

## FROM THE MARIAMMAN TEMPLE IN HỒ CHÍ MINH CITY THINKING OF THE GODDESS CULT OF VIETNAMESE

**Abstract:** *The Mariamman temple was the place of worship for Indian community in Hồ Chí Minh City. Indian has built many places of worship since they have settled in Sài Gòn. At present, there are three places of worship for the Hindu Indian such as the Mariamman temple (called the Goddess pagoda - Chùa Bà, the Goddess pagoda of Hinduism - Chùa Bà Ấn giáo, the Black Goddess pagoda - Chùa Bà Đen), the Subramanian Swami temple (called the God pagoda - Chùa Ông), and the Sri Thenday Yutthapani temple. Especially, the Goddess Mariamman temple is an attractive place of worship for Vietnamese as well as Indian while two other male God temples are solitary which intended for the Indian. Whether the differences derived from the cult of goddess that imprinted in Vietnamese culture or not? This paper tries to answer this question.*

**Keywords:** *Goddess pagoda, Goddess pagoda of Hinduism, Black Goddess pagoda, Mariamman temple, cult of goddess.*

### 1. An overview on the history of the Mariamman Temple

In 1867, French occupied the Southern region and built a city at the border gate of Saigon. Then, in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the French East India Company controlled some states in India, the French moved Tamil people from Pondicherry and Karaikal colonies located along the southern coast of India to Saigon. In Saigon, these Indian involved in the business in various fields, especially in credit, real estate and textiles. Over the time, they founded a number of Hinduism temples as places for religious practice in Vietnam<sup>1</sup>.

According to the data of the management Board of the Mariamman temple, the temple was built by the Indian community in the early of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initially, it was only a small temple for Hindu. In 1950, the temple was rebuilt according to the architectural style of a Hindu temple,

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South of India by Tamil people of the Indian Overseas Association in Saigon. Many materials and statues in temples were imported from India.

The Mariamman temple was experiencing the abandonment period. Since 1990, this temple has worked again under the governance of an Indian businessman who was a grandson of the previous manager (pass away in 2005). Currently, the temple is managed by a Management Board appointed by the government of the district 1.

## **2. An overview on the goddess Mariamman**

Mariamman, in Tamil or Marathi language, means mother Mari, which also means rain or change. She was worshiped as the goddess of fertility with the ability to bring good weather; she also was the goddess of smallpox and measles, herds of grandchildren; she also was a matchmaker.

The Goddess Mariamman very revered in the South of India, particularly in rural areas of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra states. Many researchers stated that Mariamman was an ancient Goddess of the Dravidian tribe before the appearance of the Aryan people. Dravidian people worshiped this Goddess to pray for good weather because their life depended on the agriculture<sup>2</sup>. Currently, the Mariamman Goddess is worshipped all over India and where the Indian lives.

There were many legends about the origin of the Mariamman Goddess cult. The first legend said that Mariamman was the wife of Thiruvalluvar, a Tamil poet who belonged to the lowest caste, so she was estranged from people. She was infected smallpox and she had to beg for food from one house to another; she used the Margosa leaves to stop flying into ulcers in her body. Then she recovered miraculously. People began to worship her as the Goddess of smallpox. Since, the Indians have had the custom of hanging Margosa leaves<sup>3</sup> on the doors to scare away smallpox<sup>4</sup>.

The second legend mentioned a beautiful and virtuous woman named Nagavali, wife of Perahu, one of nine Rishi<sup>5</sup>. One day, Rishi went far away and Trimurti (the trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva) came to admire her famous beauty and virtue. Nagavali did not know them; she was angry at their intrusion; she turned them into kids. The Gods were insulted and they cursed her. So her beauty disappeared and her face appeared spots of smallpox. Rishi came back, found her disfigurement, he sent her away, and he also said: you would give birth a demon afterlife. It will spread smallpox for other people like you<sup>6</sup>. Thus, you are called Mari, it means change.

Mariamman was often described as a beautiful young woman with red face, red dress. Sometimes, she was described that she held multiple weapons to denote her power. In general, she was often described with two manners, a gentle, pleasant manners, while the other one was fierce with fangs and shaggy hair.

The Mariamman Goddess had three basic characteristics as follow: Firstly, Mariamman was the goddess of villages. India was an agricultural country, the culture was originated from the context of rural life. In the villages, residents worshipped the village deities (gramadevata). A village may have many village gods, each one of which had its own function. Mariamman was one of the goddesses that was worshiped mostly in the South of India. She was often represented by a rock. She was a guardian deity of the village boundaries. The village was considered as a complete universe, the central power of the village belonged to the Goddess.

Secondly, Mariamman was the goddess of illness treatment. Indian believed that the Mariamman Goddess cured smallpox and measles. During the summer months (from March to June) in the South of India, people carried a pot of water mixed with margosa leaves and turmeric powder to prevent smallpox and measles. In this way, the Maramman Goddess liked the Shitala Goddess in the North of India.

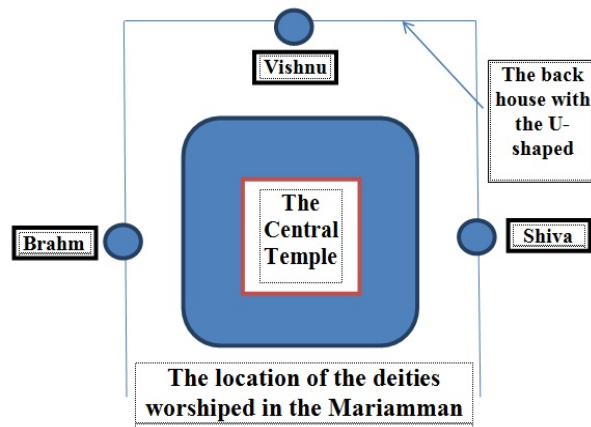
Thirdly, Mariamman was the goddess of reproduction. The Hindu often worshiped Mariamman for family issues such as reproduction, healthiness, marriage with a matched husband/wife. Indians often offered Pongal (rice cooked with green beans) to this Goddess<sup>7</sup>. Today, at the Mariamman temple in Ho Chi Minh City, the Indians still make these offerings to worship her.

### **3. The architecture and religious activities at the Mariamman temple**

The Mariamman Temple was built on a large scale with domes and pillars which were the features of the Indian architecture. The main shrine dedicated to the Parvati Goddess, the incarnation of the Mariamman Goddess. There were two guardians beside the Mariamman Goddess: Maduraiveeran was on the left and Pechiamman was on the right. In front of the Mariamman Goddess, there were two linga; one was placed on the yoni, the other was placed on a lower stone pedestal. This

forbidden area was surrounded by an iron fence, only the person who prepared for the ceremony could come in. Outside the fence, there was a wide lobby where placed the offerings such as incense, fruits, rice, salt, oil, etc... Above the statue of Mariamman, there were two statues of her sons, Ganesha and Murugan in respectful status. There were two small shrines dedicated to Cô (a little girl) and Cậu (a little boy). All three statues of Mariamman, Cô and Cậu were made of stone painted black, statues' necks and hands wearing jewelry such as gold, silver and gemstones. Besides, the roof of these three shrines had beautiful statues of deities and animals with multicolor.

Outside the yard, there was a back house with the U-shaped. Remarkably, on the wall of the back house had 18 statues of deities with different posture and manners which were set in circular domes, designed meticulously and painted bright colors. Below each statue had a name attached such as Nadarajar, Paramsiva, Brahman, Mahavishu, Kaliasman, Biaramasakthi, Samundi, Thirumagal, Mageswari, Meenadchi, Vaslambigai, Andal, Kamadchiamman, Karumariamman, Sivagami, Parvathy và Murgan. There were the three supreme deities of Hinduism as Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva in three corners. Please refer to the specific diagram below:



Besides, the Mariamman temple also had a very large lion (Simha vahanam), located at the main gate. This lion was an animal for riding of the Mariamman Goddess. Thus, when people came to the temple, they stopped for worshipping this lion to pray for peace, to banish sorrow in their heart.

The ritual of the Mariamman temple was organized every day, mainly from 8 to 9 AM and from 7 to 8 PM. The solemn ceremony was held on every Friday (day of the Shakti Goddess, the incarnation of Mariamman according to the Hindu tradition), the first day and the full moon day every month (according to Vietnamese tradition) had one more ritual from 10 to 11 AM.

The Mariamman temple's Festival was called *Vía Bà*, held in September or in October every year. During this ceremony, many backwards arrows were made of young coconut leaves and were hanged everywhere in the temple mixed with mango leaves. In comparison with the Indian culture, this was the time of the Navratri festival, which worshiped the incarnation of Durga and the last day was the day the Goddess came back in the most complete incarnation: Parvati. Therefore, in my opinion, the Mariamman Goddess is worshiped in this temple as the most complete form of the incarnation of the Parvati Goddess. This is the cult of the Goddess in the Indian culture.

The other interesting thing is that, after offering incense and offerings, visitors usually receive a gift of the temple as jasmine, it often combined into a necklace. Recipients often put flower buds on the altar or soak in the bath water as a ritual for good luck.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The Mariamman temple serviced for religious needs and gathering of the Indian community in Hồ Chí Minh City. However, we can clearly see the acculturation in these places of worship. During a long term of co-existence with Vietnamese, the Indian culture was influenced by many factors according to the rule and development of nature and society. This temple has not only attracted Indians, but it has also been attracting the other ethnic groups. In my opinion, the cause has led to this phenomenon that the Mariamman temple has not only been the place of worship for the Indian community.

Since its reconstruction in 1950, the temple has opened to welcome Việt people, even Chinese or Khmer people. Everybody has sincerely offered offerings to the deities in the Mariamman temple that were unfamiliar with their culture. It is possible that the Cult of the Goddess has had a long history of the Vietnamese culture. This type of worship has aimed to the earthly life, such as health, fortune, luck. Therefore, the

Goddess cult of the Indian has quickly integrated into Vietnamese culture and it has become an original culture in Vietnam. Besides, the receiving the Mariamman Goddess on the spiritual life of Vietnamese in Hồ Chí Minh City has been likely due to the location of this temple was once a small temple where worshiped the Goddess Linh Sơn (Linh Sơn Thánh Mẫu). Thus, when the Mariamman temple was completed, the residents lived around the temple area come to worship and pray.

Both the Cult of the Mariamman Goddess in the Indian culture and the Cult of Goddess in the Vietnamese culture have been formed and developed since thousands years ago. They manifested the conception of the universe and the conception of life. It expressed admiration the person for the birth, nurture and retaining race, the material and spiritual fulcrum, the immense protection. The supernatural phenomena gradually associated with the motherhood, the mother became the supernatural mother. The mother was idolized in human life. Therefore, the Cult of Goddess also manifested the humanity of Vietnamese. /.

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**Notes:**

- 1 [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Puducherry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Puducherry)
- 2 [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman)
- 3 Margosa leaves often used to treat skin diseases by the Indians.
- 4 [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman)
- 5 The sage has an unobstructed view, self-cultivation yoga to reach the Dhatu (realm) to merge with things.
- 6 [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman)
- 7 Đoàn Hoài Nam (2013), *Tìm hiểu về đền Mariamman tại Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh*, Báo cáo thực tập tốt nghiệp, Trường Đại học Mở Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh [Research on the Mariamman Temple in Hồ Chí Minh City, Report graduation exercises, the Open University of Hồ Chí Minh City].

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4. [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mariamman)
5. [Http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/hindu/ascetic/mariam.html](http://www.philtar.ac.uk/encyclopedia/hindu/ascetic/mariam.html)
6. [Http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Puducherry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Puducherry)
7. [Http://daidoanket.vn/PrintPreview.aspx?ID=64809](http://daidoanket.vn/PrintPreview.aspx?ID=64809)
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