

Modi-Xi Meeting - Why in Mahabalipuram?

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Summary

The Modi-Xi meeting in Mahabalipuram is intended to showcase the archaeological importance of the site as well as the ancient links between South India and China. It is also a message to Tamil Nadu that it is important from a cultural as well as historical point of view to the whole of India.

The choice of Mahabalipuram (Mamallapuram) near Chennai in Tamil Nadu is interesting for the upcoming summit meeting between Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping from 11-12 October 2019. On the first day, there are visits to the archaeological sites, as well as a dinner and a cultural program on the beach, with the second day devoted to bilateral talks.

There is considerable discussion in the media on the range of items that would be discussed, including security, the Kashmir issue, Chinese investments in India and border issues. It is unlikely that all issues will be talked through within the short time that the bilateral discussions take place, but media is expectant that there would be a lot to write about. It is interesting to examine the relevance of the location of Mahabalipuram for the talks, and there could be several reasons.

Mahabalipuram has significant bas-relief and rock-cut sculptures, dating back to the 7th century CE, during the reign of the Pallava dynasty. This kingdom, with its capital in nearby Kanchipuram, extended its influence for nearly 300 years from around 570 CE to about 900 CE. There was an outpouring of sculpture and art during this period, and there are several examples of Pallava sculptures, temples and inscriptions in the area. There is evidence of trade with China in the 7th century, and recorded evidence of Chinese travellers visiting the Pallava kingdom. There are sculptures that indicate that Bodhidharma (called Daruma in Japan and China), who was the originator of Zen Buddhism, hailed from Kanchipuram, and the only known carving of his image is available in the cave sculptures at Mahabalipuram. He travelled to China and established the Shaolin temple there. He is considered to be the originator of Kung Fu. The sculptures are also astonishing that they reveal the capabilities of machine polishing and machine cutting that seem to indicate engineering capabilities far beyond what is commonly accepted for that era. The Shiva idol in the shore temple is a perfectly machined 16-faceted polished granite idol, and archaeologists wonder at its engineering. There is also recorded evidence of thriving Buddhism in this area, and records of several Buddhist monks traveling to South East Asia and to southern China from this kingdom.

Thus, Modi is taking an opportunity to showcase not just ancient Indian art and architecture, but also the links between India and China over 1300 years ago. In the northern states of India, ancient temples, sculptures and buildings have largely been destroyed by waves of

Muslim invasions from the 10th century CE, and it is only in the south that there is still intact the buildings and temples that reflect the heritage of this era. Modi is obviously wanting to make a point about ancient Hindu culture, which assimilated Buddhism at that time. There is perhaps, another, more political agenda that is internal. Tamil Nadu is one of the few states that has been impervious to the BJP – the growth of the party in other states has not had an impact here. This could be due to the existence of strong regional parties that believe in an alternate history of culture and language that separates them from the Hindi speaking north. It could also be due to the fact that the Hindu religion and culture that the BJP appears to be pushing is already entrenched in Tamil speaking Tamil Nadu, with over 37,000 temples in the state, of which over 6000 attract pilgrims and incomes in excess of a half a million dollars a year. Therefore, BJP needs a message that is unique to Tamil Nadu. Its attempts at trying to bring Hindi into the educational curriculum have met with fierce resistance in the state. There is a need for a message to Tamil Nadu that it will not feel alienated from the BJP wave that seems to currently exist in many other parts of the country.

With the Tamil Nadu assembly elections due in early 2021, there are only about 16 months left to ensure that the forthcoming dispensation is not inimical to the central government. The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), a leading political party in Tamil Nadu, which is expected to do well in the state elections, has been sharply critical of Modi and his policies, and Modi would not want a state government that opposes his national policies. Even during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2019, he spoke about the importance of Tamil as an ancient indigenous language.

This meeting is an attempt to showcase Tamil Nadu, Tamil culture, and in a way an olive leaf to state politicians to signify that the state is important.

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