

# Indians in Bangkok and their Enterprise: From Past to Present

Sophana Srichampa\*

The Indian-Thai people migrated to Thailand in the modern time around one hundred years ago. They wanted to work for their living. Some groups of people came by sea route to the South of Thailand and moved to Bangkok later. Some other groups came by road from Kolkata to Burma and then to Thailand. The Indians migrated to Thailand from India in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. There were two routes of migration from India to Thailand. The first route was through Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Singapore, Melacca, Malaysia and then by train to Thailand and Bangkok. The second route was from India through Chittagong, Bangladesh then by train to the South of Thailand and Bangkok.

The first and large group of the Hindus migrated from Sind, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to Thailand. They started their first job in business of textile and then in the sport equipments by importing from India, Pakistan and Europe. In the later generations some expanded their business to other fields such as agro-products, bio-diesel and dairy products and embroidered goods were exported to India, USA and Europe. Indian-Thai businessmen imported some goods from China and exported according to the order of the customers from Africa and Middle East. These people have a business connection with the Indians in Singapore also. The textile business has been carried out by some Hindus from Punjab. They sell in bulk to retailers in Thailand. Some cater to the demands from African countries.

The business activities of Indians from Gujarat and Rajasthan mainly concentrate on jewelry. Some expanded their business in the products such as baby care, energy, plastic, infotech, granite and import-export of marble. Their business had links Thailand with India, China and western countries.

People from Tamilnadu, though small in number, run the international business such as software and Information Technology. The population of the Hindus is more than 100,000 all over Thailand.

Sikh migration to Thailand started in late nineteenth century from Gujranwala and Sheikupura, West Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. Most were traders by profession called Aroras and Khattris. But nearly 90% of Sikh migrants to Thailand were Aroras who were renowned as shrewd traders and Jats as cultivators.

The second wave of migration was after the partition between India and Pakistan. A few hundred families, who had relatives in Thailand, migrated to Thailand in 1947 and 1948.<sup>2</sup> The Sikh migrants in the past were Aroras or Khattris (traders), Jats (farmers), goldsmiths, kambohs (vegetable farmers).<sup>3</sup>

Majority of Sikhs came by sea route, which was a popular route until 1950, from Punjab to Calcutta. Some Sikhs came by sea route from Calcutta via Rangoon port

---

\* Centre for Bharat Studies, Research Institute for Languages and Cultures of Asia, Mahidol University, Thailand



and came to Moulemein by train, then to Myawadi by truck and rode donkeys or horses to Mae Sot, on Thai border, entered to Rahaeng (one district of Tak Province), and sailed down along the Ping River from Nakhon Sawan to Bangkok, Thailand. Another route was from Rangoon to Taung Gyi in Shan State, then turn westwards to Takhilek, Mae Sai (northern border Thailand-Burma, Chiang Rai Province) and to Chiang Mai in the North of Thailand. But this route was not common.

Majority of the Sikh migrants were salesmen and peddlers in their initial occupational venture. Most of them sold clothes by carrying on shoulders. They sold goods on credit and collected the payment by installments. They could develop relationship with customers and could sell more goods. For many years, they save, money and bought shops and became rich. These Sikh migrants have built Gurudwaras also in Bangkok (Pl.1).

With the assistance of the relatives, the Sikh migrants started the jobs quickly. Most Sikhs were non-Thai citizens as they could not read and write Thai language as that was one of the conditions to secure Thai citizenship, or due to a false notion that they would not be allowed to return to India if they became Thai, etc. But many could manage to buy property in Thailand. Some bought property before the Second World War when foreigners could buy property freely or property under proxy ownership or some had Thai wives and then bought property under Thai wife's names or property bought under their children's names who had secured Thai nationality easily by the virtue of their Thai nationality (being born in Thailand) or Some bought property under the names of their daughters-in-law.<sup>4</sup>

Bangkok has been the main place of concentration of Sikhs in Thailand. They were 18,000 in 1992. Moreover, many Sikhs from other parts of Thailand also moved to concentrate in Bangkok for their secured life. As Bangkok is the capital and a financial, commercial and communication centre of Thailand that could offer more business opportunities. The main area was called "Pahurat" or "Little India" of Bangkok. The population of the Sikhs in the year 2010 is about 30,000.

Many Sikhs are prosperous. The business of the Sikhs expanded has from cloth and textile to other domains. Some rich Sikhs have expanded their business outside Bangkok and in the tourist places in the southern Thailand such as Samui Island and Phuket. Their major customers are from Australia and Europe and a small number from Asian nations too.

Muslim carried their commercial activities by sea since Ayuthya period (1350-1767). They married local people and among the ethnic Ramans (Mon) too. Most were richer than local people. Since King Rama the IV (1851-1868) some Muslims moved to be at the City Gate in Phranakhon. There is *Masjid Wat Koh* in that area built in the Reign of Thonburi King. Most Indian Muslims are *Shia* from Surat. There is another mosque in Thonburi area called "*Masjid Saj Fi*" (White building) which was built since the beginning of Rattanakosin Dynasty in 1782.<sup>5</sup>

There were some Muslim companies who carried business as wholesale and retailers in paper, stationary, ink, perfume, leather, textile from Japan, products for photo, medicine and chemical, Chinese ceramics, embroidery products and cosmetic etc.

The Jain group migrated to Thailand around 40 years ago. There are about 2,500 persons living in and around Bangkok for past several years. They were from various parts of India such as Rajasthan and Gujarat, Mumbai in Maharastra State. Most of them reside in Silom, Suriwong, Chan, Narathiwas Rajanagarindra and Sukhumvit Road. There are two small Jain temples on Soi Putha Osoth in Suriwong area (Pl. 2,3).

It is only 40 years since renowned Indian companies started investing in Thailand and opened the branches in other Southeast Asian countries. They run businesses in rayon, petrochemicals, polyester, chemicals, carbon, aluminum, steel and car production. Such business ventures have brought in lots of Indians which marks a new epoch of Indians and their respectability in Thailand.

The Indian-Thai and Indian businessmen have participated in big numbers of the business associations such as: India-Thai Chamber of Commerce, Indian Chamber of Commerce in Thailand, Thai-India Culture and Economic Cooperation Association. Some big companies give donations for the royal projects of Thailand. They have contributed to the prosperity of Thai people in the remote areas by their own team.

As compared with another economic influential group such as the Chinese in Thailand, the Chinese traders migrated to Ayutthaya Kingdom in the thirteenth century. The Chinese were encouraged to become Thai citizens by changing into the Thai names and surnames after marriage with the Thai people as well as studying in the compulsory Thai school. The Chinese-Thai have been in Thailand more than five generations with approximately



9.5 million population. They have played the crucial role in the economic development of Thailand.

The Indian-Thai and Indian businessmen have played an important role and contributed to the growth of Thai business more than one hundred years as one of the leading groups who are successful in their business. They are responsible for social activities, financial assistance

to education, health care and environment etc. which are important features for the sustenance of a society and country. But they do not make their charitable activities public resulting in the ignorance of Thai society about their fruitful contribution to the public in general. This paper has attempted to make people aware of their contribution and support.

### References

1. Sandhu, K.S. and A. Mani, *Indian Communities in Southeast Asia*, Mentor Printers Pic. Ltd, Singapore, 1993.
2. Sidhu, M. S, *Sikhs in Thailand*, Asia Studies Monographs No. 049, Bangkok, 1993, pp.1-3.
3. Ibid, p.8.
4. Ibid, pp.36-37
5. Huapcharoen, Lamcun, *Phra Baat Som Dej Phra Buddah Yodfa-Chulalok, Ratanakosin Historical Anecdote*, The Knowledge Center, Bangkok, 2005, p.1.



INDIANS IN BANGKOK



Srichampa, Plate 1: Inside Gurdwara



Srichampa, Plate 2: Thepmonthien Temple



Srichampa, Plate 3: Sri Mahamariamman Temple