

NOTES ON A JOURNEY FROM LOPBURI TO PHRABAD

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Of late there have sprung up various land routes to Phrabad, which was formerly reached by travelling up to Tarua by train or, for those with leisure, by river; and thence by tramway belonging to a private company. The automobile, however, has altogether revolutionised the system of inland travelling in Siam. You can now reach Phrabad from no less than three railway stations by means of motor-cars. The shortest route is from Nong Don station on the Northern Railway, where the Administration Office of Phrabad district is situated. This way passes through rice fields and bamboo groves and takes some half an hour to complete. Another way is from Ban Moh station on the same line, which takes you through similar country for some 40 minutes. The most interesting way, however, is from Lopburi, which is the subject of the present note.

I happened in the second week of February to have official duties in Lopburi. This gave me an opportunity of availing myself of a trip over this route. Starting in the morning before the heat set in, we motored from the town across the railway eastwards, passing the altar of Phra Kāl famous for its monkeys. A few minutes later we passed by a lane on the right leading to the ruined Jesuit church of San Paolo, where the remains of the old Jesuit observatory still exist. Further along the main road lay the east gate, still in comparatively good preservation, directly beyond which was the Elephant Kraal, the 'piniate' of the French chroniclers in the time of King Narai. The road now curved slightly to the left and resumed again an easterly direction. We passed over the moat, no longer a real one, and penetrated a considerable stretch of garden land where custard apples of good quality were growing. Some thirty minutes from the starting-place brought us to the edge of the famous reservoir called 'the lake of the arrow's consecration' (Talé Chubson). Now Lopburi corresponds to Lava-pura, the city of Lava, the son of Rama according to the Siamese version of the Ramayana. The country around abounds in names

that are found in the final episodes of the Siamese Ramayana or the "Rāmakirti" as it is called. The arrow, of course, is that of Rāma. In the fresh breeze of the morning the 'lake' was invigorating although it has long since become a vast expanse of paddy fields. To the west and south, and presumably north, an earthen embankment of about ten metres' width has been made. From the western embankment a headland juts out into the 'lake', on which King Narai built his small but substantial residence called "Phra-ti-nang Yen" (or the Villa of Breezes). Just as in the Rāmakirti Vishnu (or Nārāyana as he is better known in Siam) retired whenever he was free from duties to his ocean abode over the seas, so Narai (the phonetic transcription of Nārāyana) would retire to his Villa of Breezes for the recuperation of his mind and body in the intervals of the strenuous works that have been and still are the lot of a King of Siam. To the east of this vast expanse of fields several rows of picturesque hills recede into the distance. The way we took was along the southern embankment. As we motored along in the cool breeze of the morning, it was tempting to imagine the whole expanse of paddy fields to the left and right of us as being full of water, with a mountain wall to the east and the royal Villa of Breezes crowning the lake, facing the receding mountain barriers. An approximate five kilometres' journey along the embankment brought us to the edge of the plain and we entered a lilly country through a gap in the mountain wall. Behind this is still to be found paddy land, and further to the north east lies higher up the presumed reservoir, the catchment area, it is supposed, of the whole water-works system which gave the Lopburi of King Narai its life. The neglect of the past three centuries has turned the reservoir into paddy fields. Although sluice gates and baked earthenware pipes scattered about from the town right up as far as the hills remain to testify to its former existence and to the big area it covered, the waterworks themselves are things of the past. Land ownership will probably forbid its resuscitation, which, were it possible, would doubtless restore much of Lopburi's life and wealth.

In the hills around us are many remains of Buddhist devotion. Very valuable works of art have been found in the numerous caves,

and a fine statue of the Buddha has recently been discovered and found its way to the National Museum at Bangkok. About 4 kilometres from the entrance to the hilly country we came to a village called Tha Tako inhabited by descendants perhaps of Lao captives from Wieng Chan. They are easily recognisable by their women's dress, the peculiar type of their skirts and their home manufactures, for which every house possesses a loom underneath, which the daughter of the house manipulates in her spare time. Beyond the village lies a stretch of open country in the centre of which is a curiously shaped hill of small proportions, standing upright by itself, with a Vihara on top of it, accessible by a bamboo ladder. It is called Khao Kaew (the gem mount). Near by can be seen the remains of a stone wall, possibly connected with the water-works of King Narai. Also nearby is situated the "Cave of Heaven", a former storage of stone images of the Buddha as well as of some Hindu deities. Very little, however, remains. The prevailing type is, as in Lopburi, that of the Buddha seated on the Naga King, the modelling of the latter being, as usual with Khmer art, very life-like, while the Buddha has Khmer features. From Tha Tako we plunged into bamboo thickets, and later on forests, the cool shade of which afforded timely shelter in the growing heat of the day. The road passed through forests, now overhanging with dense creepers, now decorated by beautiful glens, now relieved by occasional clearings. Swarms of purple and yellow butterflies flitted about among the groves, but very little bird life was noticeable. In one place there could be seen a paddy field guarded by a watch-post high up in the trees as a protection from wild elephants. After some twenty kilometres of cool glades and occasional clearings we arrived at the famous shrine of the Buddha's footprint, the object of much veneration during the past three and a half centuries, affording then, as now, a comparatively easy opportunity of touring the jungles and hills to the inhabitants of the metropolis in the plain. Phrabad seems to have gained its name and popularity through this last asset almost more than any other agency.

It is not the aim of this little article to describe Phrabad, already pictured to us by more authoritative pens. The overland journey just described, however, has not been noticed before and is

not difficult of realisation. The tourist from Bangkok should, if possible, spend a night in Lopburi which is, as is well known, an attractive tourist centre in itself. The following morning could then be devoted to the journey, which can be done in a little over two hours and a half, leaving enough time to make halts on the way. There would then be time enough also to explore Phrabad at leisure. The return journey would be made at about 2 p. m. to catch the afternoon train at Nong Don (the first of the three alternative routes mentioned above). Bangkok would be reached at 5.40 p. m. An organised trip on a big scale such as those of the Siam Society could perhaps be done in one day by leaving on a special train early in the morning, timed to reach Lopburi by 10 a. m. The above journey would be made at once, and Phrabad reached by noon or say 1 p. m. to allow time for halts. Luncheon would be taken at Phrabad. After visiting the shrine and the environs between 2 and 4 p. m., the return journey to Nong Don would be made. The special train would come back from Lopburi to await the party at the latter station. If this could be left at 5 p.m., Bangkok would probably be reached by 8.30. p.m.