

India-Vietnam Direct Historical Links **By Sujata Chatterji**

25 years ago, pioneering culture historian Benoy K Behl rediscovered and documented many ancient Hindu temples in Vietnam (travelling on little boats and on dangerous, narrow railway bridges, where there were no roads). BBC World News carried a major story on his incredible achievement. Behl's stupendous feat made front page news in India. This helped in generating publicity for the forgotten ancient Hindu kingdom of Champa (Vietnam) and soon thereafter the My Son group of Hindu temples was recognized as World Heritage.

In October 2018, Behl has revealed lesser-known ancient history again, with the help of Swami Sitaramananda who is teaching Sivananda Yoga in Vietnam. Associate Director Sujata Chatterji and Benoy K Behl were invited by Swami Sitaramananda in September and October 2018 to see the spread of yoga in China and Vietnam.

Bodhidharma is known to be the founder of Chan Buddhism in China (Dhyana in Sanskrit) also known as Zen Buddhism in Japan. Bodhidharma is one of the important pillars of Buddhism in Eastern Asia. Besides its influence in China, Chan/Zen Buddhism is known to have been of great importance in forming the culture of discipline and national character of the Japanese people. He travelled from India to China and spent time there in the 5th-6th century. He is also famously known for having taught Indian martial arts at the Shaolin Temple in China, where it came to be known as Kung Fu. There has been no information available about the route of travel Bodhidharma took from India to China. It has been generally thought that he must have gone on the Silk Route.

Pioneering historian Benoy K Behl holds the Limca book record for the greatest amount of national and international travel to document art and culture. The wide spread of his first-hand study gives him a unique advantage and perspective in understanding the culture of Asia. His work, which has created many bridges between India and the other Asian countries is widely recognized. Behl has been studying the important role played by the Hindu kingdom of Champa from the 2nd century CE till the 18th century CE, in the spread of Indian culture across South-East Asia and East Asia. Being an important maritime kingdom placed in a strategic location in Asia, the Champa kingdom would have passed on much Indian cultural influence and Sanskrit manuscripts to places such as Korea and Japan. Champa was also constantly in touch with all the countries of South-East Asia.

The history of Bodhidharma's travel to China has been shrouded in darkness. A breakthrough in revealing this history came when Behl and Sujata Chatterji found a temple dedicated to Bodhidharma in Da Lat, Vietnam. Subsequent research showed that there are numerous shrines to Bodhidharma in Vietnam, where he is deeply revered as Bo-de-dat-ma. Buddhist traditions of Vietnam also believe that the great teacher arrived in Vietnam and went on to China from there. This confirms Behl's finding

that traditions in Indonesia and other Buddhist countries state that Bodhidharma took the sea route from India to China, visiting Java and Sumatra on his journey. This ties up with Behl's extensive research of the sea-faring Hindu kingdom of Champa in Vietnam, which was a focal point for the spread of Indian cultural influences.

Bodhidharma is believed to have lived at Kanchipuram and the port from where he would have embarked would most likely have been nearby Mamallapuram. The coast of Tamil Nadu at that time was known for its considerable trade with the Mediterranean countries in the West and with the countries of South-East Asia.

Behl has also done considerable research on the visit of the great Indian teacher Atisa to Indonesia in the 11th century. In fact, Behl held a major event at the India International Centre to celebrate '1,000 years of Atisa's visit to Indonesia' in 2013. There was constant movement of Buddhist scholars on the sea routes of South-East Asia and Bodhidharma would have landed on mainland Asia at the Champa kingdom of Vietnam. He continues to be deeply revered in Vietnam till today.

This is a major cultural link highlighted by renowned international historian Benoy K Behl, between India and Vietnam, which used to be the kingdom of Champa in ancient times. 25 years after rediscovering some of the oldest Hindu temples of Vietnam, Behl has now well-established the direct Buddhist link between India and Vietnam.

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