India-Vietnam Religious Interactions through A Study of Hindu Temples in Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract: With the Indians' arrival in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in the 19th century, the first Hindu temple was erected to meet their worshipping demands. Currently, there are three remaining Hindu temples in the city, namely Mariamman, Sri Thenday Yuthapani and Subramanyam Swamy temples. Initially meant for Indians only, they later became places of cultural interaction between a culturally rich India and the prosperous modern city of Saigon. This paper is an attempt to study the cultural-religious interaction between India and Vietnam through the study of Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. Based on John Wesley Powell's concept of acculturation and Itamar Even Zohar's theory of polysystem in cultural and literature research, the paper argues that the blending of aspects of Indian traditional religion with new elements of Vietnamese religion created unique features of religious activities of Indian diaspora in Vietnam.

1. Introduction

In 2017, Vietnam and India celebrated the 45th anniversary of bilateral diplomatic relations, the 10th anniversary of their strategic partnership and the first anniversary of their comprehensive strategic partnership. This close relationship is the outcome of a long process of India-Vietnam commercial and cultural interactions which began in ancient times. When the bilateral relationship is strengthened to new levels, the need to study its various dimensions is also increased.

In the context of India's implementation of their soft power strategy and Vietnam's performance of the cultural diplomacy strategy up to 2020, the cultural dimension has attracted the attention of academics specialising in Indian studies in Vietnam. So far, there has been no serious study about the Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. There are three remaining Hindu temples in the city, namely Mariamman, Sri Thenday Yuthapani and Subramanyam Swamy temples, all of which were built following the South Indian temple architecture

style. These temples were built when the first Indians set foot in the land of Saigon (the previous name of Ho Chi Minh City) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the period of French colonialism. Initially, the temples were meant for Indians only, but later they became places of interaction between a culturally rich India and the prosperous modern city of Saigon, also known as "the Pearl of the Orient". Cultural interaction is generally a two-way process, and during the long period of mingling with the local Vietnamese, Indian culture was also influenced by the indigenous culture of Vietnam. The blending of Indian traditional culture with new elements from Vietnamese culture created unique features of Indian diaspora in Ho Chi Minh City. Today, these temples have become the living proof of the India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions and important sites for those who wish to study the cultural dimension of India-Vietnam relations[2].

2. India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions: Deep roots in history

Historical evidence shows that Vietnam and India have had cultural-religious interactions very early in history. As pointed out by Geetesh Sharma, the two countries have a shared heritage of over two thousand years, which is marked by its typical continuity and proven by hundreds of temples and stupas scattering central and southern Vietnam. The earliest contact between Vietnam and India is related to Buddhism [2, p.16]. Recent research has shown that, Indian Buddhism was introduced to Vietnam directly by sea in the second and third centuries B.C. during the time of Emperor Ashoka. Buddhism was first introduced to Do Son area, in Hai Phong City of Vietnam before spreading to China. Archaeological sites in Kien An, Thuy Nguyen, Tien Lang and An Lao districts in Hai Phong show that, the land covers nine mountains jutting out to the sea, thereby creating rich archaeological values in Hai Phong in the prehistoric period [5]. During this time, Vietnam was under the reign of the Hung King dynasty. Do Son, Hai Phong was a busy trading centre at that time. From that location, there were many ways to get to other trading centres in northern Vietnam such as Luy Lau, Ke Cho and Pho Hien. It was also from there that Chu Dong Tu[3] spread Buddhism to Pho Hien, Ke Cho and Luy Lau. Among these places, Luy Lau in Bac Ninh province became a famous Buddhist centre in Vietnam. In the latter half of the second century B.C., two Indian monks, namely Mahajavaka and Kalyanacuri, came to Luy Lau and their presence can still be seen at Dau pagoda in Bac Ninh province [4]. From Luy Lau, Buddhism made its way to China (in Banh Thanh and Lac Duong). This was also acknowledged by Chinese scholars of the 20th century such as Hu Shih and Feng Youqing their works [5]. As pointed out by Prof. Le Van Toan, the affirmation of the direct introduction of Buddhism into Vietnam before its spread China is important not only in terms of chronology, but more importantly, because it means that the Buddhism that came to Vietnam was "original" Buddhism and not diffused by Chinese Buddhism[4] [5].

Hinduism came to Vietnam a little later, in around the first century A.D. Archaeological evidence shows the influence of Hinduism

in Funan (*Phù Nam*), Oc Eo and Champa cultures. According to Ngo Van Doanh, in the first century A.D., Indian merchants crossed the ocean to travel to the land of the Far East for doing business. On these trading ships were also Brahmins who took care of religious rituals. It was these Brahmins who played an important role in the dissemination and popularisation of Hindu culture in the region. With the passage of time, various Hindu kingdoms were founded in Southeast Asia. In Vietnam, Funan and Champa were the first Hindu kingdoms, and were established in the first century A.D. Scholars in India and elsewhere know about the Ayudhaya Kingdom of Siam (Thailand), the great Borobudur temple in Indonesia, wide Indian influence in Java, Sumatra and Bali (Indonesia), and Angkor Wat of Cambodia is very well known. But it is less well known that the first Hindu kingdoms outside India were established in the region that is now the territory of Vietnam.

Thus, the influence of Indian culture in general, and Hinduism in particular, is deeply rooted in Vietnam. India-Vietnam interactions started very early and they have continued to the present day. Traces continue to be seen in various Champa and Hindu temples in South and Central Vietnam. Hinduism co-existed with other religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam. More recently, during the French colonial period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several Hindu temples were built in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) to serve as places of worship and community activities for the Indian diaspora when they came to the city.

In Vietnam, researchers have so far focused on the cultural-religious interactions between Vietnam and India in ancient times. Ngo Van Doanh's books on Champa ancient culture throw light on the Indian influence in Champa's art, architecture and social-religious activities. Geetesh Sharma's book on "Traces of Indian Culture in Vietnam" traces the establishment of the Hindu kingdoms in Vietnam, the excavations of archaeologists at important sites such as My Son temple complex in Central Vietnam… G. Sharma's book is a rare document, touching on the Hindu temples in Saigon, though very briefly [2, pp.118-123]. The proceedings of the international conference themed "Indian Values in Asia" in Ho Chi Minh City (2012) includes various articles identifying Indian elements in Vietnamese history such as "Studying the Indian factor in Funan state model" (Nguyen Trong Minh); "Hindu temples in India and in Oc Eo Culture" (Dang Van Thang); "Indian Civilisation and the development of Funan Kingdom" (Nguyen Duc Hoa); "Influence of Indian Culture in Vietnamese Buddhism" (Tran Hong Lien); "Traces of Indian Culture in Central Vietnam" (Le Dinh Phung); "Relationship between India and Funan Kingdom from the first to the seventh centuries" (Phan Nu Quynh Thy and Tran Thi Cam Tu); and "Indian values in Oc Eo culture: a case study of Go Thap - Dong Thap" (Le Thi Sinh Hien, Huynh Thi Le My).

It is easy to see that most of the research on Indo-Vietnam cultural-religious interaction focuses on Buddhism and Hinduism in ancient times. As a result, the more recent cultural-religious interactions between Vietnam and India are virtually neglected. There has been no serious research on the advent of Indian diaspora to Vietnam during the colonial period (late 19th and

early 20th centuries). Similarly, there has been no serious research on Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. This paper is an attempt to cover this gap.

3. Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City: Living proof of India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions

When the Indian people set foot in the land of Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) in the 19th century during French colonialism, they built the first Hindu temples in the city to meet worshipping demands that were still an inseparable part in daily life in the new land. In all, there were four Hindu temples established, namely Mariamman, Sri Thenday Yuthapani and Subramanyam Swamy and Ganesha (or Elephant) Temples. The fourth temple, Ganesha Temple, was located at 139 Thuan Kieu Street, District 1, in a thinly populated area. This temple is no longer in existence. After 1975, due to the process of urbanisation, Ganesha Temple was demolished to clear land for the construction of high buildings and its main statue was relocated to another place. All the four temples were constructed according to South Indian temple architecture rules. Mariamman Temple is dedicated to Mariamman, a Hindu female deity, Goddess Mariamman. Thenday Yuthapani and Subramanyam Swamy Temples are dedicated to Lord Murugan, a Hindu male deity and the son of Shiva, who is also known as Kartikeya, the War Lord. For the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City in the old days, these temples were not only the places of religious rites and worship, but also places of public meetings and get-togethers.

3.1. Subramanyam Swamy Temple

Subramanyam Swamy Temple is located at 98 Nam Ky Khoi Nghia Street, District 1, one of the oldest and busiest streets in Ho Chi Minh City. This was the first Hindu temple to be constructed in the city. The Vietnamese community in the city called this temple by a local name, - *"Đền Ông"*. There is no historical data available to indicate the year of construction of this temple; however, people believe that it was built around 200 years ago. But according to Geetesh Sharma, the temple was built about 300 years ago. This is because the first Hindus who came to Saigon must have arrived before the 19th century and then could only think about the need to build a temple for their own community after their business was consolidated and became prosperous [2, p.120]. This process must have taken at least two to three generations.

Compared to other Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City, Subramanyam Swamy Temple has the largest synagogue (main worship hall), although the whole area may not be as large as other Hindu temples. The main deity of the temple is the War Lord Murugan, the son of Shiva. In Hinduism, Murugan symbolises victory in war, and wisdom and love. Within the temple, there are various statues of other deities such as Shiva, Parvati, Krishna, Brahma, Vishnu, Hanuman and even the Buddha. Pictures of eminent persons such as the Saint Sai Baba, the poet Rabindranath Tagore and great leader Mahatma Gandhi, are also displayed inside the temple. On the right and left sides of Lord Murugan's statue are Valli and Deivayani respectively. Lord Ganesh is located on the right side of Murugan. Rahu

and Ketu are at the right and left sides of Lord Ganesh. A mouse is placed in front of Lord Ganesh. Behind the mouse, a "*palli pedum*" (sacrificing platform) is situated. On the left side of Murugan, Lord Venkatesh is with Goddess Lakshmi and Andarl on either side. Vasantha Mandapam for Utsava Murthis is located at the right side of the entrance. Near the temple entrance, a picture of Bala Krishna is housed in a specially made colourful *gopuram* structure[5]. A red painted horse *vahana* (vehicle) is in the main hall of the temple.

The special feature of this temple is the presence of Navagrahas at the right side of the temple on a tiled platform. The Navagrahas (deities of nine planets)[6] were constructed in 1928. Navagrahas are dressed with differently coloured silk clothes. Flowers and joss sticks are kept in porcelain containers. For the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City, Subramanyam Swamy Temple is a place for wedding rituals. All newly wedded Hindu couples in the city come here to perform religious rituals.

The caretaker of the temple is the Ramasamy family. Mr Ramasamy is a person of Indian origin. His father was a Chettiar (South Indian origin) and his mother is a Vietnamese. He was born and raised in Vietnam. He was married to a Vietnamese lady and they had two sons. Mr Ramasamy had Swami Shivananda's book on "Shiva Worship" which he often used for daily prayers. When he passed away, his wife, Mrs Bui Thi Yen undertook the responsibility of caretaker of the temple. Today, the temple is under the management of the Cultural Management Board of District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. This temple is not very popular among Vietnamese community.

3.2. Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple

Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple is located at 66 Ton That Thiep Street, District 1, Ho Chi Minh City. Researchers in Vietnam are of the view that Sri Thenday Yutthapani Temple appeared in Saigon in 1880[7]. The old name of Ton That Thiep Street was Ohier. Ohier was considered the busiest and prosperous neighborhood of Indian diaspora - the Chettiars, who were famous for their banking business, usury and currency exchange. Most of these people were French so they received high numbers of favours from the colonial government as "non-Vietnamese Asians". Ohier was considered an exclusive area for the Indian community in Saigon. Thanks to their wealth and prosperity, Indians could build the great Hindu temples in Saigon, and Sri Thenday Yutthapani Temple is one of them. According to Geetesh Sharma, this temple was built more than 100 years ago and did not suffer any serious damage during the wars. The architecture and decoration inside the temple remains intact.

Thenday Yuthapani is another name for Lord Murugan. So, similar to Subramanyam Swamy Temple, the main deity of Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple is Lord Murugan, the son of Shiva, and the War Lord. This temple is often called as Chetty temple as it was built by the Chettiar community and its official name is "Administ Pagoe Chetty"[8].

The structure of the temple includes the main shrine and a beautiful *gopurum* on the flat roof of the temple. The statues of several Hindu gods and goddesses are on all sides of the *gopurum*. Various scenes are beautifully carved and painted at the

bottom level of the *gopurum*, such as: four handed Subramanya seated with Valli (coloured blue, which indicates her hunter race) on his right side, and Deivayanai on his left, with a snake and peacock in front of Lord Murugan; Shiva, Parvati and Ganesh on his left and right sides respectively and a mouse in front of Ganesh; blue Rama holding a bow in his hand with Sita and Lakshmi on his left and right sides respectively and Hanuman sitting at the foot of Rama; Brahma (with four faces and four hands) with his consort, Saraswati. On the top level of *gopuram*, other figures are carved, such as: Arumugaswamy (Murugan with six faces), Shiva on a sitting position with one leg down and resting on a demon, Mahavishnu in sitting position with his consort Lakshmi.

In addition to these carvings, there are several other statues inside the temple, including the peacock, Idumpan and other guardian figures. Another feature of this temple is the presence of four beautifully painted *vahanas* (vehicles) to take the deities on procession during festival days. They are a yellow cow, swinging red horse, brown sheep and fierce looking Idumpan. This temple has both inner and outer paths in order for the devotees to walk around the deities while performing religious rituals.

In the old days, during the important Hindu festivals, the Indian community came to the temple to perform religious rituals such as the procession of Hindu deities by horse carriage. The processions of the deities used to be a grand ceremony. On such occasions, horse carriages with Hindu deities were carried around the city to the accompaniment of Indian music. In addition, Indians also performed the Thaipusan ritual on the full moon days of January and February, according to Indian calendar. Hindus believe that they would be cleaned of all sins on these days by carrying out strict religious rituals such as piercing the body with sharp objects, including parts of the body such as the tongue and mouth. Today, the grand procession is no longer performed and the horse carriages are only for display inside the temple.

After 1975, the Indian community in the city was significantly reduced and the temple became very quiet. The municipal government gave the Muthiah family the task of caretakers of the temple. Muthiah is a person of Indian origin and has a Vietnamese wife. They have three children. His whole family is dedicated to the temple service. Today, both Vietnamese and Indians visit the temple. Most Indian businessmen visit the temple when they come to Ho Chi Minh City. Sri Thenday Yuthapani symbolises the synthesis between Hinduism and local religion. This is evident because of the fact that, within the temple yard, there is a Boddhisattva statue - a popular goddess of the local Vietnamese people. Today, Sri Thenday Yuthapani opens daily from 6 a.m. to 7 p.m. for visitors and devotees. On special days such as the first and fifteenth days of the Vietnamese lunar calendar and on Hindu festival days, the open hours are extended to 8 p.m.

3.3. Mariamman Temple

Mariamman Temple is located at 45 Truong Dinh Street, District 1 and is the busiest Hindu temple in Ho Chi Minh City. The most accurate documents concerning the history of the Mariamman Temple, which

has been confirmed by the Temple Management Board, say that Mariamman Temple was built in the early 20th century, by the Chettiar community living in Saigon. In Vietnam, Mariamman Temple is known by a number of different names: *Chùa Bà Ấn* (Indian Goddess Temple), *Chùa Bà Đen* (Black Goddess Temple), *Đền Ấn Độ* (Indian Temple). But the official name written at the entrance gate of the temple is "*Đền Bà Mariamman*" which means "Mariamman Goddess Temple".

Initially, Mariamman Temple was only a small shrine with sheet-metal roof (corrugated iron roof) and meant for the Hindu devotees. In 1950-1952, the entire temple was reconstructed with the architecture that we see today, by the Tamil community living in Saigon. Many construction materials and temple idols were brought from India. Tamil craftsmen were also brought to Saigon to build the temple.

During the years of the great transformation of Vietnam in the decades that followed - marked by the national struggle for liberation from the French and American domination - the temple was at times abandoned. But the temple survived the hard times and became living proof of Vietnam-India cultural-religious interaction. After the reunification of Vietnam in April 1975, the Government of Vietnam took over the temple and turned part of it into a joss stick factory. Another section of the temple was occupied by a seafood processing company - the seafood used to be dried in the sun on the roof of the temple.

In 1990, the temple was re-opened for public worship. However, there were marked changes in the religious activities of the temple. The worshippers of the temple were no longer confined to Hindu devotees; it was extended to include many local Vietnamese people. Thus, from then until now, Mariamman Temple has become a place of worship for Vietnamese.

The main deity of Mariamman Temple is goddess Mariamman (in Tamil language). In Marathi language, Mariamman is also known as Mariaai. Both Mariamman and Mariaai are also known as "Mother Mari". "Mari" in Tamil language means "rain". It also means "change" or "transformation". Mariamman is the main goddess of South India, worshipped predominantly in the rural areas of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra. Mariamman is closely associated with the Hindu goddesses Parvati and Durga. Mariamman is considered by many to be the South Indian incarnation of Goddess Kali. In Mysore, Mari meant Shakti or power. Mariamman is often depicted as a beautiful young woman with a red face and red dress. Sometimes, she is depicted as having many hands and carrying many weapons to show her power. She is often depicted in two styles - a gentle, soft style or a fierce style.

According to many Hindu devotees in South India, Mariamman is the goddess of fertility and lushness. She is worshipped as the mother of the universe and believed to have the power to bring about good weather for agriculture. She is also the goddess of curing diseases, particularly smallpox. In South India, Mariamman festivals take place during the late summer or early autumn season. During festive season, the grand festival, as known as "Aadi Thiruvizha" (monsoon festival) - is assigned to Mariamman. Her worship mainly focuses on bringing about rains, and curing diseases like cholera, smallpox and chicken pox.

There are many anecdotal stories/myths regarding the Goddess Mariamman of which the most common is the story about the disease of smallpox and its treatment. One legend has it that she is the wife of Thiruvalluvar, a Tamil poet who was an outcast, so they are boycotted by the people. She caught smallpox and went to beg for food from house to house, using the leaves of the neem tree (*margosa*) to keep the flies off her sores. Miraculously, she recovered from her disease and people began to worship her as the goddess of smallpox. Also since then, in order to keep smallpox away, neem leaves are hung above the main entry ways of the Indian people's home[9].

Another story involves the beautiful, virtuous Nagavali, wife of Piruhu, one of the nine Rishis in Indian tradition. One day, the Rishi was away and the Trimurti (the three Hindu gods, i.e., Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) came to see if her famed beauty and virtue were true. Nagavali did not know them and, resenting their intrusion, turned them into little children. The gods were offended and cursed her, so her beauty faded and her face became pock-marked as if she has had smallpox. The Rishi returned, and finding her disfigured, drove her away, declaring she would be born a demon in the next world and cause the spread of a disease which would cause people to resemble her with the ugly looks.

Goddess Mariamman is a folk deity who placed women's experience at the centre stage. Myths about Mariamman and similar goddesses contain stories of women - both divine and human - violated, exploited and betrayed by men. But their courage and purity brought them vindication against the males whose behaviour threatened their person. Mariamman symbolises sacrifice,

motherhood, abundant wealth and good health. Her unique form of worship was overlooked or even dismissed by male dominated spiritual scholars. She was reduced to being a village deity. Unlike Brahmanical goddesses, Mariamman is represented by the natural features of Mother Earth. Mariamman is concerned with local interests. She is worshipped for fertility of earth, prosperity in the form of rain, good crops, protection from natural calamities - even ghosts and demons [7].

Inside Mariamman Temple, the statue of Mariamman is placed at the centre of the main shrine. The lion Simha Vahanam statue is placed to the left of the temple door. On the left and the right of Mariamman main shrine are the shrines of her two guardians - Maduraiveeran (to her left) and Pechiamman (to her right). In front of the main shrine, Ganesh and Murga are worshipped on the right and the left respectively. Outside the main shrine, there are two *lingas* placed on *yonis*. The main shrine of Mariamman is considered sacred and people are not allowed to enter, only priests or the caretakers of the temple can enter. On the floor in front of the main shrine, favourite offerings are placed, including joss sticks, jasmine, lilies, rice, fruits, salt, and oil. The wooden stairs, on the left of the main hall, lead to the roof, where we can see two colourful towers covered with many figures of lions, goddesses and guardians. People come to the back wall of the main shrine, put the face on the marble slabs to pray to the Goddess, believing that the Goddess can hear their wishes and turn them into reality.

As mentioned above, after 1990, Mariamman Temple started attracting a large

number of both Vietnamese and Indian worshippers. In fact, the number of Vietnamese worshippers is much larger than Indians. The reason for this is that the local Vietnamese feel this goddess worshipping is close to the Vietnamese mother worshipping cult. In addition, Mariamman Temple is reputed to have miraculous powers. Devotees have experienced the power of Mariamman for a number of years, which strengthened their beliefs. Thus, within the temple domain, there is a process of acculturation thereby merging Vietnamese and Indian religious practices to become almost inseparable.

Regarding the temple's activities, it should be noted that, apart from religious functions, the temple has also undertaken charity and social relief activities, helped the poor, people with disabilities, and the elderly. Besides, robust ritual activities take place every day. Today, everyone, irrespective of religion and race, come here to pray for peace, health and success. There are two time frames for the devotees to worship, i.e. between 8-9 a.m. and 7-8p.m. On important days such as Fridays and the first and the fifteenth days of the lunar calendar in Vietnam, there is one more time frame for worshipping rituals between 10-11a.m. According to Hindu tradition, Friday is the day of Mother Goddess Shakti, another incarnation of Mariamman. According to Vietnamese tradition, the first and the fifteenth days are considered sacred for visiting the temple. Thus, it can be seen that the Indians and the Vietnamese have their own religious spaces within the temple complex. They are very cordial towards each other.

In the old days, during Mariamman Festival, celebrating the birthday of Mariamman (annually, in October), the Mariamman statue was placed on Simha Vahanam statue and the statues were carried around the city of Saigon in a street procession. Then, the statues are brought back to the temple and there was an "Archer shooting" ceremony on the highest roof of the temple. These arrows were made from coconut leaves hanging around the temple, sometimes it is mixed with mango leaves. There are a few bows to be shot in every direction by a priest. People believe that if anyone caught one of these arrows, he/she would be very lucky. The story goes that there was a girl in the house next to the temple who was lucky to catch a sacred arrow of Mariamman and now this girl has become a middle-aged woman who lives a happy and wealthy life[10]. In India, the Mariamman Festival coincides with the time of Navrati Festival[11] which takes place over nine-ten days, worshipping the incarnations of Durga.

Today, these processions are no longer undertaken. For most Indians living in Ho Chi Minh City, the complicated religious rituals and processions are no longer so important in their daily lives. They advocate for simplicity and harmony. Their own traditional culture combined with new elements from Vietnamese culture has created a distinct culture feature of Indian diaspora in Ho Chi Minh City today. It is also very interesting to see many Vietnamese offering incense and fruit to the Goddess Mariamman. For young Vietnamese people, Mariamman Temple is among the most sacred of temples in the city that can answer prayers for a partner/marriage or for having children. Mariamman Temple has also attracted many travellers from other parts of Vietnam or abroad. All the visitors belonging

to different ethnic groups and coming to pay respect to the Goddess transcend the boundaries of ethnic difference: before the Goddess, there is only devotion and sincere hearts, and everyone is equal.

After 1975, it was a fact that, although Indians expressed their solidarity with Vietnam's struggle for liberation, most Indians fled the country in fear. These temples were then requisitioned as storehouses for a period of time, but later was returned to the priests and Hindu devotees. With the innovative and open policy of the Vietnamese government in late 1980s, these temples were well-preserved and restored.

4. India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions: Interpretations

Culture is constantly changing as it is also influenced by many social, cultural and geographical factors. Cultural interaction is generally a two-way process. The long process of India-Vietnam cultural interactions has helped the local Vietnamese enrich their own culture. At the same time, the Indian diaspora have also been influenced by Vietnamese native culture.

The India-Vietnam cultural interaction/ acculturation can be explained using the concept of acculturation firstly propounded by John Wesley Powell in 1880, and the polysystem theory in culture and literature research given by Itamar Even Zohar [3]. According to Powell, acculturation is a reciprocal interaction between two cultures [1, p.74]. This interaction sometimes occurs disproportionately, and as a result, one of the cultures is drawn into, or is altered by the other culture; or both the cultures alter. The concept of acculturation was introduced when

Western anthropologists conducted research on the interaction between European immigrants in America and indigenous peoples that led to the transformation of the culture of indigenous peoples. The white European population came to America, leading to the transformation of the indigenous culture in the direction that the indigenous culture is drawn/attracted by the white culture. Scientists call this phenomenon a cultural assimilation of indigenous peoples.

More recently, Itamar Even Zohar, Professor of Culture Research at Tel Aviv University (Israel), introduced the polysystem theory in culture and literature research. In Zohar's view, contact is the relationship between cultures by which items from culture "A" may be present in culture "B" and vice versa. Interference is a process that occurs in the environment of contact - where the transfer takes place. Zohar has offered nine hypotheses about cultural interference, including:

a. Interference will always occur;

b. Interference is most of the time unilateral;

c. Interference does not necessarily take place at all levels of a culture;

d. Contact sooner or later will produce interference, if conditions for resistance do not appear;

e. Interference occurs when a system requires items that are not available within that system;

f. A culture becomes a source culture by reputation;

g. A culture becomes a source culture by dominance;

h. Contact occurs with only one part of the target culture, and then spread to other parts;

i. A suitable category does not necessarily maintain the characteristics and functions of the source culture [3, p.159].

The phenomenon of cultural-religious interaction between the Indian and Vietnamese communities at the Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City can be interpreted on the basis of Powell's concept and Zohar's theory. Although the Indian community accounts for a very small proportion of the population of Ho Chi Minh City, their culture and religion have had significant influence on the spiritual activities of indigenous peoples. As a result of the contact, the Vietnamese community in Ho Chi Minh City has been attracted by India's rich culture. The phenomenon of a large number of Vietnamese people visiting Mariamman Temple in District 1 and the absorption of Hinduism into their culture can be explained in several ways, based on Even Zohar's theory. *Firstly*, the contact between Indian and Vietnamese communities has deep historical roots. This is the basis of India-Vietnam cultural interactions in recent times. *Secondly*, as Zohan pointed out, contact sooner or later will produce interference, if conditions for resistance do not appear. In this case, Indian people and their religion came to Vietnam by way of peace and did not provoke resistance, so it is easily accepted by the local people. *Thirdly*, the influence is brought about because of the reputation of the source culture; Indian culture is a rich culture of five thousand years and is among the most enduring and revered civilisations of humankind. Thus, the Vietnamese seem to be attracted/drawn to Indian culture rather than the other way round. However, interference in this case is not unilateral, but

rather, bilateral. The Indian people have also changed their religious activities, forms of rituals and worship in order to adapt and integrate into the Vietnamese environment and society, although this change is largely superficial. Internally, Indians keep their own cultural identity.

An example that illustrates the change of the Indian people in their way of life in order to adapt to the local life in Ho Chi Minh City is the rite of Mariamman procession. In the past, Mariamman festivals were often organised in a grand fashion. Mariamman statue, sitting on the back of the lion, was carried through the streets of the Ben Thanh area. Today, this custom has changed markedly. On the festival days, only a symbolic procession is undertaken and the goddess statue is carried around the temple grounds. Obviously, the change in the culture of the Indian community occurs only in form, while the cultural changes of the Vietnamese community takes place in depth because it is a change in the mind of the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese received new elements of Indian culture and enriched their own culture. Traditionally, Vietnamese society has been able to reconcile with different religions easily. Reconciliation is a characteristic of Vietnamese culture. Religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Confucianism all co-exist in Vietnam without any remarkable conflict [2, p.123]. Religious activities at Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City are good examples of religious reconciliation of Vietnam.

In a discussion with Ms Sadhna Saxena, a Hindi lecturer who has settled in Vietnam for more than 20 years, regarding the issue of adaptation and adjustment of the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City, she said

that, nowadays, Indian residents in the city do not go to these Hindu temples very often because they feel it is more comfortable to perform religious rituals at home. Religious activities of the Indian diaspora in the city have become a more internal domain. In the context that going to the temple for prayer is not convenient, the Indian people prefer to have their daily prayers at home. Thus, the flexibility of Hinduism is also a factor that helps its devotees keep their religion in any condition. In Vietnam, the people are free to follow or not follow any religion, so Indians feel comfortable to practice their religion, and they do not think that they have to compromise their beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The deep roots of India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions are reflected in the introduction of Buddhism and Hinduism to Vietnam in ancient times. In modern times, this interaction continues in various parts of Vietnam, including Ho Chi Minh City in the south of the country. When the Indians came to Ho Chi Minh City in the 19th century during the period of French colonialism, they built the first Hindu temples in the city. Today, three Hindu temples remain active, namely Sri Thenday Yutthapani, Subramanyan Swami and Mariamman temples. In the beginning, these temples were meant for Indians only, to serve as places of worship as well as public places of meeting and get-togethers with the Indian community. With the passage of time, the temples became places of cultural convergence/interaction between a culturally and religiously rich Indian community and a luxurious urban city. Today, they have become the living proof of positive India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions. They are valuable sites for those who wish to study the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City or to learn about the cultural aspect of India-Vietnam relations. The presence of the three Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City today continues to show that, at the time the temples were built, the number of Indians living in this area was large. That is why there were not just one or two, but four temples, and today three of those temples remain active. Using John Wesley Power's concept of acculturation and Itamar Even Zohar's polysystem theory in culture and literature research, one can interpret India-Vietnam cultural-religious interactions as an inevitable outcome of contact. India and Vietnam had contact very early in history which led to the deep roots of their cultural-religious interaction. Through the contact, Vietnamese local culture is attracted by the rich culture of the Indians. As Indian culture came to Vietnam by way of peace, it could easily hold a position in the hearts of the Vietnamese people. The intermingling of Indian and Vietnamese communities inevitably led to the transformation and adaptation of both cultures. The Indian community changed their way of life and religious practice to adapt to the local environment and conditions. The Vietnamese community also absorbed new elements of Indian culture to enrich their own culture. This interaction has not led to the disappearance of one culture but has created unique features for both groups. Both the cultures have been enriched and renewed.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Photo 1: Subramanyam Swamy Temple

Source: Author

Photo 2: Sri Thenday Yuthapani Temple

Source: Author

Photo 3: Mariamman Temple

Source: Author

Notes

[1] The paper was edited by Diane Lee.

[2] This research was funded by the Vietnam National Foundation for Science and Technology Development (NAFOSTED) under grant number 601.02-2018.300.

[3] Chu Dong Tu is a legendary figure and is a well-known saint, one of the Four Immortals of Vietnamese religious belief. The Four Immortals of Vietnamese beliefs are Tan Vien Son Thanh (Son Tinh - Mountain God); Phu Dong Thien Vuong (Thanh Giong - War God symbolising anti-foreign invasion and the strength of the youth; Chu Dong Tu (symbolising love, family life and wealth); Lieu Hanh Princess (Goddess Lieu Hanh - symbolising spiritual activities, prosperity, virtue). Among these four figures, the first three are male gods that are mentioned in the legends of the Hung King Dynasty;

the last is the only female god, who was added to the belief system during the later Le dynasty.

[4] Interview with Prof. Le Van Toan, Founding Director of the Centre of Indian Studies, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics, 6 November 2017.

[5] Gopuram is a monumental tower, usually ornate, found at the entrance of any temple, especially in the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Telangana of southern India. The tower forms a prominent feature of Hindu temples of the Dravidian style. They function as gateways through the walls that surround the temple complex. The Sanskrit word gopuram can be broken to "go" which means either "a city" or "a cow", and puram, "a town" or "a settlement". In Tamil, gopuramis derived from the two words, i.e., "ko" and "puram" meaning "king" and "exterior" respectively. The gopuram's origins can be traced back to early structures of the Pallava kings, and relate to the

central shikhara towers of Northern India. By the 12th century, under the Pandya rulers, these gateways became a dominant feature of a temple's outer appearance, eventually overshadowing the inner sanctuary which is obscured from view by the gopuram's colossal size. It also dominated the inner sanctum in a mount of ornamentation. A gopuram is usually rectangular in form with ground-level wooden doors, often ornately decorated. Gopurams are exquisitely decorated with sculpture and carvings, and painted with a variety of themes derived from the Hindu mythology, particularly those associated with the presiding deity of the temple where the gopuram is located. Above is the tapering gopuram, divided into many storeys which diminish in size as the gopuram tower narrows. Often a temple has more than one gopuram. They also appear in Khmer architecture, as at Angkor Wat, outside India. Sri Ranganathaswamy Temple in Srirangam, Tamil Nadu is the tallest gopuram in the world.

[6] Navagraha or Graha means "nine houses" in Sanskrit. They are deities who personified forms of major celestial bodies in Hinduism and Hindu astrology. They include the Sun, the Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn, and the ascending and descending lunar nodes, known as Rahu and Ketu respectively.

[7] Both Chettiar or Chetty are titles used to indicate various mercantile, agricultural and land owning castes in South India, especially in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

[8] Chettiar is a title used by various mercantile, agricultural and land owning castes in South India, especially in the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala.

[9] The neem tree (Azadirachtaindica) is native to India and the Indian subcontinent including Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Its fruits and seeds are the source of the neem oil.

The neem leaves and flowers are the most important part of the Mariamman festival. The goddess Mariamman statue is garlanded with neem leaves and flowers. During events such as celebrations and weddings, the people of Tamil Nadu adorn their surroundings with neem leaves and flowers as a form of decoration and also to ward off evil spirits and infections.

[10] There is this practice because, it is believed that, Mariamman used to live in the forest. She used the bow and arrows daily for hunting. Unfortunately, one day she was hit by the diverted arrows of other hunters. As a result, she became holy and was worshipped by South Indian people in the temple. She is at times considered the reincarnation of god Shiva, often appearing in many different forms.

[11] Navrati or Navaratri is a festival dedicated to the worship of Hindu deity Durga. The word "Navaratri" means "nine nights" in Sanskrit. During these nine nights and ten days, nine forms of Devi (deity) are worshipped. The tenth day is commonly referred to as "Dussehra" (also spelled Dasara). Navaratri is an important major festival and is celebrated all over India. Diwali - the festival of lights - is celebrated twenty days after Dussehra.

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