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Cultural Confluence: Exploring Indo-Mayan Affinities

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Abstract:

The origins of American Indians or Native Indians are the subject of numerous theories put forth by academics. There have been studies to find if there might be any links between the ancient civilization of Bharat and the New World. History in the hands of the powerful is a narrative of cruel destruction and fanaticism. Research shows that many social scientists do not pay enough attention to the presence and effects of Indian religious phenomena in American countries. This research aims to show that the study of Indian religions in the Americas is not an isolated phenomenon and that many scholars are working diligently to expose the disintegration of Native American civilizations at the hands of their European colonizers. Admiration coupled with a sense of wonder is perhaps only the tip of the iceberg. How could the traditional way of life in India and the native Latin American ways have ever come in contact with each other? A little exploration of this unique cultural connection leaves a legendary trail in its wake. This paper will mainly focus on the religion and mythology of the ancient Mayan civilization and how it is similar to that of the ancient Indian civilization.

Keywords: Mayan, Indo-Mayan, Native Indian, Native American, Culture.

Introduction

The origins of American Indians or Native Indians are the subject of numerous theories put forth by academics. There have been studies to find if there might be any links between the ancient civilization of Bharat and the New World. Even though people are proud of how each new civilization is better than the previous one, they are still very interested in ancient civilizations. Some ancient civilizations are well-known because they were around for a long time, while others stand out because they were well-organized. The ancient Native Indian civilizations fall under the second category.

History in the hands of the powerful is a narrative of cruel destruction and fanaticism. This statement would not be an exaggeration considering the likes of Diego de Landa, who burned twenty-seven volumes of valuable books on Mayan civilization, and states that the books “contained nothing in which there was not to be seen superstitious and lies of the devil” (Dani 57). Unfortunately, the truth was changed, and the remaining sources have been misread purposefully to downplay the importance of the versatility and richness present in Native American cultures.

Research shows that many social scientists do not pay enough attention to the presence and effects of Indian religious phenomena in American countries. Internationally, the study of Indian religions in Latin America is done by a small group of scholars (Martino 77). This research aims to show that the study of Indian religions in the Americas is not an isolated phenomenon; rather, many scholars are working diligently to expose the disintegration of Native American civilizations at the hands of their European colonizers.

It is noteworthy that it is impossible to credit independent development of any aspect of cultural similarity between Indian and Native American civilizations because there are so many, and these aspects also bear close affinity to each other. This means every aspect is

somehow related to the other; such as religion and mythology, or religion and society. However, because everything worth discussing cannot be part of a single study, this paper will mainly focus on one aspect: the religion and mythology of the ancient Mayan civilization and how it is similar to that of the ancient Indian civilization.

In the process of writing this paper and reading more and more about Mayan and Indian cultures, various interpretations were found, mainly poor ones, which aim to overshadow or even derogate the might of the great ancient civilizations of the past. Using language with specific terminologies elevates us to literary gods giving us the power to create and erase histories and cultures. As Mikhail Bakhtin has rightly stated, “Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of a person; it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction” (Bakhtin 110). Discourses of this kind make it possible for the truth to come out, however pleasant or morbid the findings may be.

We must be out of wits if we choose to believe in absolutes. How can any person—or voice—be more right or truthful than another? Language is not “objectively” separated from the “historical role of alien words” and is still overloaded with its “dictatorial and culture-creating role” (Voloshinov 117). For example, mythology in literary analysis is often related to religious fiction. The question is, how do religion and theology relate to fiction? Whereas people consider mythological stories as fictional, they consider religious stories as based on truth (Hasa). The term mythology is problematic in the present context because of the “multi-accentualit[ies]” attached to it, courtesy of Western discourses (Bakhtin). Being fully aware of this limitation, the researcher seeks to solve this discrepancy by finding a different term altogether. However, it is used in this research paper for now.

The Mayan Civilization in Perspective

The modern-day nations of northern Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Belize make up the ancient territory of Mesoamerica (Dani 15). Researchers believe that for thousands of years, people of pre-Columbian civilizations such as the Aztecs, Maya, Zapotec, Toltec, and Olmec lived there. One of these great civilizations known to man is the Mayan civilization. Experts traditionally believed that the Maya derived their entire society—including their architecture and social structure—directly from the Olmec. An article published by National Geographic in 2013 titled “New Evidence Unearthed for the Origins of the Maya” explains how archaeologist Takeshi Inomata has demonstrated that the Maya civilization was older than the Olmecs. However, unlike the massive declaration in the title, even in this extensive study, evidence of the origin of the Maya civilization in Mexico was missing. So, valid questions that arise are as follows—

Who are the Maya people? Furthermore, how did they arrive in Mesoamerica?

The Maya was a Mesoamerican civilization that occupied the southern part of present-day Mexico. History books and the internet are full of descriptions and pictures of the ancient Maya kingdom. The Maya people are renowned for their accomplishments in practically every field. The Maya people were known to be very wise owing to their advanced language, writing system, and architecture, such as pyramids and burial mounds (Dani 33). People regard them for their deep spirituality, as well as their maturity and wisdom. Their prayers and what they’ve achieved in science, art, and technical and mechanical fields show that they have a lot in common with the people of Ancient Vedic India, both regarding their lives and their ideas.

Arguably, the Maya, Incas, and Aztecs were founded by ancient Indians. The Mayans of Guatemala also believed that their forefathers arrived in South America from the Eastern lands (Jha). People have attempted to establish that the Maya people came from Egypt,

Phoenicia, China, Burma, North Asia, or even African countries (Dani 18). However, even though an equally ancient civilization grew and expanded nearly simultaneously with the well-known Maya and Aztec empires, the name of Indian civilization has never been spoken of in their numerous comparisons.

The Maya developed one of the most sophisticated and vibrant civilizations. They contributed many advancements to education. They were also very religious and practised various rituals, ceremonies, nature worship, and astronomy. People still speak about these aspects of the Mayans today. Religion played a significant role in Mayan culture, and People held priests in high esteem. The Maya priesthood included people from the upper class, and the chief priest was responsible for ceremonies held to bring good luck to everyone (29). These ceremonies typically involved music, dancing, feasting, and offerings.

The Maya considerably invested in prestigious temples for their worship. Ruins of these temples remain to this day, and their designs are both astounding and fascinating, having been discovered by archaeologists no more than two hundred years ago. They found whole cities buried in a tropical jungle, and they did not know much about them. Recently, hundreds of long-lost Maya and Olmec ceremonial sites were discovered in southern Mexico by an airborne lidar study by the Mexican Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (K. Smith; Inomata).

Historians have consistently acknowledged that ancient civilizations underwent significant growth and transformation. The two countries, India and Central America, had been colonies of the European Union, one from Spain and the other from the United Kingdom. Apart from this, there is also an ancient connection between the Mayan and Indian cultures. The Maya civilization has striking parallels with the ancient Bhartiya civilization, evidence of which can be discovered in ancient Vedic texts. There is mention of Mayan ancestors in old Vedic texts.

The Mayas are referred to in The Mahabharata and the Ramayana, as a tribe having left the Indian subcontinent. Dr. V. Ganapati Sthapati has stated that Jataka and Kathasaritsagar, two ancient Indian folktale collections, describe the Maya civilization (Dani 10).

These commonalities as important determining factors of the presence of the Bhartiya civilization in the Americas many centuries earlier than its European habitation shall be the core theme of this paper and the primary point of investigation.

Similarities in Religion and Spirituality

One Creator and the Trinity

The first is the concept of the Supreme Power, or Ishwara, the universal God. Hindus refer to it as Paramatman, which is symbolically connected to the sound and vibrations of AUM (also spelled as OM); the Mayans refer to this as AHAO (Dani 41).¹ In both cultures, one believes in the existence of the Trinity, the Hindu Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer), and Mahesha (the destroyer). The Mayas believed that the three universes were composed of the jaguar (representing the material), the serpent (representing the mind), and the bird (representing the spirit) (Gupta 55).

The Maya religion, similar to the Hindu religion, consisted of three layers: the heavens, the earth, and the underworld (Dani 49). Although further divisions are fourteen, the Hindu lokas are also three; the Trailokyas—the Bhuloka, the Svarga, and the Naraka (Patala).

Polytheism and nature-worship

The Mayas, like the ancient Indians, had numerous gods and goddesses, and there were various temples and idols for each deity, distinct and unique. The temples of the Mayas are now in ruins; still, they bear striking similarities to the Hindu temples in India. The towered

¹ Read Aho as Ahao in Dani 41.

temples of Tikal city in Guatemala are very similar to the temples found in South India known as the zikharis (“Similarity.”). The pyramids of these temples are similar in style to the gopurams in South Indian temples (Dani 35). Images of the Kanchipuram and Murugan temples in Tamil Nadu and Shri Venkateshwara temple in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, bear striking resemblances to the temple ruins in Mexico, such as the Tikal and Palenque temples (Dani 34; “Similarity”). Eugene Emmanuel Viollet le Duc, French architect and art historian of the 1800s, known for the restoration of the Notre Dame opines,

The Mayans who travelled from ancient India to ancient Central America were great builders by profession. When they travelled over the seas, they took their skills of building large monuments along with the basic measurement systems because the base measure and the square grid methodology of Vaastu, is common between the structures of India and that of the Mayan civilization of Central America. (qtd. in “The unique”)

Apart from the temples, the Mayan priests and the leaders also had shrines and idols in their houses where they prayed, corresponding to the Hindu tradition of public temples, as well as puja-sthala in homes. Mayans were nature worshipers, open-minded people, and egalitarian, i.e., they believed in equal rights for all living beings. They do not consider themselves as separate from, much less superior to, the natural world. They believed that each form of life has its purpose, and there is no assumption that the human is in some way superior to the others. Inanimate objects, such as stars, stones, and land, embody the Creator’s spirit. This is why they are described through a form of animism and are respected equally alongside plants, humans, and animals. They also had animal gods like Wilka Huemana, similar in form to Lord Hanuman in the Hindu religion, and insect gods like Kukulcán, similar to Vasuki, the king of nagas in Hindu mythology.

The Maya also, like the Hindus, worshipped trees and plants, such as the worship of the Tulsi tree by Hindus and the Ceiba tree, considered as the sacred tree of the Mayans. Mayan religious rituals and ceremonies were held in special altars under the guidance of the priest, who informed them about the materials and offerings to be used to please the gods. Some parallels with the Hindu Havana ceremony are the use of incense, copal, sugar, and flowers, which are often burnt during the Mayan ceremony also (Dani 48). Interestingly, during certain religious ceremonies, their priests would dress up like jaguars or wear face masks to face the demons from the underworld. This practice is commonly observed in regional festivals all around North India as well as South India.

The cosmological connection

Both cultures believed in four Yuga cycles or four cosmological seasons lasting for thousands of years (55). The Mayan culture which has been dated back to at least 1500 B.C. by Western scholars, had a comprehensive astronomy and calendar system (Britannica “Maya”). Depictions of the Hindu cosmic myth known as the Samudra Manthan, detailed in the Vishnu Purana and generally known as the churning of the ocean, are found in Mayan writings (Sidharth 1). Although not in question here, depictions of this event can also be seen in the Angkor Wat temple, located in modern-day Cambodia in Southeast Asia, where Lord Vishnu’s Kurma (tortoise) avatar is represented in stone carvings (Dokras 1).

According to Hindu holy traditions, the Asuras commit themselves to the planet Venus, whereas the Devas dedicate themselves to the planet Jupiter. It cannot be a coincidence that the Mayan calendar is based on Venus, as noted in the Dresden Codex, and the Indian calendar is based on Jupiter (Dani 38; Gupta 55; Sidharth 3). The ancient Indians called both Americas Patal Desha, inferring that the Indians are descendants of the Devas and the Mayans are descendants of the Asuras (Matlock 75).

It is also interesting to note that the Mayan calendar begins with the date around 3112 B.C. which is strikingly similar to the Hindu calendar beginning of the Kali Yuga in 3102 B.C (Sidharth 2). Hindu mythology expounds that in Kali Yuga conflict and sin will be at their peak, which is clearly evident. Another significant fact about the Mayan calendar is that after the completion of 13 baktuns which is equivalent to 5125 years, the calendar refreshes as a new age/ yuga begins. This event took place on 21st December 2012, when it was mistakenly assumed that the Mayans had prophesized the end of the world. It is a fascinating fact that according to the Hindu calendar, Kali Yuga began 5124 years ago, and maybe according to the Mayas, a different stage or phase of Kali Yuga actually began in 2012 when their calendar refreshed. According to ancient Indian astrologer Varāhamihira, when it is noon for the Devas, it is about midnight for the Asuras (Sidharth 2; Britannica “Varahmihira”). Interestingly, the time difference between India and the Americas is almost 12 hours!

Similarities of Mayan and Indian mythology

Who were the Mayas?

In Hindu mythology, it is believed that Lord Vishnu banished and transported the Asuras to Patala Loka on his vahana, Garuda (Matlock 71-76). Interestingly, the Mexican flag depicts this image, in which an eagle carries a serpent in its mouth, representing the arrival of the Meso-Americans in Mexico (“Similarity”). The Nahua god Quetzalcoatl, known as Kukulcán to the Mayans, one of their most famous gods, is believed to be the first or the originator of the clan. On his arrival on the land of the Americas with the Asuras, Lord Vishnu is believed to have become the originator or patron deity of the Americas (Matlock 76). In other legends, it is believed that he was an Indian traveler called Watan, who lived during the reign of King Bhoja in the 11th century, and defeated Tezcatlipoca, the mythical Aztec hero (Dani

45). Tezcatlipoca, interestingly, is a two-form deity in Aztec myth, a male and a jaguar form, which reminds us of the Narasimha avatar of Lord Vishnu.

Gene Matlock, an American author, has given astonishing linguistic evidence in his book *India Once Ruled the Americas!* to prove that the Mayas were actually from India. In Sanskrit, Maya translates as “divine essence”, which aligns with the belief of the Mayans, who claimed they were a heavenly race. Several Mayan towns have Sanskrit names. It is interesting that Jaina, the name of a religion in India, is also the name of a place in the ancient Mayan kingdom (Matlock 92). Archaeologists excavated many ceramic figurines from Jaina Island, an ancient Mayan burial site in modern-day Yucatan. There is a striking similarity to the idol of Mahavira in a Jain temple at Jaisalmer, Rajasthan (Lovell).

In another research, Matlock claimed that the Mayans were South Indian Tamils who were well acquainted with the sea and travelled in their boats. According to the Sanskrit language, Ketumala or Chetumala is one of the nine divisions of the western part of the world. The South Indians crossed North America and arrived in Central America at Chetumal, a coastal city in modern-day Belize. They constructed their temples here, which complies with the subject of the Mayan and South Indian temples’ comparable architectural styles, as discussed earlier. Another evidence he offers is the use of symbols in the buildings, such as the elephant and lotus, which are abundant in their native South India (“Similarity”).

Other sources have revealed that these people are the ancestors of the Nagas, one of the oldest Indian tribes recorded. The Nagas were a people, later referred to as Danavas, with their capital located in Nagapur. They are referred to in another primary Hindu scripture, the Ramayana, as belonging to a Naga-Maya tribe, and believed to have transmitted their culture towards Babylonia, Egypt, and Greece. There is also mention of the Naga tribe in the Mahabharata, when Arjuna, the disciple of Lord Krishna, goes to Patala to marry Ulipi, the

daughter of the Naga King (Matlock 76). In his book titled *The Encircled Serpent*, M. Oldfield Howey has stated,

...a reference to the introduction into America of the Indian ophiolatry (snake worship) seems to be intended in the legend told in the Mahabharata that Arjuna, the companion and *Chela* of Krishna, is said to have descended into Patala, the 'antipodes', and there to have married Ulipi, the daughter of the king of the Nagas. Apparently, Patala is America, and the Nagas were initiates. The above is said to have taken place some five thousand years ago. (qtd. in Matlock 76)

Dr. Chaman Lal, an activist in the 'Quit India Movement', conducted an extensive study on the presence of Hindu cultures in the Americas. In his book titled *Hindu America*, he has given proof of the physical resemblance of the Maya people to those of North Indians, particularly of Kullu valley in Himachal Pradesh, and their attire similar to areas of Punjab (Lal 204).

Gods and deities

As mentioned earlier, the Mayas worshipped gods of nature, much like the Hindus. They have corresponding deities, such as the God of Rain, Mayan Chac (also comparable to Ganesha, the elephant god), Indian Indra Deva; the Moon God, Mayan Itzamná, Indian Chandra Deva; and the Monkey God, Mayan Wilka Huemana, Indian Hanuman (215). Another deity that both cultures know is the Hindu god Triloknath, which is another name for Shiva. The Mexicans knew him by the same name until the Spaniards came and changed it to Tloque Nahuaque (Aztec myth) corresponding to Hunab Kuh in the Mayan mythology (Gupta 55).

Hunab-kuh, in Mayan mythology, is the principal god responsible for the origin of the universe. Matlock has also deconstructed the name; in the Kashmiri language, it means something present anywhere or limitless, like the sky. The Mayan priest is known as Balahm, which appears to be so close to Brahm, or the Hindu Brahmin (Matlock 92). The Mayans also

believed in a maize deity, or Hun Hunahpu, who was an important deity to them as maize was their staple food.

Other similarities

The game of dice – Pachisi (also Pachesi)

Almost 130 years ago, Sir Edward B. Taylor noted how the ancient Mexican game of Patolli was strikingly similar to the Pachisi game popular throughout Southern Asia, including India (66). Dr. Kroeber, a leading anthropologist from California, propounds, “the mathematical probability of two games invented separately agreeing by chance in so many specific features, is very low. The close correspondence between rules of two games indicates a real connection” (Charles 369).

Volador or "Dance of the Flyers"

Nil Puja is another name for Charak Puja, a highly charming traditional festival celebrated in the Southern Belt of Bangladesh and West Bengal. On the final day of Chaitra, or Sakranti, Hindus celebrate it in the belief that doing so will bring prosperity by wiping off the sadness and suffering of the previous year. A human Charak is prepared for this celebration, tied with a hook to his back, and then dragged around with a bar and a long rope. Surprisingly, Charak Puja and the Mexican rite known as Volador, which are both performed in Mexico and Peru, are pretty similar (Tuzi; Prabhu). The participants of the Volador ritual ask the gods for fertility and abundant harvests. In the Mayan version of this ritual, Itzamna, a bird deity, created the universe at the World Tree, which is believed to be the center of the world. Five “birdmen” stand atop a pole, indicating bird deities. The central dancer plays a flute to imitate birdsong. The four other “birdmen” (representing the four directions) revolve around the pole to symbolize life and rebirth (Coppens).

Presentation of Divine Avatars

Narasimha's etymology is nara—man and simha—lion. In Hinduism, Narasimha is a half-lion, half-man avatar of Lord Vishnu (Britannica “Narasimha”). Mayan sculptures depict Copin as a half-lion, half-man. Another Indian counterpart depicted in temple sculptures is Yali. Interestingly, the Hindu god of death and the Mayan god of death have very similar names, Yama and Yum Cimil, respectively. Ruins of early American temple sculptures depict similar creatures (“The unique”).

Conclusion

The Maya culture shares similar characteristics with the Vedic or Hindu culture of ancient India. The people of India have managed to preserve their historical heritage despite having to endure foreign invasions and domination. Intolerant invaders have demolished some of our temples, but the architecture and the scriptures have thrived even after a long span of cultural genocide. Our nation is proud of its old literature, which is still available today. Mesoamerican cultures were not so fortunate.

Except for a few writings like Chilán Balam and Popol Vuh, most have been burned to the ground by missionaries or have simply vanished over centuries (Dani 57-68). The authenticity of the remaining sources is debatable. What is left reveals many similarities to Indian philosophy, way of life, and way of thinking. As elucidated above, there are numerous parallels between Ancient Indians and the Maya regarding their spiritual characteristics, religion, and rituals. Many more affinities that are not discussed in this paper are present.

The ancient Bhartiya religion and culture exist and are spread across the globe even today. North and South America, as well as Central America, have remnants of this culture and tradition. However, there still is a serious lack of information and a considerable research gap in this field. Such a discourse must continue, as it will gradually piece together the scattered

fragments of the vast Bhartiya culture and tradition, which have spread across the globe since time immemorial.

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