

## Overview of the history of cultural development of the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

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**Abstract:** Vietnam and India are two countries that had a very early diplomatic relationship nurtured by the people of two countries over time. Among the factors that create strong bond between Vietnam and India, it is impossible not to mention the presence of Indian community. The Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City is creating the cultural diversity of this land. They have also contributed to cultural exchanges with Vietnamese, attracting investment from India, tightening relations between two countries in the new stage of development. The article uses the theory of cultural exchange and acculturation to study the socio-cultural and economic life of Indians in Ho Chi Minh City in the context of urban culture in the era of globalization. The article is designed with two main contents: First, the historical movements of Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City, Second, the acculturation and cultural exchanges between Vietnamese and Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City. The research results aim to analyze and explain the phenomenon of cultural exchange and acculturation in the fields of economics, religion, and clothing. Thereby, the article contributes to providing documents for cultural preservation, attracting investment, and developing spiritual tourism in Ho Chi Minh City.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Cultural exchanges, Globalization, Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City.

### 1. Introduction

India and Vietnam have had cultural exchange relations for more than two thousand years in the fields of religion, literature, ideology, and architectural sculpture. A typical example is the absorption of ancient Indian writing to create the Akhar Thrah writing style of Champa residents (Le Thi Lien, 2001, pp.27-38); the absorption of Sanskrit and Chinese scripts from Buddhism created the basis for the birth of Nom and Khmer scripts, making a significant contribution to preserving the mother tongue of the Kinh and Khmer people; the absorption of traditional Indian art styles in sculptures and architectural works of the ancient kingdom of Champa (J. Boisselier, 1963, p.24); along with the reception of a series of ancient Buddhist thoughts and stories in both Dai Viet and Champa, including the Six Paramitas Sutra, Jataka, Tripitaka, Old Miscellaneous Edict Sutras. Although there is still much academic debate about the position of overseas Indians in modern Vietnam, the process of cultural exchange between Vietnam and India continues to this day. Among them, the strongest Vietnam-India cultural exchange process today, the most typical is probably in Ho Chi Minh City. The consequence of that cultural exchange process is the development of cultural elements of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City, including the development of religious culture, economic culture, culinary culture, and costume culture.

### 2. Literature Review

Most of the documents by Sharma (2009), Ngo Van Doanh (2006), G. Coedes (1968), and Maspero (1928) only study cultural relations between Vietnamese and Indians in the pre-colonial period. In addition, there is a large amount of specialized demographic documents by Nguyen Van Mui (1962), Tang Xuan an (1963) and Tran Huu Quang (1964) showing that about 90% of Vietnamese people of

Indian origin live in Ho Chi Minh City, while less than 1,000 people of Indian origin live and work in Northern and Central Vietnam in the mid-20th century. Only the studies of Schrock (1966), Osborne (1979), Brocheux (1995), and Brun (2003) began to show the contributions of Indian-Vietnamese people to the market economy in both Vietnam Democratic Republic and Republic of Vietnam. Both Tran Van Giau (1957), M. Reddi (1982) and Brocheux (1995) said that because they came to Vietnam as French citizens of Indian origin and practiced loan sharking, Indians in Vietnam were viewed by both the socialist state of Vietnam Democratic Republic and the capitalist state of Republic of Vietnam as remnants of colonialism and imperialism, and were pushed to the margins of society. Phan Thi Hong Xuan (2007), Phan Thi Hong Xuan (2009), Do Hoai Nam (2011) have shown the complete opposite, which is the peaceful coexistence and completely deep concern of the Vietnamese state with overseas Indians, as a community of foreigners in Vietnam. A typical example is the birth and development of INCHAM (Indian Business Chamber in Vietnam) with 120/149 members in Ho Chi Minh City, as well as the birth and implementation of policies for people with contributions to the revolution like Ms. Bibi. However, there is almost no research that puts the process of forming the Indian overseas community in Ho Chi Minh City from the perspective of rational choice theory, or puts the development of elements of culinary culture, costume culture, economic culture, and religious culture of Indian overseas in Ho Chi Minh City from the perspective of functionalism.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### *3.1. The Process of Forming the Indian Community in Ho Chi Minh City is Associated with the Process of Finding Ways to Meet Their Legitimate Needs According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Such as the Need For Safety, The Need for Food, and The Need to Get Rich*

This is also a long and complex process with diverse and rich cultural spatial and temporal contexts. While the first wave of migration was associated with the context of Anglo-French strategic competition in India and the process of colonial exploitation in Cochinchina by the French colonialists; the second wave of migration was associated with the context of the two world wars, which affected the economic life of Indians in the British colony and the French concession; finally, the third wave of migration is associated with the post-Vietnam war context and the process of shaping India's Look East policy and Act East policy.

Rational choice theory emphasizes that individuals must often consider their motives when deciding on actions. Those motives can be factors outside the individual, existing values that influence the individual's decision to act (Le Ngoc Hung, 2008, p. 355). Those motives can also be strategic calculations depending on social relationships, characteristics and rules of the social context (Luong Van Hy, 2000, pp. 19-20). From the perspective of rational choice theory, the formation of the Indian diaspora community in Ho Chi Minh City is also associated with three main motives: to find a livelihood (Nguyen Phan Quang, 1998, p.59), to expand their own trade networks via sea (Nguyen Dinh Dau, 1997, p.26), and finally to work to serve the colonial government's study colonies (Sandhu & Mani, 1993, p.20), thereby, colonial governments could develop more effective colonial exploitation policies. Among them, the Chetty people immigrated to Ho Chi Minh City mainly with the motive of serving the French colonial exploitation. Because they were rich business owners and had pro-French tendencies, they were also the ones who mainly contributed money to build the first Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. Over time, the number of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City of Chetty origin increased, and their power increasingly dominated Saigon society in the early 20th century, only behind the French and Chinese (Son Nam, 2014, p.178). The French who had extra money often sent them money so they could lend it to the Vietnamese for interest and pay them for their work. That led to protection from the French. The newspaper New Voice of Women (Phu Nu Tan Van) issued on August 6, 1931 told the story of Mr. Candassamy in Saigon, thanks to his honesty and integrity, many French people sent him money to lend him money. When the economy is difficult, those who lack money do not have money to pay on time, and those who deposit money ask for money too quickly. This guy didn't have money to pay, so he fled to Nam Vang and hid because he was afraid of the "fire dogs" of that hot-tempered Westerner. Finally, he returned to appear in Court. The court annulled the confiscation order, and the creditors let him pay his debt in peace. In 1935, the Indian community in Saigon established the

"Southern Hindu Mutual Aid Association". The Association had the patronage of the Governor of Cochinchina at that time, Pierre Pagès, and he was honored as the Honorary President of the Association. The Association's Charter includes 14 chapters with 87 articles. The terms and conditions are clearly stipulated such as: members of the Association must be adult French Indians, joining the Association requires payment of fees, regulations on administration, and a welfare fund (The II Center of Vietnam National Archives, 2017). Bombay people immigrated to Ho Chi Minh City mainly with the motive of expanding the trade network by sea to Ho Chi Minh City. Because they did not have close economic and political relations with the colonial government like the Chetty people, the Bombay people were only the founders of large business guilds in Ho Chi Minh City (Vidy G., 1949). In addition to the 5 Chinese guilds, the local government in Saigon at that time also decided to establish Indian guilds. The decision dated December 24, 1874 allowed the establishment of two Indian guilds in Cho Lon (one for Buddhist Indians, one for Indian Muslims) and one guild for Malay expatriates (Nguyen Dinh Tu, 2016, p.546). Only workers of South Indian origin who work as horse-drawn carriage drivers, cow farmers, jewelry makers, and fabric and confectionery traders live in Cho Lon and Ben Thanh markets in multicultural Indo-Vietnamese and Indo-Khmer families. In most of the markets in the provinces in Cochinchina, they cover market tickets. In the early 20th century, right in the city center, cows still appeared eating grass on the sidewalk near the streets where overseas Indians lived (Nguyen Duc Hiep, 2010). Currently, the Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City also has a very diverse composition. A few of them are Indians, all are elderly, some still have French nationality, a few have not even acquired nationality of any country; The majority are mixed-race Indians, they are the 2nd, 3rd, 4th generations born and raised in Vietnam, have Vietnamese nationality, speak Vietnamese, and are listed as Indian ethnicity in administrative documents. The group of Indians coming to Ho Chi Minh City to work is also quite large. They come and return home when their work ends. This group cannot be included in the Indian community, but in another aspect has also created Indian identities in the economic, cultural and social life of Ho Chi Minh City. After 1975, quite a few residents of this community returned home or went abroad to live, so the dispersion in the residence of the Indian Muslim community was even higher. Besides, in the marriage relationship with other ethnic groups, most of which are Vietnamese (Indian husband and Vietnamese wife), the families of these generations still live scattered in other districts of the cities such as Binh Thanh, District 6, District 7, Go Vap District. In Saigon, in the area of District 1 and District 3 today, where Indians live and do business, it is quite crowded. The tangible cultural heritage of the Indians includes community heritage, especially religious relics, and is most concentrated in three Hindu temples and two mosques (Ngo Van Le, 2017).

### *3.2. Each Cultural Element of Overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City has its Own Function, Contributing to Maintaining Their Overall Stable Culture*

According to functionalism, each institution: economic culture, religious culture and costume culture has a certain function in the overall culture of the Indians in Ho Chi Minh City, of which the most important function is to contribute to ensuring the relatively stable existence of the cultural body of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City. Also, according to functionalism, the entire cultural system of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City can only develop when institutions such as economic culture, religious culture, and costume culture contribute and develop together. In addition, these cultural institutions also contribute to meeting other functions and needs of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City such as ensuring a source of livelihood to support them, ensuring the safety and development of individuals in all social circumstances. As long as one of the cultural elements such as economic culture, religious culture, or costume culture falls into crisis, the entire cultural system of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City will not be able to continue to adapt effectively to the natural and social environment in Ho Chi Minh City, thereby, the entire cultural system of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City will also fall into crisis.

Religious culture can only exist and develop when it still meets the needs of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City. Since the 19th century until now, since Hindu temples were built in Ho Chi Minh City, overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City have not only had a place to gather in the community and

strengthen community cohesion, but also a place to practice customs and traditions to reassure themselves before natural disasters, failures, bad luck, epidemics (Phan Thi Hong Xuan, 2007, p.110).

Thanks to the Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City, the economic culture, especially the religious economy in Ho Chi Minh City, has prospered. More and more tourists from all over come to worship Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. Not only has the economic life of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City improved, but the process of cultural exchange between Indians in Ho Chi Minh City and other ethnic communities has also become more effective. Typically, the Mariamman temple, the Gurnagar temple on A Duong Vuong street, the Hindu temple on Ohier street, and the mosque on Dong Du street have attracted Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer people to worship, and practice rituals during the Diwali and Ganesha Chaturthi festivals (Phan Thi Hong Xuan, 2009, pp.335-349).

Also, from the perspective of functionalism, it can be seen that the cultural and religious institutions of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City have contributed significantly to affirming the interaction and acceptance of integration of overseas Indians with Vietnamese people. Religious culture is an important element in the culture of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City because it deeply reflects their Hindu identity, the identity of a culture of both apsara dancers and Brahman monks. Over time, the temples have been restored many times but still retain the ancient features of Indian architecture. Today, relics have brought the city opportunities for economic, cultural and tourism development, contributing to the creation of a unique new type of tourism: tourism through cultural heritage. Indian Pagoda is a place to preserve Indian cultural imprints, demonstrating the unique architectural and cultural achievements that the Indian community has left in Saigon. Currently, the pagodas are all special architectural relics, belonging to the type of urban archaeological relics, creating an extremely unique highlight in the cultural and religious diversity of the city.

Vietnamese culture is inherently feminine. Therefore, the Vietnamese culture is ready to synthesize and transform elements of Hinduism, Brahmanism and flexibly transform with the Vietnamese Mother Goddess belief to perform rituals according to its own beliefs at Mariamman Temple. Because of the cultural similarities in goddess worship, many Vietnamese people also sincerely bring offerings to pray for health and luck. That shows how strongly the religious culture of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City has spread. Meanwhile, the overseas Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City still believes in goddesses Parvati, Sarawati, and Lakshmi to bless their businesses (Ngo Duc Thinh, 2013, p.25). One of the common characteristics of Vietnamese culture and Indian culture is unity in diversity. Therefore, they can all participate in activities at different religious and belief facilities of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City. Muslims and Jains still attend Hindu festivals and go to Hindu temples to pray. There are almost no religious conflicts among overseas Indian groups in Ho Chi Minh City (Multiple authors, 2013). Besides, the reception of goddess Mariamman into the spiritual life of Vietnamese people in Ho Chi Minh City is most likely due to the location of this temple, which used to be a small temple where Vietnamese people worshiped Linh Son Thanh Mau (Tran Van Giau & Tran Bach Dang, 1987, p.99). Therefore, when the temple was completed, residents living around the temple area still came to worship and pray.

Another illustrative example of the A people changing to integrate with life in Ho Chi Minh City is the Goddess procession. In the past, Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City often held large festivals and Goddess processions were paraded throughout the streets. During the festival (mid-October every year), the statue of Mrs. Parvathy sits on the back of the Simha Vahanam lion statue and is carried along all the roads in the Ben Thanh area. Today, this custom has been changed. On holidays, only her symbol is welcomed in the temple grounds. Contact and acculturation of Vietnamese culture in the Indian community only manifests on the surface, mainly in daily life, while acculturation of Indian culture in the Vietnamese community only manifests deeply, in the mind.

It also shows some characteristics of Indian culture in Ho Chi Minh City. Firstly, Indian culture in HCMC associated with the process of settlement and integration of the Indian communities into the Vietnamese ethnic community. It is the transition from immigrant to citizen status. The cultures of the Indians are the result of centuries of integration. On the other hand, Indian cultures also positive factors promoting the integration of Indians. Indian culture have some similarities with traditional Indian culture but are not Indian culture as in India. This is also something to pay attention to in tourism

activities, especially for tourists when learning about culture in HCMC, to avoid confusion of many people. Indian culture in Vietnam, is a part of the ethnic community culture in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Secondly, the Indian cultures in HCMC are quite diverse and rich, partly apart from the common features, there are quite distinct differences between local groups and dialects. In Ho Chi Minh City, it is the difference between the Hindu Indian community and the Muslim Indian community. Thirdly, Indian culture exist and develop in the urban space, a large city with a rich history and culture, Saigon - Cho Lon city before 1975 and Ho Chi Minh City today. The Indians in HCMC are urban dwellers. Their culture is more or less different from the Chinese and Indian culture in rural areas. Chinese and Indian culture in Ho Chi Minh City is both closed and open. Right from the beginning of settling in Saigon - Cho Lon, with the status of immigrants, overseas Vietnamese, Chinese and Indians had to take care of all aspects of their material and spiritual lives by themselves. Households must rely on community cohesion to survive and develop. On the other hand, they also have to expand their economic, social and cultural relations to integrate. That is inevitable, it must be open for development, especially living in urban areas with many ethnic groups, cultures, and religions.

From the perspective of cultural exchange and acculturation, the worship of goddess Mariamman in Indian culture or the worship of goddesses in Vietnamese culture have been formed and developed for thousands of years in people's conception of the universe and outlook on life. That shows respect for those who were born, raised, preserved for generations, is the material and spiritual fulcrum, and is the immense embrace and protection for each person in the face of all difficulties. Supernatural phenomena are gradually associated with mothers, from specific mothers to supernatural mothers. Mothers are idolized in human life. Worshipping the goddess is therefore also natural and worthy of pride in the humanity of the Vietnamese people (Doan Hoai Nam, 2013).

By the early 20th century, overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City still wore traditional costumes to return to their cultural roots. However, traditional costumes are increasingly causing inconvenience in work, labor and travel in the modern and friendly Ho Chi Minh City. Therefore, overseas Indians gradually only wear traditional costumes at home, as well as during community festivals of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City.

Acculturation is the process by which one (group) of individuals comes into continuous contact with another (group) of individuals, absorbing (in whole or in part, voluntarily or forcibly) the culture of the (group) of individual (Nguyen Hoa Mai, 2019, p.34), where indigenous cultural features combine with exogenous elements and in which some other elements are lost (Vo Thi Thu Thuy, 2013, p.31). Acculturation can also be understood as the interaction of two or more groups of people through mutual social interaction to create strong conditions for acculturation (Thomas Barfield, 1997). Acculturation can change both cultures, or change one culture to the point of losing most of its native cultural characteristics by voluntary or forced means (Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 2010, p.11). In the process of acculturation, unilateral influence from an exogenous cultural factor due to random contact between two ethnic groups is considered normal acculturation exchange (Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 2016, p.214). When two ethnic groups selectively exchange and acculturate each other, the ethnic groups adjust their native cultural forms to suit the natural and social environments. Therefore, acculturation can be seen as the adaptation of an ethnic group to a foreign culture through self-adjustment and cultural change after strong interaction with the ethnic group/culture. Other foreign countries, acculturation can lead to changes in the original cultural patterns of one or both ethnic groups (Truong Thi Bich Tien, 2005). At the same time, acculturation in that sense will include three stages: the simulation stage, the combination stage and the transformation stage to suit the national spirit and social context (Phan Ngoc, 1998). From acculturation, a series of cultural phenomena can occur during the process of cultural exchange such as deculturation, cultural rejection, cultural assimilation, and cultural resistance (Phan Thi Yen Tuyet, 1994). In the case of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City, they still keep their traditional costumes and live together, separate from the Vietnamese religious headquarters, but they still accept vibrant cultural and religious activities with the participation of Vietnamese people. Previously, Mariamman Temple was also a place for loan sharks. Today, the temple is a place for religious cohesion and activities, charity activities and social activities of the overseas Indian community in Ho Chi Minh City. Thus, it can be seen that, according to the theory of cultural exchange and

acculturation, overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City have both chosen the separation strategy in the field of costume culture and the integration strategy in the fields of economic culture and religious culture.

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, in general, from the perspective of rational choice theory, each group of overseas Indians immigrating to Ho Chi Minh City enters a different context with different motives. Among them, the Chetty group is both rich and has a close relationship with the French colonial government, supported politically and economically by the colonial government; Therefore, their lives are relatively royal, living in villas and villas near offices, commercial offices, and public administrations of the French. They are also the owners of the earliest Hindu temples in Ho Chi Minh City. Meanwhile, the Bombay group only had great economic potential, leaving a relatively unfavorable mark on the Vietnamese and Chinese who did not follow mercantilism. Obviously, the political motivation of the Chetty group is much greater than that of the Bombay group, while the economic motivation of the Bombay group is much greater than that of the Chetty group. If the Chetty group came from the French concession, the Bombay group came from the British colony. Therefore, the status and development process of the Chetty group and the Bombay group are not completely the same, even though they belong to the upper class of Indian expatriates in Ho Chi Minh City compared to the group of Tamil workers from South India. However, from the perspective of cultural exchange and acculturation theory, most of them choose to simultaneously deploy the separation strategy to preserve national cultural identity through costumes and cuisine with the integration strategy to fusion and integration of religious culture with Vietnamese and Khmer people. From the perspective of functionalism, culinary culture and religious culture both reflect the process of preserving the ethnic cultural identity of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City and their process of cultural integration with Vietnamese people and the Khmer; costume culture and economic culture show the uniqueness of the overseas Indian culture in Ho Chi Minh City, distinguishing it from the Vietnamese and Khmer people. In addition, culinary culture and religious culture have become resources to support the economic culture of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City. The cultural and religious institutions of overseas Indians in Ho Chi Minh City are not only places for religious activities, weddings, and ceremonies to increase community cohesion, but also a place to promote inter-ethnic cultural exchange, consolidating economic culture, ensuring the effectiveness of cultural integration strategies with Vietnamese and Khmer people, especially in the context of Indo-Vietnamese and Indo-Khmer multicultural families that have become increasingly popular over the past 100 years.

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