India-Thailand: Historical and Cultural Connections

Why in news?

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar visited the Devasthan in Bangkok, the Royal Brahmin Office of the Thai Royal Court and the official centre of Hinduism in Thailand.

How India and South East Asia share relations?

- European and Indian scholars have referred to Southeast Asia as 'Farther India', 'Greater India', or 'Hinduised or Indianised states'.
- **Trade**- This attracted Indian merchants and trade in spices, aromatic wood and most importantly gold is known to have flourished.
- In 20th century, the Indian nationalist historians referred the ancient Indian kingdoms in Southeast Asia as its 'colony' but the theory has been rejected as there is very little evidence to substantiate.
- The first Indian kingdom to come up in Southeast Asia was **Funan**, which is the predecessor of modern Cambodia and **Lin-yi** in southern Vietnam, both of which came up in the 2nd century CE.
- **Culture-** The classical Sanskrit and Pali texts from India carry references of the region using various names such as Kathakosha, Suvarnabhumi (the land of god) or Suvarnadvipa (the golden island).
- The South East Asian traders brought along with them Indian religion, culture, traditions and philosophy along with them to the shores of Southeast Asia.
- They were also accompanied by Brahmin priests, Buddhist monks, scholars, adventurers and some of them married the local girls and were often employed by the local rulers.
- **Language**- Many local languages in the region, including Thai, Malay, and Javanese contain words of Sanskrit, Pali and Dravidian origin in significant proportions.
- The Thai language is written in script derived from Southern Indian Pallava alphabet.
- **Religion**- Shivaism, Vaishnavism, Theravada Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhism and later Sinhalese Buddhism came to be practised in the Southeast Asia.
- The concept of divine authority and kingship, are largely shaped by the Indian practices.
    - For example, the Thai king is considered as an incarnation of Vishnu.
- The episodes of Ramayana and Mahabharata are regularly featured in puppet shows and theatre events.
- In terms of architecture, monuments are some of the best examples of Indian influence in the region.
    - Borobodur Stupa in Java
    - Angkor Vat temple in Cambodia
    - My Son temple in Vietnam

Geographically, 'Farther India' refers to Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar and the Malay states.

What about India's religious links to Thailand?

- Thailand is part of Suvarnabhumi territory, which finds mention even in Ramayana by written Valmiki in 1000 BC.
- **Rule**- In the early centuries of the Common Era, Thailand, which was historically known as Siam, was under the rule of the Funan Empire.
- In the 6th century CE, it was under the rule of the Buddhist kingdom of Dvaravati.
- In the 10th century, the region came under Khmer rule, which is also known to have links with India.
- **Trade links**- A Tamil inscription found in Takua-pa testifies trade links between the Pallava region of South India and southern Thailand.
- A mercantile corporation of South Indians called **Manikarramam** had established a settlement here and built its own temple and tank, and lived as a self-contained colony.
- **Religion**- The most significant cultural contribution of India to Thailand is Buddhism, propagated in the 3rd century B.C. by Buddhist monks sent by King Asoka.
- Brahmanism and Buddhism existed alongside each other in Thailand in the pre-Sukhothai period of the 13th century.
- The Mon kings of Dvaravati and the Khmers had patronised Buddhism, but at the same time had also adopted Brahmanical customs and practises.
- Apart from the popular Brahamanical deities of Ganesha, Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, those that are largely absent in Indian socio-religious landscape, such as Indra are also worshiped in Thailand.
- The Ramayana known in Thailand as **Ramakriti** or **Ramakien** has provided an outlet of cultural expression in Thailand and episodes from the epic are painted on the walls of Buddhist temples.
- From the 13th century onwards, several Thai kings assumed the title Rama, which has become hereditary during the present dynasty.

How significant is cultural relation in terms of soft power?

Soft power is an ability to co-opt people, to achieve political ends through attraction rather than coercion or payment. The concept of soft power was propounded by Joseph Nye.

- After India gained independence in 1947, Thailand was the first country to recognize India, the Republic of India diplomatically and politically.
- The influence of India still are in the Southeast Asia particularly, Thailand.
- Thailand's **'Look West'** policy was the perfect complement to India's **'Look East'** policy which has been instrumental in promoting bilateral relations between the two countries.
- Based on deep rooted connections and cooperation of both sides, prosperity and wealth can be achieved as associated benefits as part of soft power diplomatic

engagement between the two countries.

References

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