

India-Champa: Shared Cultural Heritage in Southeast Asia

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Abstract: The Champa Kingdom, which flourished from the 2nd to the 19th centuries in what is now central and southern Vietnam, played a significant role in shaping the cultural, political, and economic landscapes of the Southeast Asia. The remnants of Champa's civilization, including its temples, inscriptions, and artifacts, offer a glimpse into its rich heritage and influence. This paper focuses on the Indian impact on the Champa Kingdom which is a testament to the dynamic interplay of cultural exchange and adaptation. The profound influence of Indian religion, art and architecture along with social practices on Champa highlights the importance of India in shaping the cultural and historical development of the Southeast Asia. The author studies the enduring influence of the Champa culture and how it continues to be a source of inspiration, fostering a relationship built on shared history, cultural affinity, and mutual respect for both countries of India and Vietnam.

Keywords: India, Vietnam, Champa Kingdom, Chams, religion, culture.

Subject classification: Cultural studies.

1. Introduction

At a time when we talk about “ASEAN as the cornerstone of India's Act East Policy and the Indo-Pacific vision,” we need to re-look at the relation which goes more than 2000-year-old (Jaishankar, 2024). The Cham culture played a crucial role in shaping the political, economic, and artistic landscape of Southeast Asia. From the

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2nd century AD onward, the expansion of commercial interactions with Indian traders, population growth, and the need for a more structured administrative system likely contributed to the emergence of multiple kingdoms across the Indochina Peninsula. These kingdoms were profoundly influenced by Indian social and religious traditions, encompassing both Buddhism and Hinduism. The historical and cultural linkages between the India and Champa abound our mythologies and ancient literature. The ancient name of this region as Campa occurs in many Sanskrit inscriptions of that country as “Campadesa, Campapura or Campanagara while the kings are mentioned as Campesvara, or Campapura-paramesvara” (Deshpande, 1970: 475). Michael Vickery (2011) remarks about the record of early Champa royalty in the Sanskrit inscriptions of C96 dated 658 CE (Vickery, 2011).

Historians point out that economic and cultural links can be traced back to the 2nd century BC to the Champa Kingdom, which flourished around central and southern Vietnam and has played a significant historical role in shaping the cultural and trade connections between present day India and Vietnam. The ancient relics of Champa in Mỹ Sơn stands a time-tested testimony to our civilizational inheritance. “Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary and its remarkable architectural ensemble dates from the 4th to the 13th centuries CE and is located in the Duy Xuyên district of Quảng Nam province, in central Vietnam. It represents a vivid picture of an important phase of the history of Vietnam, the South East Asia region and its confluence with India. The heritage was recognized as a National Site in 1979 by the Ministry of Culture of Vietnam and as a Special National Site in 2009 by the Government of Vietnam. In 1999, World Heritage Committee of UNESCO inscribed the site as a world heritage site” (Embassy of India, Hanoi, 2023). And “the Governments of India and Vietnam entered into a Memorandum of Understanding for conservation and restoration of the World Heritage site at Mỹ Sơn in 2014. Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was assigned the task of conservation and restoration work of A, H & K temples at the Mỹ Sơn Sanctuary. Following the approval of the detailed project reports prepared by ASI, the Government of India deputed a team of specialists on site from 2017 to 2022 to take up conservation and restoration works of identified A, H & K Group of Temples” (Embassy of India, Hanoi, 2023).

It not only carved its own unique cultural identity but also forged lasting links with the Indian subcontinent. Under this backdrop, this paper covers the legacy of the Champa and its profound impact on the contemporary relations between India and Vietnam.

2. Historical context

The Cham culture played a significant political, economic and artistic role in the history of Southeast Asia. Since the 2nd century AD, probably due to the intensification of the commercial contacts with the Indian traders, with the growing of the population and the necessity to face with a more complex system of administration, it is believed that different kingdoms emerged, scattered in the Indochina peninsula, deeply influenced by the Indian social and religious model, both Buddhist and Hindu.

Archaeologists, geographers and historians have traced the land and sea-routes leading to 'Indianisation of Southeast Asia' since the very early period. It is believed that Kalinga (ancient name of Odisha province in India) had close maritime interactions with the ancient kingdom of Champa (Vietnam). Though there is very little research on this subject, it can be predicted that this cooperation must have been a part of India's ancient 'Act East Policy.' In words of legendary historian R. C. Majumdar, "one of the most splendid though yet unwritten chapters of Indian history is the story of the growth of new India in the Far East" (Majumdar, 1927: xxiv). This minuscule research to trace the political, economic and cultural interactions amongst the two ancient regions of Champa and Kalinga has led to resumed interest in the subject.

The people of Champa were known as Chams, and were engaged in maritime commerce with the Kalinga region in India. The Indians from Kalinga found a hospitable home in Champa, intermingling with their cultures, customs and traditions, language and beliefs. Discovery of pottery and inscriptions along with the architectural style, carvings and designs, floral motifs and the long-standing monuments speaks a lot about the affinities and socio-cultural similarities between Champa in Vietnam and Kalinga in India. The people from Kalinga influenced the political, social, economic and religious life of the Chams in an extraordinary manner and the remnants of that hallmark are still accessible in Vietnam. The architectural style of Mỹ Sơn relics which is today a UNESCO World Heritage site, and the ancient archaeological remains scattered in the coastal areas of Vietnam from Đà Nẵng to Bình Thuận province speaks about these historical legacies.

Followed by maritime trade, the cultural diffusion between Kalinga and the Champa took place in the waves of religious spread, beginning with Hinduism and followed by Buddhism and Islam. With that the religion also came language and literature, art and architecture, social and cultural festivals, and norms and values of

governance and administration. "The local people readily assimilated the new civilisation and adopted the religion, art, social manners and customs, alphabet, literature, laws and administrative system of the conquerors" (Majumdar, 1927: xxiii). A renewed interest in cultural and spiritual awakening has bestowed a fresh perspective to understanding and retracing the Kalinga-Champa linkages. R. C. Majumdar (1927), talks about existence of the ancient trade-routes between the eastern islands and the coasts of Bengal, Orissa, Madras and Gujarat. "Generally, the Indians proceeded by sea to the East and Southeast from Tamralipti, Kalinga, Masulipatnam and Broach. In addition to the sea-route they also proceeded to the East and South-East by land-route through Eastern Bengal, Manipur and Assam" (Majumdar, 1927: xiii). He further adds, "The colonists who proceeded by sea established the famous kingdoms of Champa (mod. Annam) and Kamboja (Cambodia) in addition to many other notable kingdoms in lower Burma, Malay Peninsula and the islands of Sumatra, Java, Borneo, Bali etc" (Majumdar, 1927: xiv). According to G. E. Gerini (1909), a double stream of emigrants from India flowed into Indo-China at a very early period.

One proceeding from the north advanced overland, through Manipur and Burma and influence the northern part of Indo-China as far as Tonkin Gulf and Chinese borders; the other coming from South reached Indo-China by sea, and its influence extended mainly over Malay Peninsula, Siam, Kamboj and Southern Annam. Thus, it will be seen that Northern Indo-China owes its early civilisation to settlers from Northern India; while its southern portion, including the Malay Peninsula and Archipelago, is indebted for its ancient development to adventurers and colonists from the Coromandel and Malabar coasts (Gerini, 1909: 122-123). He adds, "From the Brahmaputra and Manipur to the Tonkin Gulf we can trace a continuous string of petty states ruled by those scions of the Kshatriya race, using the Sanskrit or the languages in official documents, after the Indu style employing Brahmana priests for the propitiatory ceremonies connected with the Court and State. Among such Indu monarchies we may mention those of Tagong, upper Pagan, and Sen-wl, in Burma; of Muang Hang, C'hieng Rung Muang Khwan, and Dasarna (Luang P'hrah Bang) in the Lau country; and of Agranagara (Hanoi) and Champ in Tonkin and Annam (Gerini, 1909:122-123).

Historian D. G. E. Hall (1955: 28) elaborates "Archaeological evidence shows that the centre of its power lay just to the south of the Hue region, in the modern Annamite province of Quang-nam, which is so rich in archaeological sites that it was evidently the sacred territory of Champa". G. Coedès (1944) further looks into the process of Indianization. According to him, "the region's assemblage

of cities and states, as well as ideas about finance, military organization, and apotheosed rule, had all been the result of a protracted series of interactions with Indian traders and priests. It also introduced advanced ideas of rule and religion and new kinds of religious monuments, based on Hindu and Buddhist ideals” (Chapman, 2018: 1).. The kingdom extended along the eastern coast of Vietnam from the centre to the south and was divided into several parts, of which Quảng Nam was considered as the holy land of the Chams.

Indian historian Kalidas Nag (1957) studied the Indian influence in Southeast and wrote: “Bold Indian mariners were starting to found their culture-colonies in Champa and Cambodge” (Kalidas, 1957: 23). According to him, “From the 3rd century A.D. we find inscriptions in Indian language and script, in different parts of Indo-China, especially in Champa and Cambodge. Indian religion and art influenced profoundly the life of the people for about 1,000 years” (Kalidas, 1957: 32). He believes that, “Champa was divided into four provinces: Panduranga, Kauthara, Vijaya, and Amaravati.” (Kalidas, 1957: 32). He further say, “the earliest inscriptions so far traced in Champa (Vietnam), Java and Borneo were written in Sanskrit and in purely Indian scripts. Isolated centres of trade and commerce, founded by the Indian merchants and mariners, developed gradually into big cultural zones and finally into the Hindu colonies and empires like that of the ‘Shree Vijaya’ in Indonesia and of the Hinduised kingdoms of Champa and Cambodia in Indochina. Small local sanctuaries gradually developed into colossal architectural marvels. He also studied about the extent to which, “The Brahmanical and Buddhist leaders as well as Indian merchants, princess and intellectuals cooperated intensively with the gifted indigenous population and thus laid securely the foundation of Greater India.” (Kalidas, 1957: 57-58).

Panduranga kingdom, whose people were known as the Chams, and owing to the strong trade connections that they had developed with ancient India, became deeply influenced by the Hindu religion, as evident from their religious practices and artworks. “During the visit to the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage site of Mỹ Sơn in Quảng Nam province, the President of India in Nov 2018 expressed his appreciation for the close collaboration between the two sides that has facilitated Archaeological Survey of India’s effective implementation of the Project for the conservation and restoration of three temple groups at the heritage site” (Embassy of India, Hanoi, 2023). The President of Vietnam welcomed India’s support for the Cham community, including the building of the Cham Community Houses and Schools and Cham culture research programs in Ninh Thuận province” (Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, 2018). In May, 2020 team of the ASI discovered an 1,100-year-old monolithic sandstone Shiva lingam, a representation

of Shiva, it was seen as a moment of great pride by India. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar announced the discovery saying “it reaffirmed a ‘civilisational connect’ between India and Vietnam and is a ‘great cultural example of India’s development partnership.’”

3. Cultural and religious impacts

Regarded as one of the oldest kingdoms of Southeast Asia, Champa was greatly influenced by three dominant religions: Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. Careful attention has been paid to the Indian aspect of Cham art, architecture and religious influence. However, it has not been possible to present a very clear picture of such a continuous cultural contact between India and Champa till the discovery of the numerous Sanskrit inscriptions and other researches in the art and archaeology of that region mostly by French scholars. Georges Maspero’s *Le Royaume de Champa* originally serialized in *T’oung Pao Journal*, March 1910-April 1911, and published in book-form in 1914 (English translation in 1928) provides an overview of Champa which was an Indianized kingdom that controlled what is now southern and central Vietnam. The book looks into the political history of Champa with an analysis of social and economic conditions along with its art and architecture. The inscriptions were originally published in French. Henri Parmentier who carried out large-scale excavations on the sites of the Buddhist monastery at Đồng Dương (Indrapura) and the Hindu temples at Mỹ Sơn has done monumental work on art and architecture of Champa in his seminal work, *Inventaire Descriptif des Monuments Chams de l’Annam* (1918).

Philippe Stern in his book ‘The art of Champa and its evolution’ (*L’art du Champa ancien Annam et son évolution*, Toulouse, 1942), reclassified the monuments of Champa and its sculptures and presented a new chronology based on the study of decorative motifs. The classification as suggested by Stern has been widely used in research works related to the history of Cham and other Southeast Asian arts. Other works on this subject is by Jean Boisselier (Boisselier, 1963). The author reviews the development of stone sculptural art in Champa, from the origins of the art form in the 7th century at a number of sites along what is now Vietnam’s central coast, through its several temple complexes of Đồng Dương and Mỹ Sơn to its eventual decline under the pressure of invasions by the Mongols as well as neighbouring Khmers and Vietnamese, in the 13th - 15th centuries.

Percy Brown (1959) in his book ‘Indian architecture’ noted the similarities between the Kalingan and Champa architectural styles (Brown, 1959). According to him, “in the architectural remains of the Chams there are definite evidences that their civilisation was fundamentally Brahmanical, although in the 10th century, there was a short interval when Buddhism was favoured.” All the structures at Hindu

temple city of Mỹ Sơn, Buddhist site Đồng Dương and Po-Nagar near Nha Trang indicate about their Indian ancestry. The tall tower called as Kalan, is the chief feature of Cham architecture corresponding to Shikhar of the Indian style. “The temples were constructed in groups of three, the principal shrine being in the centre, with its subsidiary shrines placed on either side” (Brown, 1959).

Hermann Jacobi (1895) has outlined the historical connections in Uttaradhyayana Sutra (Hermann, 1895: 108-111). This literature mentions the maritime contact between Kalinga and Champa. In Chapter 21 titled ‘Samudrapala’, Jain Sutra refers to “Campa, there lived a Sravaka, the merchant Palita, who was a disciple of the noble and venerable Mahavira. As a Sravaka he was well versed in the doctrines of the Nirgranthas. Once he went by boat to the town of Pihunḍa on business. A merchant gave him his daughter while he was doing business in Pihunḍa. When she grew, he took her with him on his returning home. Now the wife of Palita was delivered of a child at sea; as the boy was born at sea (samudra), he was named Samudrapala. Our merchant, the Sravaka, went leisurely to Campa, to his house; in his house the boy grew up surrounded by comfort.”

French scholar, Jean Francois Hubert lays down, “From the eighth to the fifteenth centuries, Cham civilisation was mainly Hindu (without forgetting Buddhism – essentially in sculpture – from the end of the ninth and the beginning of the tenth centuries), which is to say that it borrowed from India its cults, principally that of Shiva, its language, Sanskrit, its social structure (four classes) and its concept of royalty” (Hubert, 2005: 18). Geetesh Sharma (2010) discusses how Indian traders, merchants, artisans, adventurous young princes and scholars played important part in the spread of Indian culture and religion in this region (Geetesh. 2010). He has meticulously studied the relevant materials recovered from the ruins of Vietnam by the historians and archaeologists of various countries and convincingly argues that though the Hindu rulers professing Hinduism and Buddhism, ‘patronized Indian learning, art and architecture’, in course of time, considered themselves as ‘part and parcel of Vietnam’ and ‘the Indian culture got completely submerged in the local culture’.

The inscription of Vĩ Cảnh, written in Sanskrit of about the 2nd or 3rd century A. D., shows them to have already thoroughly imbibed the Indian civilisation. It refers to the royal family of Sri Mara establishing a Hindu dynasty in Champa. “The Chams, as such, never played any distinctive part in the political history of the country. They cheerfully submitted to their foreign masters and adopted their manners, customs, language and religion. They were politically merged in the Indian elements and there was a complete cultural fusion between the two races” (Majumdar, 1927: 21).

Bhadravarman has been regarded as one of the most important kings in ancient Champa. His full name was Dharma-maharaja Sri Bhadravarman. He has

been identified with the erection of a temple to Siva, under the name of Bhadresvara-svami, at M̃y Son. This temple became the national sanctuary of the Chams. King Bhadravarman seems to have been a scholar and it is expressly laid down in the inscription No. 4 that he was versed in the four Vedas. Another important ruler was the king Gangaraja who is mentioned in inscription No.12 as having abdicated the throne in order to spend his last days on the Ganges. The abdication of the throne and retirement to India are certainly very striking coincidences, and the identification, although by no means certain, is undoubtedly very probable. Some important information about Rudravarman is obtained from inscription No. 7.

We are told that Rudravarman belonged to the Brahma-Ksatriya family and that during his reign the famous temple of Mahadeva, called Bhadrevara-svami after its builder the king Bhadravarman, was burnt by fire. "The sanctuaries at My Son demonstrate the unique cult and cosmological concept of Cham royalty in which the Śivaite cult is represented in the form of worship of both linga as a phallus and a statue of Śiva in human form side by side. This double system of worship is represented by the royal linga at M̃y Son B1 and the standing Śiva at M̃y Son C1 as well as those at M̃y Son A1 with A4 and E1 with E4; these were the most significant places in the royal cult of ancient Champa. The worship of the specific cult of Lord Śiva of M̃y Son together with the worship of Goddess Bhagavati, Śiva's sakti in the form of Po Nagar Nha Trang reflects a cosmological dualistic cult of the Cham dynasties based on Hindu culture" (Trần Kỳ Phương, 2011: 235-55). It is believed that Hinduism was Champa's state religion, although Mahayana Buddhism was embraced for a while between the 9th and 10th centuries. However, Islam was later introduced to Champa where it became very widespread. Today, it is Islam that is the dominant religion among the descendants of the early people of Champa (Nakamura, 2000: 55–66). There are two hypotheses on the coming of Islam to Champa as follows. Firstly, Islam could have been brought to Champa by Arab, Persian or Indian merchants from the 10th to the 14th centuries. Secondly, Islam might have been introduced later by Malay immigration.

Most historians believe that it was not until the fall of Vijaya in 1471 that there was a significant Muslim community among the Cham population in the region. It is believed that the period 1550-1650 was the critical phase of Islamization and Christianization in Southeast Asia. By the seventeenth century, a considerable portion of the Cham population had probably converted to Islam.

4. Art and architecture

The Cham sculpture was essentially the expression, direct or indirect, of the Indian, Brahman or Buddhist pantheon as interpreted locally. "The spirit of Shiva is

omnipresent in Cham sculpture (Hubert, 2005: 31). It has been worked in a variety of materials, principally sandstone, but also gold, silver and bronze, and primarily illustrated themes from Indian mythology. Visnu is also mentioned as Narayana Hari, Govinda, Madhava. Vikrama, Tribhuvanakranta. "He is depicted on a pedestal of Mỹ Sơn temple. He also appears riding a Garuda and holding sankha. Laksmi, the consort of Visnu is also referred to as Padma and Sri. The representations of Gajalaksmi are also met with. At Tra-kien, she is shown as holding two lotuses" (Boisselier, 1963: figs. 62 and 111). The Cham rulers professing Hinduism and Buddhism set up a socio-political structure on the ancient 'Brahmanical and Buddhist Indian Model' and patronized Indian learning, art and architecture. Although the rulers considered themselves to be a part and parcel of the native soil, yet the Indian culture dominated in every sphere of life. Later on, however, the Indian culture got completely assimilated in the local culture" (Geetesh, 2009: 25).

According to R. C. Majumdar, "Buddhism had also a fairly strong hold on the people of Champa. Buddhism seems to have obtained a great deal of royal favour, and statues and temples of Buddha were erected by kings and people alike. There was also a powerful community of Buddhist monks and we hear of erection of monasteries in different parts of the kingdom" (Majumdar 1927: 209). He further lays down that, "the evidence of inscriptions and sculptures thus leads to the conclusion that although not so predominant as Saivism, Mahayana form of Buddhism had a great hold on the country. King Sri Jaya Indravarman deva VII was evidently a great patron of this sect. It is believed that he was learned in the doctrines of Mahayana and installed several Mahayana deities (No. 81)" (Majumdar, 1927: 213).

It is believed that, "the establishment of the well-known monastic complex at Đồng Dương, built in the vicinity of the Indrapura, by Indravarman II marked the heydays of Buddhism at Champa and appears to have been an important stronghold of Buddhism. The religious complex at Đồng Dương stood as the state citadel and all the major Buddhist activities were centred at Đồng Dương Mahavihara, indicated by the epigraphic evidence that proclaims its celebrated position as the principal sanctuary of the Indrapura dynasty" (Abira, 2018: 205). Excavations have unearthed the remains of a Buddhist temple, far greater in dimensions than the largest Brahmanical temple in Champa. Several images of Buddha have also been discovered amid the ruins. The patronage of the Buddhist sangha provided a way for royal authority to penetrate and incorporate the local political structure (Nguyễn Thế Anh, 1993: 98 - 114).

To quote R. C. Majumdar, 1927:

"The An-Thai Ins. (No.37) dated 902 A.D records the erection of temples and monasteries by kings Bhadravarman and Indravarman, apparently at the request of, and out of respect for a monk called Naga puspa.

Again, the Nhan-Bieu Ins. (No. 43), dated 911 A. D., records that a dignitary of Champa erected a temple of Avalokitesvara and a monastery, called Vrddhalokesvara, apparently after his grandmother, princess Lyan Vrddhakula.

A large number of Buddhist gods and goddesses received the homage of the people. Some of these divinities are named in Kim Choua Ins. (No. 93) viz Sri Jina Paramesvara, Sri Jinalokesvara, SriSaugatadevesvara, SriJina Vrddhesvari and SriJinadevadevi.

It is a notable fact that Temples of Siva and Buddha were often erected side by side by the same donor (cf. Nos. 28, 31, 43). The reciprocal influence of these two religious sects is also indicated by the fact that Buddha was called Damaresvara (No. 123), the lord of Damaras or Bhutaa, an epithet originally belonging to Siva. It is also a note-worthy fact that figures of Siva decorated the famous Buddhist temples of Đồng Dương”.

Vietnamese Buddhism absorbed elements of Indian Buddhist traditions, creating a unique blend that is evident in the religious and cultural landscape of Vietnam. “This kind of syncretism led to the development of unique artistic style and iconographic forms of both Hindu and Buddhist deities, where the Shaivite faith had a great impact on the Buddhist rituals and practices” (Abira, 2018: 199). The transmission of Buddhism from India to Vietnam also facilitated cultural exchange between the two regions. Going beyond religious aspects, these exchanges included art, architecture, literature, and philosophy.

5. Conclusion

Indian civilization exerted a profound cultural influence over these regions, leading to the emergence of a distinct Indianized cultural sphere in this distant part of the world. So long as the Hindu dynasties were in power the civilisation flourished. Gradually, in the words of R. C. Majumdar, “the savage tribes from the north, like the Thais, the Laos and the Annamites, which were hitherto kept in check, overran these countries and destroyed the Hindu dynasties after they had gloriously ruled for nearly 1300 years” (Majumdar, 1927: xii-xiv). Though a gratifying reminiscence of a glorious past endures, there is no longer any living connection between India and the once overseas territories under her influence. Consequently, an insurmountable divide was established between the Hindus and their counterparts in the Far East.

External threats from neighbouring groups, such as the Khmer from the west and the powerful Viet from the north, contributed to the kingdom’s downfall in 1471. From then until 1832, their history was defined by a series of lost battles in a struggle to preserve their identity, ultimately leading to their complete disappearance (Guidi, Russo, Angheleddu & Zolese, 2012: 361-368). Although, end of Champa coincided with the fall of Vijaya in 1471, some scholars have argued that the Champa kingdom

continued to exist until the middle of 19th century in the southern part of the kingdom of Champa called Panduranga where the largest concentration of Cham people in Vietnam is found today. The northern Champa possessed the major harbours and the main rice production areas while Panduranga was a barren area. Gradually, we see Islamization of the Cham people because of their active participation in the maritime trade network of Southeast Asia.

Although, initially introduced by Persian, Arab and Indian traders, it is also believed that the Malays as the people who propagated Islam amongst the Cham. By the 17th century, a considerable portion of the Cham population had probably converted to Islam. It is believed that, “Champa and Cham people, partly Islamized, were still very active in the maritime world during the ‘Age of Commerce’. Cham traders were found in every port cities in the region” (Shiro, 1996: 35-42).

The Champa, with its cultural richness and historical connections to India, remains an integral part of the narrative shaping the relationship between India and Vietnam. From the magnificent temples of Mỹ Sơn to the contemporary diplomatic engagements, the legacy of the Champa serves as a bridge connecting the past and present. As both nations navigate the complexities of the modern world, the legacy of Champa civilization continues to be a source of inspiration, fostering a relationship built on shared history, cultural affinity, and mutual respect.

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