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By Prof. V. Suryanarayan

On June 25, 2019 Chennai witnessed a spectacular and memorable meeting. The meeting was organized by *Andal Bakthargal Peravai* and Chennai Centre for Global Studies. The Guest of Honour was *Phra Maha Raja Guru Bidhsrvisudhigun*, the religious adviser and preceptor to the King of Thailand. The Rajguru performs the religious rites associated with coronation as a result of which the King acquires divinity and gets the title of Rama. The entourage of Rajguru consisted of four people, and they were dressed in white dhoti worn up to the knees, a white buttoned up coat and white shoes. What was striking about the entourage was their well-oiled *kudumi* (tuft) which proves that their ancestors hailed from Tamil Nadu. There are 14 Brahmins today in Thailand, they are highly respected and they keep alive the Hindu traditions. In fact, they are unofficial Indian ambassadors in Thailand.

According to an inscription found in a Thai temple the Brahmins had come to Thailand from a village called Ramnagar near Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu. The long years of residence in a new country meant that they have forgotten Tamil. The Rajguru is unable to speak in English also. But the silver lining of the function was Rajguru's son, Bhisma Rahas Brahmanakul, who had his education in Tamil Nadu and specialized in Marine Engineering. He spoke in English, interspersed with Tamil and proudly proclaimed that whenever he comes to Chennai he felt that he was completely at home.

Ravikumar, who had visited Southeast Asia, including Thailand, several times and written books and articles on Indian cultural impact in these countries delivered a scholarly presentation. Based on his wide reading and field work in Southeast Asian countries, Ravikumar enthralled the audience. He exploded many myths propagated by Western writers. For example he explained that the history of Singapore did not start in 1819, when Stamford Raffles founded the city, but went back to Rajendra Chola's time when a Hindu prince was ruling parts

of Singapore. The function was an intellectual treat.

While discussing India's abiding cultural influences in Southeast Asia, it must be pointed out that the greatest Hindu temple in the world is not in India, but is in Cambodia. Angkor Wat, constructed by Suryavarman II, dedicated to Vishnu, carries in architectural form, *Samudhra Manthan*, churning of the ocean. On one side are the *Devas*, on the other side are the *Asuras*, the rope is serpent Vasuki and the churning stick is Mount Meru. It must be highlighted that we do not have *Samudra Manthan* depicted in any of the temples in India.

I want to deal with two countries in Southeast Asia, Indonesia and Thailand. The people of these two countries, one is predominantly Muslim and the other is predominantly Buddhist, are proud of their Hindu heritage. India does not evoke the memories of an imperialist past in Southeast Asian minds. Except for the Chola invasion in early 11th century, which did not leave any lasting impact, the interaction has been benign and led to the cultural efflorescence of Indonesia.

The Indonesian leaders frequently acknowledged this fact. To illustrate Sukarno wrote in an article in *The Hindu* dated January 4, 1945: "In the veins of every one of my people flows the blood of Indian ancestors and the culture that we possess is seeped through and through with Indian influences. Two thousand years ago, people from your country came to *Yavadvipa* and *Suvarnavdipa* in the spirit of brotherly love. They gave the initiative to found powerful kingdoms such as those of Sri Vijaya, Mataram and Majapahit. We learnt to worship the very Gods that you worship still, and we fashioned a culture that even today is largely identical with your own. Later, we turned to Islam, but that religion too was brought to us by people coming from both sides of the Indus". In the late 1950's when ZA Bhutto tried to build bridges of understanding between Pakistan and Indonesia on the basis of Islam, Sukarno told him, "I am a Muslim by religious faith. but I am a Hindu by cultural heritage".

The influence of Ramayana in both Indonesia and Thailand is profound. It is not only an epic of India, but also the national epic of these two countries. Ramayana has been a perennial source of inspiration and is told and retold for several generations. In that process it has undergone variations and adaptations. Even in the world of scholarship relating to Ramayana tradition, it must be mentioned that the first International Ramayana Conference was not organized by India, but by Indonesia in August-September 1971.

What is admirable about the Indonesian leaders is the fact that they do not shy away from celebrating their glorious heritage. President Sukarno was named after the Mahabharata hero Karna. The Government of Indonesia has issued several stamps featuring Ramayana and Mahabharata heroes. The Indonesian Airlines is known as *Garuda Airlines*. Ramayana was translated into *kawi* language even before Kamba Ramayana was published in 1200 AD. The Central Bank of Indonesia is named after the Hindu God of Wealth Kubera. Sage Agastya's statues are found in different parts of Java. Hanuman is the official mascot of Indonesian military intelligence. In the 1977 Asian games held in Jakarta, the official mascot was Hanuman.

When you travel down from the Sukarno-Hatta International Airport to the *Merdeka* square, you come across several beautiful sculpted

figures from Hindu mythology, Bhima, Garuda and Hanuman. But the most beautiful among them is the depiction of Arjuna Vijaya in which God Krishna and Arjuna are in a chariot. This beautiful piece of sculpture was constructed during the Suharto regime. Equally beautiful is the statue of Goddess Saraswathi which adorns the front portion of the Indonesian Embassy in Washington DC.

Turning to Thailand the international airport in Bangkok is called *Suvarnabhumi*. What attracts you in the airport is the beautiful depiction of *Samudramanthan*.

I will not be doing full justice to the subject if I do not refer to the untiring efforts and intellectual acumen of Padmashri Mahamahopadhyaya Satya Vrat Shastri, a “living legend in Sanskrit” and an eminent Indologist. Prof Satya Vrat Shastri was Visiting Professor in Chulalongkorn University (1977-79) and in Silpakorn University (1988-1991). He extensively toured in Thailand and was impressed by Indian imprint in Thai way of life. He mastered the Thai version of Ramayana and published a book entitled *Ramakirtimahakavyam* (A Sanskrit Mahakavya on Thai *Ramkein*) which was published in 1990. Prof. Visudh Busyakul, the well-known Thai academic, has summed up Prof Shastri’s contributions as follows, “We are grateful to him from the academic point of view as well as from the fact that by means of his literary efforts he has effectively been an ambassador whose ultimate aim is to strengthen the cultural bond between our two countries, India and Thailand”.

A tree is known by its fruits. Among Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri’s students in Chulalongkorn University was Her Royal Highness Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the princess of Thailand. Thanks to Prof Satya Vrat Shastri’s inspiration, she developed keen interest in Indian culture, India’s cultural imprint in Southeast Asian countries and varying versions of Ramayana. She mastered Sanskrit, Pali and English and specialized in epigraphy and history. From 1978 she came to India regularly, travelled widely and exchanged ideas with academics and Hindu religious leaders. A keen photographer she held a photo exhibition in India International Centre in November –December 2016. It was appropriately called *My Fond Memories of India*. In recognition of her efforts to promote India-Thailand relations, the Government of India, on March 31, 2017, conferred on her *Padma Bhushan*

In her foreword to Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri’s book on *Ramkein*, Her Royal Highness mentions that Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri was “passionately in love” with Thailand and it was this fact that inspired him to write the monumental book. To quote: “It is a good idea to acquaint the people outside Thailand with the Thai version of the Rama story, which differs from all the others. ..I am sure the work will meet with full applause from lovers of literature”.

I invited Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri to come to Madras University and address the faculty and students of the Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras in April 1998. I cannot resist the temptation and want to quote two incidents narrated by Prof. Satya Vrat Shastri in the course of his lectures. The first incident took place in 1978 in the Saket railway station. He saw a lady with two small children, aged about 8 and 6 years. Both of them were putting on five tufts of hair. The scene immediately reminded Prof Satya Vrata Shastri of ancient Dharmashastra, which mentions *kakapaksas*, the five tufts to be worn by boys during tonsure ceremony. The Ramayana records that Lord Rama was having them while accompanying Sage Visvamitra. A tradition which has become extinct in India still prevails in

Thailand.

The second incident which left an indelible imprint on Prof. Satya Vrata Shastri's mind took place in Chiang Mai in 1992. He had gone there to witness the consecration of a Hindu temple. Along with the idols to be consecrated there were innumerable small idols. On enquiry Satya Vrata Shastri was told that the Thai Buddhist devotees had brought them from their homes so that idols they worship could also be consecrated. What touched Prof. Satya Vrata Shastri is the fact that the Thais see no contradiction in being Hindu and Buddhist at the same time.

The question naturally arises: Why do we in India shy away from celebrating our national epics? Why do we not install statues of Rama, Krishna, Garuda, Parasurama, Mahabali and others? Our epics are not Hindu epics, they are national epics. When I was associated with University of Calicut few years ago as the first Professor for Maritime Studies, I came across *Moplah Ramayana*, a version of Ramayana very popular among the local Muslims. In Kerala on Vijayadashami day, *Vidyarambam* begins for all children. At the age of 4, not only Hindu children, but Christian and Muslim children also are initiated into writing. During the Ayyappa season, every devotee before he reaches Sabari Mala, prays in *Vavar Kavvu*, a darga for Bawa, who is considered to be a brother of Lord Ayyappa. One of the most renowned authorities on Kamba Rmayana in Tamil Nadu was Late Justice Ismail. In Sri Ranganam God Vishnu is believed to have married a Muslim woman, *Tulukka Nachiar*, and the first offering to the Lord every day is *Roti*. According to contemporary Jesuit chronicles, the Mughal emperor, Akbar used to pray twice a week according to Hindu traditions, twice a week according to Christian traditions and the rest of the days according to Islamic traditions. Like the characters in Moliere's play, who convey without speaking anything, Akbar was a secularist long before the concept of secularism came into vogue. To say Hindus tolerate other religions is not true; they accept all religions as part of Indian tradition.

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