

# WHEN ZHOU WAS 'LOST IN CONTEMPLATION' AT SHORE TEMPLE IN MAMALLAPURAM

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

History repeats: Zhou En-Lai, the then Premier of the People's Republic of China, during his visit to Mamallapuram on December 7, 1956; and, right, at the Integral Coach Factory on December 13, 1956. THE HINDU archives THE HINDU ARCHIVES

When Chinese President Xi Jinping, accompanied by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, visits Mamallapuram on October 11 for a cultural evening, it will mark the first visit after a gap of 63 years by a top Chinese dignitary to the World Heritage Site famed for its rock-cut sculptures.

On December 6, 1956, the then Prime Minister of China, Zhou Enlai, and Vice-Premier, Ho Lung, visited Mamallapuram, about 50 km from the city. R.K. Nehru, India's Ambassador to China, was the Indian government's representative during his visit.

A report published by *The Hindu* on December 7, 1956, says the Chinese Premier and his delegation spent "nearly two hours" at Mamallapuram [regarded as the city of Mamalla or Narasimhavarman-I (630-668 CE) of the Pallava dynasty]. He "expressed his admiration of the sculptures and asked a number of details about each piece of work" he was shown by the Archaeological Survey of India. At the entrance to the Shore Temple, he stood for "quite some time" and was "lost in contemplation of the scene".

He also watched some sculptors at work and was shown ancient manuscripts. He also drank two glasses of tender coconut water.

## Kalakshetra programme

On Friday evening, Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi are scheduled to witness a cultural programme to be presented by the Kalakshetra Foundation, an 83-year-old Chennai-based institution devoted to teaching Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music.

In the ambience of the Shore Temple, the Indian Prime Minister will host a dinner for the Chinese President.

Unlike this time, the visit of the Chinese dignitary in 1956 was a relatively low-key affair.

It was left to the Collector of Kancheepuram district [which was then called Chengalpattu and comprised the present Tiruvallur district too] A. Venkatesan to receive Zhou. Other local officials and local Congressmen were also present.

A "lovely silk shawl and a set of Tamil books" were presented to the Chinese Prime Minister, *The Hindu* reported.

Zhou used the occasion of his trip to Mamallapuram to capture global attention. Interacting with a group of international journalists, he questioned the attitude of the government of the United States in the Suez Canal crisis, which was then a raging international dispute.

The visit of the Chinese Prime Minister took place at a time when bilateral ties were marked by the "Hindi-Chini bhai bhai" slogan. This was evident in Chennai at the time of Zhou's arrival, as a

large number of schoolchildren lined the road from the Meenambakkam airport to the Raj Bhavan, waving flags and showering flowers on the Chinese visitor. The children also raised slogans “long live Indo-Chinese friendship” and “Zhou Enlai ki jai”, according to a report.

Besides, at a civic reception at the Corporation Stadium (now called Nehru Stadium), a “vast gathering,” to quote another report of *The Hindu* published on December 6, 1956, turned up and Zhou “received an ovation” when he rose to address the gathering.

The Prime Minister, who had earlier met India’s former Governor General C. Rajagopalachari at the Raj Bhavan, told the gathering that “Madras [which was how the city was called then] is a city which has made an outstanding contribution to the great culture of India.” The then Mayor, K.N. Srinivasan, presented a miniature Ashoka Pillar in silver and gold to Zhou, who later went to the Gemini Studio to watch the shooting of a Telugu feature film starring S.V. Ranga Rao and S. Varalakshmi.

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