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The Cultural Heritage Of Buddhism In Ancient Cambodia: Perspectives From Inscriptions And Literary Sources

By

YON BUNYOM,

Research Scholar at Gautam Buddha University, Greater Noida, U.P., India.

Dr. Chandrasekhar Paswan,

Supervisor, Assistant professor, and former head of the School of Buddhist Studies and Civilization, Gautam Buddha University.

Abstract

The Kingdom of Cambodia has embraced Buddhism since the mission of Asoka in the 3rd century BCE. Buddhism has long been a vital source of spiritual, educational, moral, and cultural values in Cambodia. Cambodia's Buddhist heritage is revealed in its architecture and inscriptions, which are essential for understanding the ancient history of Cambodia from interpretations and evidence. Literary sources offer insights into the culture of Cambodian Buddhism, including relevant records and inscriptions found both in Cambodia and abroad. Numerous inscriptions and literary sources have been interpreted and published since the 19th century to elucidate Cambodia's historical connection to Buddhism. The cultural heritage of Buddhism holds great importance in the modern lives of Cambodians, especially regarding the architecture, art, and sculptures of Buddhist monasteries and monuments over the centuries. Buddhist cultural heritage significantly contributes to tourism in Cambodia. Inscriptions and archaeological evidence revealed Buddhism's existence in the Southeast Asian region.

Keywords: Heritage, Buddhism, evidence, inscription, Theravāda, literary sources, culture, temples, monuments, monasteries, India, Cambodia, relations, perspective.

Introduction

This paper explores the inscriptions and literary references that play a vital role in shaping literature and culture in premodern Cambodia, using available epigraphical data and archaeological findings. Inscriptions are considered the most reliable source of ancient history as they are generally devoid of myths and narrate the facts. Epigraphy is the study of inscriptions. An inscription is anything written or engraved on stone, wood, metal, bronze statues, bricks, clay, shells, pottery, etc. Epigraphy includes deciphering the text of inscriptions and analyzing the information they contain.

The Kingdom of Cambodia, known as Kambujā or Kampuchea, is located in the Lower Mekong area of Southeast Asia. The major religion practiced by Cambodians is Theravāda Buddhism, with 95% of the population identifying as Buddhists, enshrined in Article 43 of the 1993 National Constitution Cambodia, which states that "Buddhism is the state religion of Cambodia."

From ancient times, Cambodian monarchies adopted two religions from the Indian subcontinent—Buddhism and Hinduism. This adoption resulted in a harmonious blend of Indian cultural elements with local traditions, achieved through assimilation and conventionalization during the early stages of the state formation. Scholars noted evidence of Buddhism practiced alongside other religions in Funan, Chenla, and Angkor, as shown through inscriptions, art, and literature. This indicates substantial progress under royal patronage and harmonious coexistence within society. Buddhism and Hinduism are the main religions from the Indian subcontinent, and they were introduced to Cambodia by missionaries and tradesmen. Although the precise date of the introduction of Buddhism to Cambodia remains unclear, archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and Chinese historical sources indicate that Buddhism may have existed in Cambodia as early as the 5th to 6th centuries CE.

Following the Third Buddhist Council, King Aśoka dispatched nine missions to spread the authentic teachings of the Buddha across India and beyond, including Suvannabhumi, or "Land of Gold," led by Sona and Uttara, into Southeast Asia, which covers present-day Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam. Cambodia emerged as an Indianized state in Southeast Asia that adopted Theravāda Buddhism, where many educated Buddhist monks and scholars traveled to aid in spreading and growing Buddhism in the Funan kingdom. Indian monks came to teach Buddhism and resided in the Funan kingdom for one to two years before they were invited to China, including Bhikkhu Nāgasena (484 A.D.) and Bhikkhu Paramartha (499-569 A.D.).

Introduced by Indian missionaries in the 3rd century BCE, Buddhism flourished in Cambodia alongside Hinduism by the 5th century CE. Several Buddhist artifacts originating from the fourth or fifth century have been discovered at Oc Eo Port, the prosperous harbor of Funan. It is widely recognized that the Buddha bronzes of Gandhara Art and Gupta Art were significantly influenced by trade between India and Funan. Numerous

Buddha heads, including those from Phnom Bāth and Vatt Romlok, which influenced by the Gupta and post-Gupta periods.

The influence of Sanskrit and Pali literature is significantly evident in Cambodia following the first millennium of the Christian era. Furthermore, an undated Pali inscription has been discovered at Wat Toul Preah Theat (Thāt) in Prey Veng Province in Southern Cambodia. It is believed that Pali literature reached Cambodia during the 6th - 7th century AD; however, it had not yet fully developed within the region. Numerous Sanskrit inscriptions have also been found throughout Cambodia, including the inscription at Ta Prohm temple in Takeo Province, southern Cambodia. Coedès claimed that an inscription dated AD 1308, containing both Pali and Khmer, marked the earliest discovery of Theravāda Buddhism at Wat Kok Svay Chek in Central Cambodia. However, the evidence suggests that Theravāda was introduced to Cambodia several centuries ago, which has since evolved into the Sanskrit language.

The concepts and rituals of Mahayana Buddhism significantly influenced the power of Angkor's last extraordinary monarch, Jayavarman VII (1181–1220). In the aftermath of the decline of the Angkorian period, Theravada traditions commenced their ascendancy, continuing to the present day. Pali, the language of Theravāda Buddhism, emerged as a religious language in Mainland Southeast Asia as Buddhism spread, influenced by Sri Lanka, which led to the replacement of Sanskrit in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Early research focused on the restoration of temples, the analysis of architecture and sculpture, and the examination of stone inscriptions. These efforts culminated in the first site maps and inventories of inscriptions (Aymonier 1900-1904; Lunet de Lajonquière 1901; 1902-11; Parmentier 1916; 1927; 1931; 1939), which effectively documented chronologies and architectural styles(Welch, 1997). Moreover, early epigraphic researchers were to produce a chronology of Khmer monarchs as the foundation for a linear historical chronicle. Much of the research work on Cambodian inscriptions, such as Bergaigne (1885-1893), Cœdès (1937-1966), Dupont (1952), Majumdar (1953), Briggs (1951) and others expressed greater interest in the content of the Sanskrit parts of the inscriptions, which gave details of the royal chronologies than in the Khmer language parts which provided most of the information on the political economy, architecture, and art. Although contributing significantly to the establishment of a historical chronology for the Khmer empire, the Sanskrit scholars regarded India as the external source of Southeast Asian cultural development, including its religions, architecture, and statehood (Cœdès 1968[1964], Mabbett 1977b; Vickery 1998: 38-45; 1999: 3; [1984]1999).

Buddhism and Hinduism shaped Khmer civilization, making its culture rich and diverse. From the early Christian period to the 8th century A.D., the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Funan and Chenla dominated. The Angkorean period lasted from 802 to 1432. Buddhism and Hinduism progressed side by side, according to the rulers. Mahāyana Buddhism became the state religion during the reign of King Jayavarman VII (1181-1218

A.D.), the most significant Buddhist monarch of the Angkor period. Theravāda Buddhism became a state religion after the 13th century and has remained so until the present. After the Angkor period, in the last four centuries, Khmer leaders engaged in battles with Vietnam and Siam, impacting Buddhist practices in Cambodia. This era saw the destruction of numerous manuscripts and palm leaves related to Buddhism, which impacted the economic and political situation. This turmoil ended in 1863 with the French Protectorate, lasting until Cambodia's independence in 1953. During the rule of Buddhist King Norodom Sihanouk, Buddhism was declared the state religion, leading to the establishment of the Tipitaka Translation Council, Buddhist University, and Buddhist Institute. This era is recognized as the modernization of Buddhism and education in Cambodia. Sihanouk's reign ended in 1970 with General Lon Nol's coup. In the early 1970s, American bombings and corruption sparked discontent with Lon Nol's regime. The Khmer Rouge seized power in 1975, leading to the eradication of Buddhism. In 1979, Buddhism was reinstated, and ordination and studies resumed. There was an age restriction, allowing individuals over 50 to enter until the 1990s, while ordination remained accessible to young men.

The inscriptional heritage of Cambodian Buddhism is prominently reflected in its traditions, arts, culture, monuments, and architecture. These elements have evolved from a blend of indigenous and Buddhist practices from ancient times to today. Inscriptions and literary sources serve as primary resources for researchers and historians to provide religious and historical evidence in the past, present, and future.

The Inscriptions in Cambodia

In Cambodia, inscriptions are mostly related to religions, monarchies, and high ranks for their devotion, construction, and donation in the temples and steles. Numerous inscriptions were discovered throughout the Khmer Empire during the 19th century and the present era; these inscriptions have unveiled significant historical events and religious affiliations in past times. Many historians, archaeologists, and researchers have worked for it in the last centuries, and much evidence and sources have been reconstructed in modern times. The Vo-Canh inscription is the oldest in the second half of the third century, written in Sanskrit(Jessup, 2004). The studies indicated that other earliest inscriptions in Cambodia used the Sanskrit language, with records commencing in the fifth century. From the seventh century, there were also inscriptions wholly or partially in Old Khmer, the ancient form of the Cambodian language, began to appear. The inscription dates back to 611 CE and is composed in Old Khmer, incorporating Sanskrit loanwords, and is inscribed using the Early Pallava script, a variant of the Brahmi script. However, there are about 1,200 inscriptions in Sanskrit, Old Khmer, or both, covering the period to the fourteenth century(ORTNER, 1951). Inscriptions in Old Khmer and Sanskrit, found most commonly in temple precincts on stele and door jambs and ranging in age from the 4th or 5th century CE to the 14th century CE, have been an essential source of information about the society that produced them. However, they have

also left scholars with many unresolved questions. Historical research has been hindered by limited data, the lingering influences of early research priorities, and economic theorizing often inapplicable to Angkor and the Khmer Empire or premodern Southeast Asian societies in general.

The early research emphasized the importance of temple restoration alongside architecture and inscriptions, resulting in inventories that recorded chronologies and styles. Much interpretation relied on evidence of Cambodian culture derived from India. Most pre-Angkorian and Angkorian textual evidence comes from around 1200 inscriptions. Most inscriptions are found in modern Cambodia, especially near Angkor, but they also spread across mainland Southeast Asia, reflecting Khmer influence at the time. Found mostly in sanctuaries, these inscriptions focus on religious foundations, their support, and administration. The texts are in Khmer, Sanskrit, or both. Khmer writings emphasize political, bureaucratic, or economic content, detailing founders, donors, and contributions of personnel, land, and goods. In contrast, Sanskrit texts, presented in verse, praise kings or officials and invoke deities.

The earliest Sanskrit texts from the Funan period in Cambodia are dated to the 5th century; however, undated Khmer inscriptions emerged approximately a century later. Dated inscriptions in Sanskrit and Old Khmer commence in the early 7th century. The Pre-Angkorian Sanskrit texts were predominantly concise 'literary gestures'; nonetheless, by the Angkorian period, they evolved to utilize highly sophisticated poetry, characterized by refined orthography and grammar, as in India. These display knowledge of Indian intellectual and political thought and literature, including the metrics of poetry(Majumdar, 1953). Wheatley noted that this phenomenon is apparent in the integration of Indian religious concepts and local cults. For example, an interpretation of the complex relationship between Indian ideas and Indigenous culture within the Cambodian context describes Śaivite devotionalism as a significant mechanism for enhancing chiefly charisma while not inherently precipitating radical changes in the religious and ethical frameworks of early Khmer society(Wheatley, 1961). Paul Mus has argued that the Brahman and Buddhist deities within the context of Indian religions were acceptable because they accorded with the spiritual concepts of Southeast Asian Indigenous cultures, particularly with regard to animistic beliefs encompassing agrarian deities and water spirits, which were customarily linked to certain locales(Mus, 2010). These beliefs could be articulated through the linguistic and intellectual frameworks of Indian thought. The analogous notions of Indigenous deities residing in natural stone formations, as well as the concept of natural liṅga serving as the focal points of Śiva's manifestations, serve as exemplary illustrations of this association.

The significance of inscriptions lies in the fact that they offer valuable information regarding historical figures and events, categorizing them as primary sources. Certain inscriptions delineate precise dates of historical occurrences. Among the advantages of epigraphic records as resources for examining societal, economic, political, and historical dynamics of kings, officials, and people in that country is the fact that their authors were

contemporary with the events they illustrate. The landscape of ancient Cambodia, spanning from the 6th to the 14th centuries CE, was characterized by a multitude of religious structures. However, stone inscriptions discovered at these sites suggest that many of these structures were identified by diverse terms in Sanskrit origin, Old Khmer, and Pāli. Many inscriptions in Sanskrit and ancient Khmer have been found within the area of the Angkorian Empire, enabling us to reconstruct the history of Cambodia partially. They are extremely important documents, but in many instances, it is not always possible to separate real historical events from legendary ones due to the extensive use of double meanings and metaphors(Roveda, 2005).

Inscriptions can be categorized in various ways, one of which is based on the support or material used. The most robust records are found on stone and metal; however, some ink inscriptions also endure, such as those on the walls of the stele at the Vo-Canh temple and behind the Buddha statue at Wat Toul Preah Theat (Thāt). Inscriptions can be monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, utilizing one or two languages in either Sanskrit or Khmer scripts. Survival records refer to inscriptions made on more durable materials like stone and metal. The influence of these records originates from religious inspiration and invokes the deities to whom they were dedicated following the construction of that site.

The inscriptions discovered in Cambodia are regarded as the largest collection found among Southeast Asian countries. The first scholar who demonstrated interest in Cambodia's inscriptions was Heinrich Kern, who published several inscriptions in 1873 A.D(Marston, 2004). Since that time, Auguste Bath, Abel Bergaigne, M. Aymonier, and Lunet de Lajonquière, with the support of the École française d'Extrême-Orient, have translated from Sanskrit to French and published almost all of the inscriptions. George Cœdès is the most distinguished scholar who dedicated his life to elucidating Cambodian inscriptions. Throughout his lifetime, he methodically collected as many inscriptions as possible and published them in eight volumes containing the inscriptions dated from the 5th to the 14th centuries A.D. His work comprises a total of 1,005 inscriptions, covering the whole territory of Cambodia and some parts of Thailand and Laos(Pou, 2011).

Bronkhorst observed that Sanskrit first appeared in inscriptions in South Asia during the early centuries of the Common Era. It gradually becomes the preeminent inscriptional language across the entire South Asian subcontinent and much of Southeast Asia. For nearly a thousand years, Sanskrit has dominated this vast region(Bronkhorst, 2011). Most of the Cambodian inscriptions are Saivite, some are Vaisnāvite, and a few of them are Buddhist records. The epigraphic evidence illustrates the existence of different sects, such as Pañcarātra, Pasupata, Bhagavata, Yogacara, and Tantra. These inscriptions also give information on religious conditions during that time, such as the compromise of those religions. The gods Siva, Visnu, and the Buddha were worshipped side by side, sometimes by the members of the same family. The worship of footprints not only of Visnu but also of Siva was a distinctive custom. The dominance of Brahmins, who were well-versed in

the Vedas, Vedangas, and Purānas, as shown in some inscriptions, is good evidence of the partial adoption of the caste system.

Sheldon Pollock (1996, 2006) speaks for this reason of the 'Sanskrit cosmopolis,' which he approximates as existing between CE 300 and 1300. A defining characteristic of the Sanskrit cosmopolis, as he states, is that Sanskrit emerged as the primary medium of political expression within the various polities that comprised it, notably those in much of South and Southeast Asia. He accurately emphasizes that Sanskrit did not serve as a lingua franca.

"Sanskrit's spread was affected by traditional intellectuals and religious professionals, often following in the train of scattered groups of traders and adventurers and carrying with them disparate and decidedly uncanonized texts of a wide variety of competing religious orders, and Saiva, Buddhist, Vaishnava, and others (Pollock, 1996).

The early seventh century CE was the dawn of a new era in the history of Cambodia. The beginning of the century saw the first dated inscriptions in vernacular Old Khmer language. These texts supplanted step-by-step local Sanskrit epigraphy. However, Sanskrit continued with the dating formulae, royal names, and eulogies placed inside the Old Khmer texts. The earliest dated inscription of Cambodia, dated K. 557/600, was discovered, named Vatt Croy, situated on the right riverbank of the Angkor Borei River(Stark, 2006). This location is associated with an ancient urban site of the same designation, which has been excavated by an American research team from the University of Hawai'i at Manoa under the guidance of Miriam Stark. The inscription is dated to 611 CE and is written in Old Khmer, incorporating Sanskrit loanwords, and is inscribed in the Early Pallava script, a kind of Brahmi script(Leading Research Fellow et al., 2019).

The content of the Cambodian inscriptions was written in both Sanskrit and Khmer languages. The Sanskrit inscriptions, which date from the 5th to the 14th centuries A.D. and are discovered throughout Cambodia, illustrate a vibrant environment of Sanskrit learning. The quantity of such inscriptions composed in ornate Kavya style is greater in Cambodia than in any other region of Southeast Asia, and many of these inscriptions are notably extensive. As noted by Philip Jenner, the total number of Sanskrit inscriptions is 503 number(Jenner, 2009). The Sanskrit inscriptions typically commence with a eulogy dedicated to the gods and then give the genealogy of the reigning king along with his illustrious achievements. Certain inscriptions recount various incidents, eulogizing the king who conquered his enemies. The presence of the Sanskrit language in Cambodian inscriptions exemplifies the elevated proficiency of its authors. However, Majumdar has observed that the orthographic characteristics of the Sanskrit inscriptions in Cambodia are slightly different from the prototype(Majumdar, 1953).

The Khmer language was employed in the early inscriptions to document particulars of donations, including lists of servants and offerings in the Āsrama, or temple. Over time, the Khmer language evolved stylistically, providing more comprehensive details regarding historical events. The Khmer inscriptions, particularly those from the Angkorian Period, may be regarded as Angkorian literature. To date, a total of 619 inscriptions have been discovered. Among these, there are 164 inscriptions belonging to the Pre-Angkorian Period and 455 that belong to the Angkorian Period(Long, 2000). The oldest inscription composed in Khmer is K.600, discovered at Angkor Borei, corresponding to the Saka Era dated 611 A.D. Epigraphers have conducted extensive studies on the system of early Khmer writing, which, by the conclusion of the early historical period, has provided a fascinating model for sociopolitical organization during the pre-Angkorian era(Stark, 2001; Welch, 1997).

Khmer inscriptions appear at the end of the pre-Angkorian sequence, beginning in ca. A.D. 611(Jenner, 1980). Stelae, on which inscriptions were engraved, frequently displayed dual inscriptions (in both Sanskrit and Khmer) after this point in time. Some Khmer inscriptions emphasize the contributions of kings, nobles, and other esteemed dignitaries, often referencing the donation of property, which includes land, goods, and slaves, to the temple. Other inscriptions describe legal matters, and still others provide information on dynastic lineages. Buried within these inscriptions lies valuable information regarding plants, animals, and agricultural practices. However, many inscriptions are incomplete (broken, partly illegible) and lack dates; sometimes, the date was given in an accompanying Sanskrit inscription. The tradition of Khmer inscriptions that first appeared during the early historic period continues throughout the historical period(Stark, 1998). The term "Khmer inscription" for convenience, broadly denotes historical texts dating from the 5th century onwards that are engraved on materials such as stone and metal. These inscriptions have been discovered across a diverse array of regions in mainland Southeast Asia (the area that includes modern-day Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Laos. Composed in scripts originating from India, the text predominantly employs the ancient Khmer and Sanskrit languages. It is noteworthy that the term "Khmer inscription" commonly includes the so-called "modern inscriptions" that were engraved after the 16th century.

The Khmer corpus contains claims, but we shouldn't assume that Khmer Hinduism and Buddhism were Indian Hinduism and Buddhism. Many texts were authored by Khmer scholars, including locally born Brahmins, although Indian philosophies influenced them. Additionally, the Khmer 'caste' system (varṇa) differs from the Indian system, sharing only a name. These groups did not representative of the general populace; rather, they constituted an elite within society. The manifestation of religious beliefs is predominantly evidenced through inscriptions and Chinese records. Over one thousand inscriptions have been discovered and documented, inscribed upon stone stelae, pedestals for images, and temple door jambs, composed in Sanskrit verse, Khmer prose, or commonly in both forms.

Scripts of Inscriptions

The scripts employed in Cambodian inscriptions can be divided into multiple developmental stages. The Vo-Canh Inscription provides the earliest evidence of writing in Cambodia. Notably, the script in this inscription closely resembles that of the Girnar Inscription attributed to Rudradvarman, dating back to roughly 150 A.D(de Zilva Wickremasinghe, 1901). Some of the minor differences, however, show similarities with the scripts of Southern India, particularly in the area under the control of the Iksvāku Dynasty in Andra Pradesh around the 3rd Century A.D. (Filliozat, 1966). But it is the only example of this kind of script. Apart from the Vo-Canh Inscription, the script that epigraphists believe to be the prototype of all scripts of Southeast Asia, called Pallava script or Southern Brahmi script, emerged around the 5th Century A.D. Many inscriptions from the early time of the Chenla Kingdom show much similarity with the script used in Southern India, particularly in the Pallava Empire of Kañcipuram. The view of using the name 'Pallava scripts' to denote the scripts in Southeast Asian inscriptions was generally accepted since Vogel's masterly study of the Kutai Inscriptions in 1918 A.D. But, Sircar pointed out that the alphabet used in Pallava inscriptions during the 4th – 6th Centuries A.D. is really the Late Brahmi, of the same type as used in other parts of India. Furthermore, the Saka Era, which was frequently used in Cambodian inscriptions, never appeared in Pallava inscriptions, and the features of Cambodian inscriptions tend to demonstrate influence from the western part of India, particularly the Kannada-speaking region(Sircar, 2017). By the beginning of the Angkorian Period in the 9th Century A.D., the script had typically become Khmer and had acquired a distinct form. The people of the Angkor Empire held this type as their script, as attested by the inscription at Lolei Temple stating that the content was written with Kambujaksara, the alphabet of Kambuja. After this time, the style changed very little, although all carvers did not write in the same way. The unique development in the Angkorian period is the upper part of the alphabet called 'Sak' (hair), which was elaborated on in various styles of Khmer form of language. In some cases, the time of the script can be assumed by considering its Sak. After that, during King Jayavarman VII's reign in the 12th Century A.D., the Khmer script was improved to a unique style.

The Relevant Inscriptions of Pāli Literature in Cambodia

Buddhism has played a significant role in the cultural heritage of Southeast Asia. The Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the Borobudur in Indonesia are two prominent examples of the historical prominence of Buddhism in this region(Santina, 2024). The advent of Buddhism in Cambodia can be traced back to the 3rd Century BCE, primarily due to the missionary efforts of King Dhammāshoka of India. Since that time, Cambodian Buddhism has undergone several phases of evolution. According to the Mahavamsa, the Great Chronicle of Sri Lanka, King Dhammāshoka dispatched missions to the southern and northern regions, leading to the arrival of monks Sona and Uttara in Suvannabhumi, which covers present-day Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar. During its early phase, Cambodian Buddhism blended Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism until

the 13th century CE. From the Funan Kingdom period (100 BCE-500 CE) to King Jayavarman VII's reign (1181-1219), Hinduism and Mahayanism coexisted with royal patronage(Gyallay-Pap, 1996). Since the 13th century, significant changes followed the Theravada practices using the Pāli language.

The Pali literature has played a crucial role in the historical development of Buddhism in Cambodia, alongside Sanskrit and Old Khmer, which are found in various locations. Sometimes, it was engraved with the Khmer and Sanskrit. The term 'Pali,' which was used as a literary language, originates in India, although it did not develop well at that time. Later, the Pali language saw further development in Ceylon and various Southeast Asian nations, including Burma, Khmer, and Siam. In the fifth century CE, there were three distinguished Buddhist scholars in India: Buddhaghosa, Buddhadatta, and Dhammapsila. Among them, Buddhaghosa's Pali scholarly endeavors illuminated the religious history of Buddhism in Ceylon and Southeast Asia(Banerjee, 1973; Bapat, 1956).

The influence of Pali literature is evidently observed in Cambodia following the first millennium of the Christian era. Additionally, an undated Pali inscription was uncovered at Wat Toul Preah, or Preah Thāt, located in the Prey Veng Province of Southern Cambodia(Banerjee, 1973). It is believed to date back to the 6^{th} - 7^{th} century. It is assumed that although Pali literature arrived in Cambodia during that period, it had not yet developed significantly, and Sanskrit was used as the main language. According to George Coedes, the existence of Buddhism in Cambodia during the 5^{th} and 6^{th} centuries A.D. was because of royal patronage(Coedes, 1975). The forms of Buddhism have flourished in Cambodia from the 2nd century A.D. up to the present. Several Sanskrit inscriptions were discovered in different regions of Cambodia, like the inscription of Ta Prohm of Bati Province in Southern Cambodia(Hazra, 1982); inscriptions of Prey Prasat(Eliot, 1921), Tep Pranam, Prasat Komnap, Prasath Bāth Chum near Angkor Thom(Bayon) in Northern Cambodia; Phnom Banteay Neang near Mangkol Borei district, Banteay Meanchey province, in western Cambodia(Chatterjee, 1928), etc. So, at that time, Sanskrit literature had a stronghold over Cambodia.

An inscription, dated AD 1308, written partly in Pali and partly in Khmer, was unearthed at Wat Kok Svay Chek in central Cambodia and referred to the accession of Sri Srindravarman or Indravarman III at Yasodharapura in A.D. 1296. Additionally, another inscription, mixed with Pali words, was uncovered at Barāy, situated near the reservoir of Angkor Thom in Northern Cambodia during the reign of Indrajayavarman (AD1308-1327). The evidence presented above demonstrates important historical comprehension. It shows that in the early 14th century AD, Pāli literature emerged in Cambodia, and Theravada Buddhism flourished in the kingdom.
From the 11th century AD to the mid-13th century AD, the political dominance of Cambodia (Khmer) extended to Siam, with the exception of the Mon kingdom of Haripuñjaya. It is of significant importance to note that during this period, Cambodian Buddhism may have permeated this region due to interactions among people.

We can categorize this influence in two ways: firstly, the Khmer or Cambodians who were settled in the Mon region of Lopburi in Siam adopted Theravada Buddhism, followed by the introduction of Pali literature in that area. Secondly, the Cambodians embraced Theravada Buddhism before Siam declared its independence, with Pali literature making its way to Cambodia due to their commercial engagements with Sri Lanka.

However, Chou-Ta-Kuan, a Chinese missionary, visited Angkor in AD 1296 and said that Chu-Ku came to Cambodia during the reign of Indravarman-III (AD 1295 - AD 1308)(Hazra, 1982). They took a vital position in the development of Theravada Buddhism in the 13th century AD, and Pali literature developed in Cambodia then.

Jinakālamali, the Siamese Chronicle written by Ratanapanna Thera, provides information indicating that in AD 1423, eight monks from Cambodia traveled to Ceylon accompanied by twenty-five monks from Nabbisipura in Siam and six monks from Rāmāñña in Burma to receive the Upasampāda Ordination. The aforementioned thirty-nine monks engaged in the study of sacred Pali Buddhist texts under the guidance of Buddhist monks of Ceylon. Then, they received the Upasampāda Ordination was conferred in AD 1424 at Yāpāpattāna in Kalyāni(Sirisena, 2023). This event reflects the propensity among Cambodian Buddhist monks to gather knowledge of Pali Buddhist literature. Nevertheless, both Sinhalese and Cambodian sources remain silent regarding the Cambodian mission to Ceylon. Notably, this era coincided with a period of conflict between Siam and Cambodia. However, political disturbances did not obstruct the religious affiliations between Cambodia and Siam in the 15th century AD.

An undated inscription containing several Pali terms has been uncovered at Kompong Svay in eastern Cambodia. G. Coedes asserts that this inscription is evidence of the 15th century AD(Hazra, 1982). Furthermore, it relates to a monk named Lankā, who taught the teachings of the Dhamma to the royal princes and played a significant role in Cambodia's Buddhist religious history.

The primary scriptures of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia are the Pali Canon, known as the Tipitaka. This extensive collection of texts includes the Vinaya Pitaka (monastic rules), Sutta Pitaka (teachings of Buddha), and Abhidhamma Pitaka (philosophical and doctrinal analysis). These texts are integral to the religious education of monks and are frequently recited during ceremonies and festivals. This specific form of Buddhism places significant emphasis on the Pali Canon as its foundational scripture and concentrates on monastic life, meditation, and the pursuit of enlightenment. Although Mahayana Buddhism historically held prominence, particularly during the reign of Jayavarman VII, its presence is now minimal in comparison to Theravada Buddhism.

Currently, Buddhist monastic education in Cambodia is experiencing rapid advancement. At this time, the two sub-sects (Nikayas) of the Cambodian Sangha have been re-established. Specifically, the current Dhammayuttikanikaya was officially revived by a royal decree issued by His Majesty Norodom Sihanouk in 1991. When Buddhism was re-established in 1979, only the Mahanikaya, which is the major sub-sect of the two, was present re-established. Now, Buddhism has successfully regained its former prominence and popularity, with the number of monasteries and monks exceeding those prior to 1975. A considerable portion of the Cambodian population once again adheres to Buddhism, and Buddhist monasteries and monks have become integral services to both the populace and the nation as a whole. Additionally, Buddhist monastic education has been re-established and extensively expanded, supported significantly by the patronage of the King and the Government; this resurgence has made remarkable progress within a relatively short timeframe since its re-establishment.

Conclusion

The examination of the corpus of Khmer inscriptions, which serves as the primary source of data for this study, offers new insights into the operational dynamics of Angkor during the Khmer Empire, where a considerable amount of inscriptional evidence has been uncovered in Southeast Asia region. The Khmer language was employed in the early inscriptions to record details of donations, which included lists of servants and offerings within the Āsrama, or temple. As time progressed, the Khmer language underwent stylistic evolution, offering more comprehensive details regarding historical events. The content of the Cambodian inscriptions was written in both Sanskrit and Khmer languages. The Sanskrit inscriptions, which date from the 5th to the 14th century A.D. and are discovered throughout Cambodia, illustrate a vibrant environment of Sanskrit learning. The quantity of such inscriptions composed in the ornate Kavya style is greater in Cambodia than in any other region of Southeast Asia, and many of these inscriptions are notably extensive.

In contemporary times, although Cambodia is a Buddhist kingdom, it retains the strong influence of Indian Hindu and Buddhist rituals, mythology, and inscriptions. This influence is evident in many of its rituals and inscriptions, which are similar to Indian culture and traditions. Moreover, when one sees the magnificent Angkor Wat temple, which is depicted on the national flag as a symbol of pride for every Cambodian, one may necessarily consider India as a source of ideational inspiration that contributed to its construction, despite the fact that its architecture is distinctly Khmer. In contemporary times, Cambodian literature is influenced by Theravāda Buddhism, which currently serves as the state religion of Cambodia.

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