

Exploring Indology In Vietnam: Its Role And Relevance

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Abstract:

The study of India and Indic elements related to culture and religion has been in great academic interest domain in recent years. Vietnam is also in that league where academicians are interested in this field. The research article deals with the past interests among Vietnamese academia and refers to the significance of such research in Indology. Hinduism and BUDDHISM has been connected with Vietnam from the second/third centuries of the Christian Era. It is evident in Cham heritage and Buddhist shrines and architecture spread around the country. The author also tries to put emphasis on young Vietnamese scholars to work in this area and follow the new lines of Indological research.

Keywords: India, Vietnam, Hinduism, Buddhism, cultural linkage, Pilgrimage.

Introduction

Almost 10 years back, there was a news item in major VN print media on Sept 21, 2007. It ran as:

Established during the time of the Indian Prime Minister AB Vajpayee's Govt. in 2000, Department of Indology at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ho Chi Minh City made a very encouraging development. Professor Le Tay, the then Head of the Department announced that 16 students would be admitted at his University each year instead of every two years! Apart from their standard college subjects, students in the programme are learning Hindi as well as studying Indian learning Hindi as well as studying Indian geography, history, philosophy, culture and foreign policy. This shows how important it has been for Vietnam to delve into the subject of Indology. With over 200 students passing out from this phenomenon of Indology, the significance is well understood.

INDIA AND PAST OF VIETNAM

Very few know in Vietnam nowadays that there was a King named Śrī Māra and he belonged to the Pandya dynasty in the Second Century AD.¹ This is known by the Vĩ Cạnh Inscription which is composed over a rock-cut stone and words are etched on both sides. Narrating a royal donation made by the family of Śrī Māra, it has 15 lines on one side and 7 continuous lines on the other side. Unfortunately, we can see and read only nine lines out of the total 22. Sanskrit scholars who studied the facsimile of the inscription find the poetry part to be in Vasanta-tilaka metre.

Interestingly, Śrī Māra, following the Indic traditions, gave his property to the people who were close to him and instructed that in future, all kings should honour this donation. The words 'Śrī Māra Rājakula' are inscribed very clearly. Apart from epigraphic sources, we have nothing about Śrī Māra from other sources, Chinese sources mention a Hindu kingdom that encompassed Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia started by him. Śrī Māra is mentioned in the Chinese sources as Kiu Lien² who occupied Champa by revolting against the previous rule in the long coastal territory of present-day Vietnam. It might have happened in the late second century AD. All French scholars who traversed, studied and wrote about most of the Southeast Asian locations agree that Kiu Lien was Śrī Māra. His all successors are also known through the Chinese sources, their names ending with Varman(Phan in Chinese).³

MỸ SƠN SITE

There are several Hindu shrines, temples and a number of stone images of Hindu deities. A statue which is wrongly identified as a dancer is a 10th century AD masterpiece from Mỹ Sơn. In its right, a Vina⁴ playing deity is Saraswatī, the goddess of music, knowledge and arts. It is made of yellowstone. These two sculptures are in the style of Tra Kieu which has Indo-Javanese influence. It is now at the Đà Nẵng Cham Museum, Đà Nẵng city, Vietnam.

ŚIVA KNOWN AS THÁP BÁNH ÍT

¹ Majumdar, Ramesh C. 1927. *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*. Vol. Vol. I, Champa. Lahore: Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot.

² Maspero, Georges. 2002. *The Champa Kingdom: The History of an Extinct Vietnamese Culture*. Translated by Walter E. J. Tips. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

³ As a surprising coincidence we had both Varman and Maran names in the ancient Pandyan Kingdom in Tamil Nadu.

⁴ Vina is a stringed instrument of Indian origin which usually has four strings on a wooden fingerboard with movable frets and a gourd resonator at each end.

Mỹ Sơn was the site of the most important Cham intellectual and religious centre. It is believed that it has served as a burial place for Cham kings. Mỹ Sơn is the finest example of the Champa civilisation and its grandeur can be considered at par with the other Indic inspired big cities of Southeast Asia: Angkor (Cambodia), Bagan (Myanmar), Ayutthaya (Thailand) and Borobudur (Java).

Mỹ Sơn became a religious centre under King Bhadravarman in the late 4th century and continued to flourish for almost a thousand years (13th century). Most temples were dedicated to Cham kings associated with divinities, especially Śiva, who was regarded as the founder and protector of Champa's dynasties. The sanctum sanctorum of the first Hindu temple at Mỹ Sơn was dedicated to Bhadrēśvara, which connected the name of King Bhadravarman with Īśvara, another name of Śiva.⁵

The linga inside was discovered in 1985 while new excavations were going on there. Dated to be from the 8th century, it is unique to see that Śiva was worshipped in human form rather than in the form of linga. At an altar inside, a standing statue of Śiva was found which is now kept in the Đà Nẵng Cham Museum. If you visit the Museum, you would find a large panel of dancing Śiva alongside the fine image of Nandin, his bull ride. On the left side of Śiva is his son Skanda (under a tree), his wife Uma and a devotee. You can also see on this panel a Ṛṣi who is also dancing. The two music players are sitting under a tree, one with two drums, and the other with a flute. The panel also features a finely carved lion – which is associated with Śiva's consort, Parvati in her Durga form. The lion is also a symbol of royalty.

Many of us are largely unaware of the presence of Hindus in Vietnam who are known as Cham living in the region of modern-day central Vietnam from the 7th century onwards. Their population is now merely about 60,000 and their traditions are still alive for centuries. With no connection now with India, the Cham cities were named after the Sanskrit words such as Indrapura, Sinhapura, Amaravati, Vijaya and Panduranga; these Hindu people and their culture continue to flourish to this day. When we study the history of Champa kingdom and its people, we also come across its culture which is still alive though with some changes.⁶ Champa was a strong kingdom connected with the Indian cultural traits. The sea trade made them extremely rich where the language (Sanskrit), art and architecture, and socio- religious practices

⁵ Sahai, Sachchidanand. *Bhadreshvara : A Forgotten form of Shiva in India and South-East Asia*. B.R. Publishing Corporation, 2016.

⁶ Coedes, George. *The Indianized States of Southeast Asia*. University of Hawaii Press, 1975.

flourished. Its most talked port was Kattigara which about two thousand years ago, the Roman explorer Ptolemy⁷ wrote about. The Cattigara port can be found marked especially in his map of the world. Modern scholarship has confirmed Cattigara⁸ as the forerunner of Saigon (modern day Ho Chi Minh City). Cattigara⁹ was, in fact, the main port at the mouth of the Mekong River, a name derived from Mae Khong, the Mother Ganga.

Historically, Champa was divided into five regions. Indrapura (present-day Dong Duong) served as the religious centre; Amaravati was the present-day Quang Nam province; Vijaya was today's Cha Ban; Kauthara is identified with the modern Nha Trang; and Panduranga exists today as Phan. Panduranga was the last Cham territory to be conquered by the Chinese who entered Vietnam.¹⁰

The 'celebrated' Christopher Columbus had made an attempt to reach the Champa Kingdom. As in previous three journeys, he erred in this fourth one too. The political powers of Spain and Portugal knew the highly profitable trade routes of Europe connecting it with India would further provide immense opportunities in the region of South and Southeast Asia. Like others, Columbus however, wanted to restore the disrupted direct trade links with India and the West.¹¹

In his fourth journey, Columbus thought that he had reached Champa though he had landed up in Costa Rica!¹² By sailing west from Spain, he was pretty sure that by keeping going straight from the west, he would reach the Cape of Kattigara and other ports off the Vietnamese coast. The lure of the famous gold mines of the Champa Kingdom brought him to the wrong location! The folly of his fourth voyage perhaps saved maritime Southeast Asia from the onslaughts of European powers as each one was having a cut-throat competition to be much richer.

⁷ Claudius Ptolemy is also said to be an Egyptian or Greek.

⁸ Chakravarti, Adhir K. "Early Sino-Indian Maritime Trade and Fu-Nan." In *Early Indian Trade and Industry*, edited by D.C. Sircar, 101–117. Calcutta: University of Calcutta, Centre of Advanced Study in Ancient Indian History and Culture, Lectures and Seminars, no. VIII-A, part I, 1972. Also published in *The South East Asian Review* (Gaya, India) 20, nos. 1 & 2 (1995): 5–14.

⁹ The name has been borrowed from Sanskrit *Kirti-nagara* कीर्ति-नगर "Renowned City" or *Kotti-nagara* कोर्ति-नगर "Strong City"

¹⁰ Majumdar, Ramesh C. 1927. *Ancient Indian Colonies in the Far East*. Vol. I, Champa. Lahore: Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot.

¹¹ Herrmann, Albert. "Der Magnus Sinus und Cattigara nach Ptolemaeus." *Comptes Rendus du 15me Congrès International de Géographie, Amsterdam, 1938*, tome II, sect. IV, *Géographie Historique et Histoire de la Géographie*, 123–128. Leiden: Brill, 1938.

¹² Cohen, J.M., ed. *The Four Voyages of Christopher Columbus*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.

As stated above, Mỹ Sơn became a sanctuary where the Hindu religious motifs were in abundance. It was a centre of great literary activities. If we see the pictures taken by French archaeologists in the late 19th century, there were about 70 structures in this Complex. Unfortunately, now only 25 of them survive. Most of them including the main Tower were destroyed by the US air force bombers during their leisure times in the Vietnam War (1968-1969).

ANOTHER LINGA AT MỸ SƠN

At the top of Mount Ba, the ancient Son Tien Tu pagoda is still revered by surviving Cham communities as the most spiritual and sacred place in the entire country. Situated at a height of 3 meters, Ban Chan Tien has a footprint belonging to a Hindu God who “set his footstep on soft land at the dawn of humankind.” Nearby, at the recently opened Archaeology Museum, Oc Eo, a large Sivalinga and yoni are kept in its copied shape. A sequence of the seated Lord Ganesa’s statues adorn the walls.

In recent times, the Vietnam Government has shown keen interest in preservation of the Mỹ Sơn heritage. The Indian government has also stepped in to provide conservation of the Cham temples inside the Complex. In 2013(June), the then Prime Minister of Vietnam officially announced that nationwide 30 images are identified as National Treasures of Integral Import to the Nation, and his Government is committed to protect. Interestingly, among these are several Indian artifacts, such as the images of Visnu, Surya, Durga and Siva from the Champa region.

LANGUAGE AND SCRIPT

Another reason to study Indology in Vietnam is the abundance of the Sanskrit legacy in the country. The Võ Cạnh inscription is one of the most ancient Sanskrit inscriptions discovered in the region. It is surprising that the Da Rang River valley in central Vietnam has been the place to discover many such Sanskrit inscriptions. Their discovery is one of the most fantastic aspects of India’s past to be found in Vietnam.

The Cham people also developed their script which is connected with the Brahmi Grantha script which came from the south Indian shores. The Cham communities used the script with their own modifications throughout many centuries as evidenced in their manuscripts available today. During the French rule, the Latin script was imposed upon the entire country including Cham. Today, the Cham script is highly valued but the fact is that there are hardly any experts left in the country who know the classical Cham script.

The Cham language is still spoken by nearly 200,000 people, and its content of Sanskrit inspired words needs to know this ancient past of the region. It seems that the richness of Sanskrit in India

was pervasive almost at the same time as what we find in use in Vietnam and elsewhere in other Southeast Asian languages. In fact, we can say that this region of Chams in Vietnam played a significant role in the globalization of Sanskrit.

THE CHAM PEOPLE TODAY

The Cham people in Vietnam are, though Hindu mostly, have a small number (known as the Eastern Cham) following Islam. It was due to the Arab traders who frequented the coastal Champa. However, their percentage among the Cham population is small and the majority practice Hinduism. Again, a small part of them are known as Cham Bani and the rest are called Cham Balomon.¹³ Despite going through several attempts to make them as a lost ethnic group, the smaller number of Chams left have kept their traditions intact. Their reverence and rituals still take place in temples, the festivals are still celebrated, and the Cham society features several Indic practices which are evident in the weddings, births and last rituals. Along with the Balinese Hindus in Indonesia, the Chams in Vietnam represent the only remaining non-Indic populations of indigenous Hindus surviving today in the world. But the Hindu Cham Bolomons (to a certain extent the Cham Bani too) are facing the challenges of modern times. With the little resources left, and the impact of modern materialism, the young Chams are moving out of their areas, and find very little time to continue their socio-cultural life of their ancestors. Though true, some efforts have been made to protect and promote the rich traditions of Cham Hinduism, it is still a long way to go.

To the contrary, the tiny Cham Muslim population in Vietnam has been more successful in preserving their cultural past. Strong cultural and financial ties have been woven between the Cham Muslims and the outside Muslim communities which has resulted not only in creating new places of worship (masjid), but it has also helped in growing motivated groups of preachers who move among the Chams to inspire them and facilitate their financial requirements. This global connection helps the Cham Muslims to flourish.

THE CHAM ELDERS

There is a group of elders among Cham Hindus who act as their 'priests'. They are however not well aware of the antiquity of the Chams. On the subject of their culture and people, they hardly know the past. On the origin of the Cham Balamon, some of these leaders refer to Java in Indonesia a few thousand years ago. On their connection with India, they know nothing very specific except

¹³The word *Balamon* is none other than the *brāhmaṇa* which denote the social group of Brahmins in India.

the fact that the Indians used to come to the coastal Vietnam of Champa kingdom since the second century AD, and the Chams adopted Hinduism as their religion. The trade connection was affected after continuing for over one thousand years. The Indian merchants thereafter stopped coming not only to Champa but also to most of the parts of Southeast Asia. This was replaced by the growing power of Islam which came along with the Arabs.

The Chams have also today forgotten many of their festivals. However, it is highly interesting and a subject of academic interest to note that the Saka era-based New Year is still there. It is celebrated in a big way and the Chams join together in one of the ancient Cham Hindu temples in their vicinity.

The diminishing continuity of the Cham Balamon traditions and culture among the young people is another important area to be studied and researched by Vietnamese scholars.

There are four Cham temples where they gather to worship today: Po Nagar, Po Rome, Po Klong Garai and Po Dam. The Chams are aware of the Temple complex of Mỹ Sơn in Đà Nẵng and in recent times, an interest has grown among them to visit this place.

The official presence of Vietnamese language in daily life and also in the schools has led to a situation where reading and writing of Cham language would disappear in a century or so. With the influence from Vietnam growing bigger, very few young people know how to read or speak properly. This would also mean the loss of their ancient rituals and beliefs.

There are some efforts to continue the Cham legacy in Vietnam and the official Cham festivals have been started in recent times. But there is more to be done to study Cham history and traditions. The universities in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) have initiated the Cham Study programmes, and UNESCO has also started to protect it. But there is still a long way to go for the protection and preservation of the Cham heritage.

INDIANS IN MODERN VIETNAM

By 1867, the French had captured southern Vietnam before spreading all around. In the next 50 years, they laid the foundation for modern infrastructure with the construction of highways, railways, ports and dockyards along with the banks and the post and telegraph network. In the 1880s, the French brought the Tamils from Pondicherry and Karikal in India where they had political control. They worked for the French in developing these infrastructures. While referring to Vietnam's modernization, one cannot forget the Chettiar community from the Tamil area who landed up in Vietnam for trade and money lending.

According to the 1937 population count taken by the French regime, there were around two thousand Indians living in Southern

Vietnam (Cochin China), and another one thousand were residents in northern Vietnam (Tonkin) and central Vietnam (Annam).

An estimated 3,000 - 4,000 Indians lived in South Vietnam in the 1950s and 60s, very few were in North Vietnam. Out of 1000 Indians estimated to be in Saigon in the 1950s, about 400 of them were from the French territories in India, and the remainder were Gujarati from Bombay (the present-day Mumbai) and Sindhi merchants from Sindh province of India. Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Indians were all present.

During the Vietnam War, the unfavourable economic and political situations in South Vietnam caused the exodus of Tamil money lenders and traders. Among Indo-Vietnamese, the War created a fear of suffering and loss. Therefore, a large exodus of such people was seen in those days.

India had supported Vietnam's independence from France, and also had stood against the US intervention in the Vietnam War. India after the unification of Vietnam was one of the first countries to recognize the unified Vietnam.

We can broadly divide Indians in Vietnam under two categories: pre-1975 Indo-Vietnamese, living in Vietnam since late 1800s, and those post- 1990s Indians who came to Vietnam recently after the implementation of the Doi Moi economic reforms, as entrepreneurs, business people, professionals and foreign workers. The majority of Indian Vietnamese were South Indian (e.g. Tamil), however a sizable minority were North Indian (e.g. Gujratis, Sindhis, Punjabis). Many Indo-Vietnamese lived in Saigon, but some also lived in other cities and towns like Đà Nẵng, Đà Lạt, Huế, and Nha Trang. The pre-1975 Indo-Vietnamese are very few in number today in Vietnam. As of 2011, there were about two thousand people of Indian origin who are settled in Vietnam, mainly in the Ho Chi Minh City area.¹⁴

ORIGIN OF MODERN HINDU TEMPLES

The Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon) are over 100 years old. In the late 19th century, the Tamils from Pondicherry constructed the Mariamman Temple in a gopuram architectural style. In the 1950s, the Tamil Chettiars built two Hindu temples, namely Sri Thendayutthapani Temple and Subramaniam Temple, using Indian craftsmen, builders and sculptors. Their architecture was based upon the laid temple architecture practice in India. Therefore, you feel like being in a temple in India's Tamilnadu where the Madapam and the pradakshina space for

¹⁴ Some of them have Vietnamese wives. Their offsprings have Tamil names but they are not able to converse in Tamil.

circumferential walk are essentially found. The Hindu temples are also serving for both Hindus and local Buddhists in both religious festivals. This is an important aspect which needs to be studied by the Vietnamese Indologists.

THE MODERN TEMPLES AND THEIR MANAGEMENT

For many decades, the Indian Hindu temples remained closed. In 1993, the temples re-opened for worship following the negotiations between India and Vietnam at the diplomatic level. To mark the friendship between these two countries, each temple exhibits the flags of India and Vietnam at the entrance. However, the persons looking after such Temples are appointed by the Vietnamese authorities. For running the Temples, the support came from the Indian communities. As per the temple regulations, the caretakers cannot take money directly from the devotees, the latter make donations into the sealed box kept in front of the main deity. Since there is no external financial support to the temples, all temple expenses are met from such collections.

OTHER INDIAN RELIGIOUS PLACES

The scholars in Vietnam can also delve into other religious activities by the migrant Indians. The Tamil Muslims have built several mosques in Ho Chi Minh City in the 1930s. They include the Central Mosque (Thánh Đường Đông Du :Dong Du Mosque), Jamia Al-Musulman, the Chợ Lớn Mosque (Thánh Đường Chợ Lớn), and the Jamiul Islamiyah Mosque. It can be a unique study by visiting such places. Also, the Sikhs have built a gurdwara (Sikh temple).

WHAT INDIA CAN DO FOR INDOLOGY IN VIETNAM

The Indians require first of all to understand the past glory of Champa kingdom in Vietnam. Then only the present-day Chams can be studied. The establishment of the Chairs in the Universities in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City and Đà Nẵng can be also very important. Offering young Vietnamese scholars to learn and research about the Cham history and culture would be also another great initiative. This can be possible by both private and government level efforts. The visit of Cham Balamon priests to India can make them feel connected with the Indian art, architectural wonders and the various facets of Indian culture which can be known only by such visits.