

## **India-Vietnam Relations: From Sustainable Tradition to Expanding Modernity**

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**T**he foundation of strong Vietnam-India relations is the deep and rich cultural strength of the two countries. When talking about India, we in Vietnam think of India as one of the four earliest cradles of civilisation. Of these, the Indian civilisation has been in existence from 3,000 BCE and perhaps even earlier, and has constantly enriched and diversified throughout the course of history. The other three ancient cradles of civilisation in the world were the Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Chinese civilisations. Of these, the Mesopotamian and Egyptians civilisations were completely disrupted, while the Chinese Yellow River civilisation was sometimes shaken and disrupted (as in the period of Emperor Qin Shi Huang when Confucian books were burned or the Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong).

The Indian civilisation has always been cultivated, and over time has become enriched and diversified in unity, as well as continuously become as great as the Himalayas, and as majestic as the holy Meru Peak—or the “pillar of heaven” shining with the bright light of the Eastern sky. This makes India mysterious.

India is mysterious because it is known as the land of myths and legends with so many miracles, as well as the land of fairy tales and legends of thousands of angels and gods creating a mysterious spiritual oriental path. India is mysterious because it is home to all the great religions of the world,

either founded or adopted (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, etc.) and the country is the subcontinent which has the largest number of religions in the world. Every religion in India has their own principles and doctrines but all live in peace, tolerance and kindness in an Indian house.

India is mysterious because it is one of the most religious and philosophical countries in the world. Indian philosophy is rich and diverse which has many different schools divided into two large systems: Astika (theism) and Nastika (atheism). Astika is an orthodox system, which accepts the epistemic authority of the Vedas, defends the philosophy and Hindu religion, and recognises the preeminent position of the Brahmins. Nastika is an unorthodox system, which rejects the absolute supremacy of the Vedas and many principles of Hindu philosophy. In particular, the two schools of philosophy are different but they share a fundamental point that is the way of life. This basic point is different from western philosophy. The essence of western philosophy is that awareness is within the limits of reason while in India it is the way of life. The way of life is a way in which a practitioner is a devoted human being earnestly lives and dies with his or her thoughts and expresses them in their daily behaviours and actions in life. On the contrary, awareness is the subject, which stands still on a certain ivory tower and observes

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life as an outsider looking down on the river. The reason praised and worshipped by the Western is just a small level among different levels of the truth. Ethics are the basis of reason, and reason is only a temporary means of the path to truth. Indian philosophy is based on morality, which is different from Western philosophy, which is based on reason.<sup>1</sup>

When talking about Indian culture, we think of a heroic culture. How can it not be heroic when India is the earliest cradle of human civilisation; how can it not be heroic when the Indian religions “read” for the literature to record. Over a few millennia, Indian literature has given the world many great works of spirituality and philosophy, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. India has given to the world great poets and authors, from Kalidasa to Rabindra Nath Tagore, the former a saint and the latter a great enlightened thinker of Modern India. Since ancient times, Indian culture has also been global. India did not expand the territory with hot wars to occupy the land of other countries, but it expanded its cultural boundary and occupied a cultural space outside India. Today, India is the country having the fastest economic growth rate in the world and is expected to have the third largest economy after the US and China by 2025-2030. By then, India will also be the world’s fourth powerful military, with a young labour force and dynamic growth. Therefore, India will be a model of combining economic development and the world’s largest democracy.

Vietnam too is a special nation. It is special because Vietnam originally is a country in Southeast Asia and not a part of China. The original geography of Southeast Asia includes the Yangtze

river section to the south, the southern area of Tan Lanh range and the present Assam area. The natural environment in this area was suitable for developing wet rice culture.

Anthropologically speaking, until the middle of the first millennium BCE, the Bach Viet area (Baiyue or Hundred Yue) in a broad sense, or the Viet-Muong region was basically the non-Chinese and non-Indian region. Vietnam and China are mainland Asia. Vietnam is a region of wet rice agriculture, China is a region of dry rice (planting millet, sorghum, barley). From the middle of the first millennium BCE, China expanded into the Yangtze river basin and the south area, the Bach Viet area gradually shrunk, leaving Vietnam as the only remaining representative of the Bach Viet in the past, having the status of nationality-state, and the status of nation-people. From that time, there had been similarities between Vietnam and China.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the differences between Vietnam and China came first, and the similarities of the two countries came later.

It is special because, since early times, Vietnamese culture tends to exchange, integrate and acculturate (with other cultures). The country thus has a multilingual and rich culture, and Dai Viet civilisation is among the 34 earliest civilisation of mankind. Many scholars in the world agree that the Vietnamese cultural identity was created from the cultural region of the Red River wet rice culture nearly 4,000 years ago, which was strengthened in 2,000 years of fighting and negotiating with China, as well as integrated in 2,000 years of cultural exchange and enrichment with Indian culture, and this was enough for Vietnamese culture to successfully acculturate. In addition,

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Vietnam's history of more than 4,000 years of cultural acculturation to Western culture, included both coercion and cultural dialogue. This at times was resisted and at times absorbed and had both positive and negative consequences. It was both very dialectical, and at the same time difficult to dialectically argue, but the most important thing is that Vietnam maintained its national identity while modernising.

Vietnam is also special because, from the perspective of the struggle for independence, freedom, national liberation and reunification, Vietnam defeated all stronger foreign invaders, such as the Han, Tang, Song, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties of China, as well as French colonialism and American imperialism. With the victory against all invading armies, Vietnam set a shining example of patriotism, fighting spirit, courage, intelligence and creativeness which is admired and highly appreciated by progressive mankind loving peace, justice, democracy and humanity around the world.

It is special because, from the perspective of foreign policy, Vietnam just got out of war and the embargo against the country was lifted, but Vietnam has already formulated a policy of "multilateralisation and diversification", connecting and establishing diplomatic relations with 189 countries, promoting economic, trade and investment relations with 224 markets in all continents in the world, establishing a comprehensive strategic partnership with three major countries: India, Russia and China, and having good relations with all other major countries, including the five member states of the United Nations Security Council, signing a new One Strategic Plan 2017-2021 (OSP) between Vietnam and 18 United Nations agencies. Vietnam

has been elected to many international organisations, such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (2013); chairperson of the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency 2013-2014 (IAEA); UNESCO World Heritage Committee 2014-2017; non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (the first time in 2008, the second time in 2019 for the term of 2020-2021), as well as rotating chairman of the ASEAN.

Vietnam's specialty has attracted many scholars and politicians in the world. When invited by incumbent President of the United States Donald Trump to the White House, former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told President Trump about the history and unique characteristics of the Vietnamese people, and he emphasised: "Vietnam is such a special country—a special nation, so the U.S. should have a special relationship with them".<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between Vietnam and India is a special one with a long history of civilisation dating back more than 2,000 years. The bilateral relationship between the two countries has gone through four waves of cultural exchanges and great acculturation, which laid a solid foundation for long-term development.

Firstly, the wave of Indian Buddhist cultural exchange spread to Vietnam. This is the wave of exchange that Indian Buddhism spread to Vietnam by sea from the Indian Ocean to the East Sea and arrived in Do Son, Hai Phong, Vietnam, during the Great Ashoka period (third century BCE) before the religion spread to China. Vietnamese people simply exchanged and acculturated Buddhism to the local cultural sphere because Buddhism is both

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a religion and a philosophy advocating equality, humanity, democracy and having no caste system, which is consistent with the culture of the Vietnamese people who are polytheistic, thus they easily accepted Buddhism and made the religion having national characteristics. Vietnamese monks studied Buddhism and established Vietnamese Buddhist sects such as the Thao Duong sect in the Ly dynasty and Truc Lam sect in Tran Dynasty in order to counterbalance Confucianism and Chinese Buddhism, and more importantly, they used Buddhist thought to adjust and balance foreign thoughts and religions, making them suitable to Vietnamese people's cultural minds. Albert Einstein, the greatest scientist of the twentieth century, told Jawaharlal Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, when the two met each other in the U.S. in 1947: "If there is any religion that would cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when Buddhism met the Vietnamese thoughts of kindness and democracy, the religion could easily combine with these thoughts and fully develop.

Secondly, the wave of cultural exchange and acculturating the Hindu culture to Vietnam. This was a wave of cultural exchange and acculturation that Hinduism actively entered Vietnam by sea from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, and arrived in Da Nang, Quang Nam provinces in Central Vietnam in the early years CE. The imprints of this cultural exchange and acculturation are cultural specialties, arts, architecture, and sculpture of Champa culture. The cultural contact between India-Champa happened in two ways: spreading religion and heritage. This cultural exchange and acculturation took place in many

areas: writings, beliefs; sculpture, architecture; calendar and literature. Today, intangible cultural heritage such as the folk songs of the South Central Vietnam, the Cham dance are still handed down and developed; tangible cultural heritage such as the My Son Sanctuary (Quang Nam, Da Nang) still stands the test of time and now is being restored.

Thirdly, the wave of cultural exchange and acculturating Vietnam's Funan culture to Indian culture. This is the wave of exchange and acculturation in which the India's Brahmin culture played an active role. Funan is an ancient country in Vietnamese history. In its flourishing period, this kingdom's territory included the South Central Vietnam, spreading to the Menam valley (Thailand), which was merged into Chan Lap territory in the seventh century. At the end of the seventh and eighth centuries, the kingdom was separated from Chan Lap and became a part of Vietnam's territory. Since ancient times, the Indian Brahmin priests, most notably Kaundinya (Huntian), came to this region, and collaborated with local people to establish a country following Indian model in all aspects: politics, social institutions, urbanisation, transportation, technology, agriculture and the religious system and cultures, in which Brahmanism played a major role. In this area, Oc Eo culture of Vietnam has indigenous origin, which was developed from Sa Huynh culture, and played a major role in cultural exchange and acculturation to Indian culture. The result of that acculturation is still present today.

Fourthly, the fourth wave of cultural exchange and acculturation, during which Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese national liberation hero and the world's

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great man of culture, played a leading role. India's ancient traditional culture and new Indian thoughts were crystallised in the minds of great men such as the great poet Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. In the path of finding a way to save the country, President Ho Chi Minh studied, collected, and actively received the light of the world's thoughts, including Buddhist thought, Hinduism, the enlightened thought of Tagore, the nonviolent thought of Gandhi, and the thoughts of Nehru, a leading architect of a modern India.<sup>5</sup>

As early as 1921, Ho Chi Minh started studying about India and the Indian independence movement. He wrote many articles about India such as "Revolutionary movement in India"<sup>6</sup> published in *La Revue Communiste*, No. 18-19, August, 9-1921; "Oriental women"<sup>7</sup> published in *Russia's Rabotnisa* in 1924, "Workers movement in India"<sup>8</sup> published in *France's Inprekorr* in 1928. In 1927, Ho Chi Minh met Gandhi and Motilal Nehru, as well as wrote a poem "To Nehru" in 1943 when they were both in prison. Ho Chi Minh also invited Nehru to visit Vietnam in 1954, and he visited India in 1958. The similarities in ideologies and cultural personalities among Ho Chi Minh, Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru and what they had done for India and Vietnam are the root, as well as the sustainable foundation for the continuous development of Vietnam-India relations.

### **Towards Expanding Modernity**

For nearly half a century of receiving and promoting good values in the traditional relations, cultural acculturation and ideological exchange between the two nations, the leaders and the

peoples of the two countries have been continuously fostering and cultivating bilateral relations, making the relations develop from a strategic partnership (2007) to a comprehensive strategic partnership (2016). We can make a general assessment of the achievements of Vietnam-India relations in the modern era with the following thoughts.

Over the past half century, the world has experienced many changes; bilateral and multilateral relations in many countries have shifted and changed, but the relationship between Vietnam and India has remained faithful, transparent and straightforward and has flourished with no obstacles, despite the two countries being geographically far apart and in having great differences in geographic area, population, race, religion, development orientation, as well as the role and the position in the world. What factors, foundations, and motivations have created such a faithful, transparent and ever-growing relationship? To answer this question, we should confirm the following arguments:

Firstly, the Vietnam-India relationship has been nurtured and fostered by cultural background, since there have been cultural exchanges and acculturation between the two countries for more than 2,000 years, and the relationship has always been nurtured, cultivated and developed.

Second, the similarities of the two countries' leaders in the twentieth century, in the field of politics, diplomacy, defence and national development laid a solid foundation for bilateral relations between the two countries. The roots laid by Ho Chi Minh, Gandhi and Nehru have enabled later leaders of Vietnam and India and the peoples of the two countries to build and nurture the relationship.

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Third, Vietnam-India relations have been synchronously built from base to superstructure, backbone of which is mutual political trust. From the international perspective, there are very deep bilateral relations. At times there have been ups and downs, obstacles and conflicts in relations, paying high prices and full of pain, but Vietnam—India relations have always overcome all challenges, and the two countries' relations are especially faithful and pure. There is very high political trust between Vietnam and India as there are no problems between the two countries. Moreover, there are similarities in strategic interests; thus the two countries are willing to trust each other and share mutual interests on almost all bilateral and multilateral issues, including complicated issues like the East Sea dispute. Such political trust is always strengthened by the frequent exchange of high-ranking delegations of the Parties, States, National Assembly, Parliament and Governments of both countries. In recent years, Vietnam's General Secretary of the Communist Party, President, Chairperson of National Assembly, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister of Vietnam often pay visits to India.

Similarly, India's President, Vice President, Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and Speaker of Parliament also visited Vietnam. High-level visits do not only lay the foundation for the implementation of the signed cooperation agreements, but also deepen the political trust between the two countries.

Fourthly, the political foundation for the openness of the environment and the development space of the two countries since Vietnam started its renovation in 1986 and India conducted reforms

in 1991 have been really flexible and open. The two countries have achieved significant achievements in many spheres: politics, diplomacy, economics, national defence, security, energy, culture, education, science and technology and people-to-people diplomacy. That India changed its policy from "Look East" to "Act East" in the new context and new vision, in which Vietnam is the pillar of this policy, is an important factor in further deepening relations between the two countries.

For nearly half a century, the Vietnam-India friendship has continuously developed, and achieved many good results, but these achievements still do not fulfil the potential and expectation of the two countries. Meanwhile, our two countries are facing many opportunities and challenges.

The world is now facing new situation with following remarkable developments:

- There are growing trends in economic globalisation, as well as internationalisation of production and labour division. Participation in global production networks and value chains has become indispensable for economies.
- Global political and security issues are now complicated and unpredictable with many different intertwined trends, such as competition and cooperation at the same time, increasing volatility and mutual influence among nations. Many problems have arisen at the same time such as traditional and non-traditional security, environmental security, energy security, food security; expanding influence of international terrorism; complicated developments in the Middle East; crisis on the Korean Peninsula;

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tensions between Russia and the U.S., Russia and EU, the U.S. and China, Brexit in the UK, etc which demonstrate that protectionism, emerging populism, pragmatism in international relations are dominating words and actions, which are sometimes inconsistent of some heads of states.

- Mankind is entering the era of Industrial Revolution 4.0. Knowledge and intellectual property increasingly play an important role, and become a decisive factor in the development of human society. Because of the rapid development of science and technology and the universal sovereignty of the nation-states, that is, no nation or any single region will dominate the world in terms of economy, technology or population. However, the human race has not yet entered any particular era (American era, Chinese era, etc.), rather than a global era.
- The Asia-Indian Ocean-Pacific region, especially the East Sea dispute, is now becoming a flashpoint in the face of China in the vortex of Sino-American relations.
- International institutions are being challenged. The most obvious example is that China is ignoring the ruling of International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, belittling international law, unilaterally interpreting international law contrary to the common standards and common interests of the international community, blatantly sending the survey vessel Haiyang 8 and the escorted vessel to operate illegally in Vietnam's exclusive economic zone and continental shelf. These are dangerous actions, threatening regional and international peace and security.

In this new context and new vision, in order to develop the increasingly solid friendship between Vietnam and India, apart from improving and strengthening national strength of each country in a creative and effective way in the new situations of multi-lateralisation and diversification of external relations, our two countries must strengthen political belief, and always be shoulder to shoulder according to the speech of former Indian President Pranab Mukherjee at the Opening Ceremony of the Centre for Indian Studies, Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics (September 15, 2014): "The relations between the two countries have never been as good as they are today... To protect common interests such as peace and prosperity, India and Vietnam must stand side by side... India will always be a reliable and loyal friend of Vietnam".<sup>9</sup>

Confirming the bilateral relations using thoughts, feelings and trust is very important. However, in order for all of these to be realised, it is necessary that the leaders, managers and people of the two countries are determined to implement them in reality. Because all the limits of development come from the people themselves, and from the way work is organised, as well as the principles of institution's operation and work implementation mechanism.

With high mutual political trust, especially pure loyalty, as well as love and similarities in the development of the two countries, we believe that the friendship between Vietnam and India will become increasingly comprehensive and deepened.

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