in India.

The Jaya Srimaha Bodhi the oldest human-planted tree in the world - is considered to be an unbreakable bond between India and Sri Lanka. Sangamitta, the sister of Arhat Mahinda had arrived to Sri Lanka a few years after the Arahath - bringing with her a cutting from the branch of the sacred Bo-tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment.

Thus the Mahavihara is today regarded as the home of Theravada Buddhism.

8. The shared religious heritage of our countries is not limited to Buddhism. Sri Lanka is also home to Hinduism.
The Pancha Ishwarams are five kovils existing from time immemorial in Sri Lanka, and are dedicated to the Saiva Siddhanta doctrine.
Koneswaran situated in Trincomalee, in the East of the island, lies on the same latitude as Mount Kailash and is known as Dakshina Kailash.

Shiva worship is prevalent amongst the Tamil people of the Northern and Eastern Provinces.
Vishnu worship is practiced by the Hill Country Tamil Hindus and Buddhists. Hence there are separate shrines located in many Buddhist temples for Vishnu worship. The other deities worshipped by the Buddhists include Lord Ganesh, Lord Murugan, Goddess Pathini, and Goddess Kali.

9. Moreover, Pali and Sanskrit are still used by the Buddhists and Hindus in the country.
The Sinhala language is closely related to Prakrit and the Sinhala script has similarities with the Grantha script which originated from the Pallava script.

Sri Lanka is the repository of the Pali texts - The Theravada Tripitakaya (Buddhist Pali canons) and other Buddhist writings.
Along with Sinhala, Tamil is an official language of Sri Lanka.
Sri Lankan Tamil speakers constitute the second largest Tamil population in the world (next to India).
Thai Pongal is celebrated in Sri Lanka and is a public holiday together with Diwali.

10. A number of Sinhala and Tamil customs are shared with South India. The Indian saree worn by a majority of women and the vetti worn by Tamil men are the most common.

Certain spices are shared by both countries – especially Kerala spice - since waves of Kerala spice traders settled down on the west coast of Sri Lanka monopolizing the spice trade and assimilating themselves with Sinhala society. One such family, the Alagakonnara, ruled the low country kingdom in the island for a time.

Finally, many Kerala customs were absorbed by the Sinhalese and the Tamils. The adoption of the Malayalam astrology and the Rahu Kalaya are good examples.

There are many who travel to Chennai for Nadi Vaakhiya readings. Ayurveda and Siddha medicine systems as well as Vedic Astrology are also a part of Sri Lankan heritage.

The shared heritage also include cuisine such as Appam, indi appam, and pittu.

Similarly, the interaction between the South Indian Tamil kingdoms and Jaffna also contributed to the shared heritage in the form of Tamil cuisine such as Dosa, Sambar, Rasam, Idli, Vadai and Murukku that is popular throughout the country.

Bharata Natyam is no longer confined to Jaffna.

Sri Lanka is also unique in absorbing the vast majority of Tamils brought initially as plantation labour during British colonial rule now living in the Hill Country and the South as citizens of Sri Lanka.

11. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi at the Vesak illuminating ceremony at the Gangaramaya Temple in Colombo, highlighted “our region is blessed to have given the world the invaluable gift of Buddha and his teachings.”

    It is this gift of Buddhism which glued the cultural ties between South Asia and South East Asia creating a necklace of shared heritage.

12. According to the Ashokan Rock Edicts, the Emperor dispatched Buddhist missionaries to Suvarna Bhoomi (modern-day Myanmar and Thailand). This was an indication of the Mauryan Empire’s close relationship with that region, where Indian traders would have already created strong links with the trade settlements in this part of Asia.

    Similarly, the Malay sailors, who were dominating the shipping routes between India and China were frequent visitors to India.
    Thus Indian religions - mainly Hinduism and Buddhism, and India’s languages - Sanskrit and Pali, as well as the Indian cultures became the building blocks of a shared heritage in South East Asia as well.

13. The origins of the Funan Empire (now a part of Vietnam) is similar to the Prince Vijaya story in Lanka.
    Brahmin merchants traveling by ship to China repulses an attack by Vietnamese pirates.

    Kaundinya, a Brahmin who led the sailors, subsequently marries Princess Soma - who was the leader of the pirates. Thereafter they establish the Kingdom of Funan.

The subsequent Indianized rulers of Funan changed the laws of the country to conform to the system in India.
Some have traced Kaundinya's origins back to the Kaundinya Brahamins who coincidentally lived in Odhisha – the same region as Prince Vijaya's father, Sinhabahu.

Odisha people can thus claim to be nation builders.

14. The original Buddhist missions as well as the Brahmins travelled by land to South East Asia.

As maritime trade developed it became possible to reach what are today the Indonesian islands by sea.
By about the 8th Century,Mahayana Buddhism had taken hold of the Malayan landmass and islands of present-day Indonesia.

Sanskrit became the language of the scholars.
Brahmins rituals were introduced to most Royal Courts.
The Hindus were divided amongst the Shaivites and Vaishnavites.
Subsequently, Harihara denoting the unity of God Vishnu and God Shiva became popular.
Similarly, alongside Mahayana Buddhism, the Avalokitesvara cult too gained popularity.
Unlike in other parts of South Asia the distinction between religions became blurred and religious icons became interchangeable.
Only the Theravada Buddhists formed a minority.

The fusion of Mahayanism, Hinduism, Avalokitesvara and local beliefs led to the emergence of a priestly class upholding a new political order of the Devarajah cult.
Kertanagara - the famous Javanese king was revered as a Shiva-Buddha.

15. One of the outcomes of the parallelism between Hinduism and the Mahayana Buddhism was the construction of some of the largest Hindu and Buddhist temples in the world.

Angkor Wat, dedicated to Vishnu was built by Suryavarman II.
One of his successors, Jayavarma VII, built the Mahayana temple Bayon.

Plo Klong Garai Hindu Tower Temple and Dong Duong temple complex in Champa,Borobudur in Sumatra, and Prambanan in Java are some of the other outstanding masterpieces.

From about the 13th Century, the religions that upheld the ruling classes were challenged by the newer populist religions.
Islam came to Indonesia both from Arabia as well as India. Malikussaleh - the ruler of Samudera Pasai in Aceh was the first to convert in mid 13th century.

Parameswaran of Malacca was the first ruler to converted to Islam in the Malay Peninsula.

By the end of the 16th century, Islam had spread through both the Indonesian Archipelago and the Malaysian Peninsula.

The Chinese Admiral Zheng, a Muslim, settled Chinese Muslims in these islands.

Islam offered opportunities for advancement that suited the material and social needs of trading communities.
It was a religion that bypassed the hierarchical social structures of the Hindus and Mahayan Buddhists.

The rapid spread of Islam led to the collapse of many of the earlier Hindu and Buddhist kingdoms in the region.
Only Bali - which gave refuge to the Javanese Hindu rulers - remained Hindu.

Nevertheless, the Ramayana and Mahabharta still persist as a part of Indonesian culture.
Hindu rituals co-exist with Islam beliefs.
Balinese dances originated from Hindu dances.

Here too - palimpsest culture consisting of layers of Islam founded upon a layer of Hinduism.

The original name for Myanmar - Brahma-desh is an indication of the strong influence of Hinduism in the country. By the 11th Century, Myanmar witnessed a reform movement promoting Theravada religion. Subsequently this reform movement spread to Sukhothai, the first Thai kingdom.

The egalitarian nature of Theravada Buddhism based on the strict interpretation of the Dhamma appealed to the people as opposed to the elitism of Mahayana Buddhism.

The conversion of Anawrahta, the king of Bagan to Theravada Buddhism, was a turning point for Buddhism in the area.
The king then assisted Sri Lanka's King Vajayabahu I, in his wars against the Cholas.

Thereafter, monks from Bagan were sent to Sri Lanka to revive the Buddhist Sangha which was in decline.
In return, the King requested and received the Pali Tripitakaya, the Buddhist canons.

The murals in the Gubyaukgyi temple in Bagan depicts the scenes from Sri Lanka's history.
This was the beginning of a long cultural exchange between the Sangha of the two countries.

A number of missions were sent to Arakan by the kings of Kandy for monks to carry out ordination ceremonies.
King Alaungsithu of Bagan is believed to have visited Sri Lanka for worship.

16. The spread of Theravada Buddhism created a shared heritage between Sri Lanka and Thailand.

    A number of Maha Theras from Sri Lanka including Udumbara Maha Thera settled in Sukhothai to spread Buddhism.
    A branch of the sacred Bo-tree in Anuradhapura was brought to Thailand in the 14th Century.

    When the priesthood of Sri Lanka ceased to exist, Ven. Upali Thero from the Kingdom of Ayutthaya (named after Ayodhaya of India),visited Kandy in Sri Lanka in 1753, and recommenced the Upasampadha ordination ceremonies. Hence, the main sect of the restored priesthood in Sri Lanka is called the Siam Sect.

    The Hindu customs continued parallel to Theravada Buddhism in Thailand.
    The Ramayana is enacted as Ramakien.
    The Thai language use Sanskrit script.

    The Royal Ploughing ceremony and the Water-pouring ceremony at the King's coronation traces its origins to India.

    The Thai heritage then also constitutes of layers of Indian, Sri Lankan and Thai cultures.

    One more example of the merging of cultures – Indian, Sri Lankan and local - is Cambodia.

    The introduction of Theravada Buddhism by Tambralinga Thero, son of Jayavarman VII (and who had studied in Lanka) brought about an end the concept of Devaraja – a divine ruler. Thus with the absence of god kings, the Angkor Wat was abandoned.

17. Thus unlike in the Hellanic and Roman empires, and the European colonial empires of later times, there were no impositions of culture and religion through war and conquest. Neither were there periods of bondage that usually accompany such conquests. In fact, elements of rancor and compulsion were absent in these interactions.

    The religious discourses in India predominantly concentrated on immortality and impermanence.
    It was an interaction which stimulated scientific thinking leading to Ariyabhata's discovery of zero.

    Thus this cultural syncretism was spread over a millennia - during which cultures, religions and social systems from outside blended together with indigenous practices and beliefs to bring about new cohesive systems.

    This made possible for Hinduism and Buddhism – especially Theravada Buddhism to adapt to local environments.

The end result is the rimland of shared Indian heritage spreading from the Indian sub-continent to Vietnam, encompassing South East Asia.