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Mapping Indo-Khmer Historical and Cultural Connections: Peaceful Coexistence and Convergence of Culture

Khath Bunthorn*

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Centre for Indo-Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi – 110067, India.

**Corresponding Author Email ID: khathbunthorn@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT

Since the early centuries of the Common Era, Indian cultural elements and the local traditions blended well through assimilation and conventionalisation during the early stage of state formation. Proofs of Indo-Khmer historical and cultural connections have been extensively found in archaeological, sculpture, and literature evidence. The question is why Cambodians, in ancient times, did not resist foreign cultural elements such as those linked to India, which were virtually enormous. The key objective of the present study is to examine the deep-rooted historical and cultural connections between India and Cambodia. By reviewing relevant literature by some Cambodian scholars, the article sheds light on how Cambodians view their country's connections with the South Asian nation. It critically reviews the notion of Indianisation and Indian cultural influence in Cambodia in the past and its appearance in the present and examines the ways in which Cambodians came to accept Indian ideas and customs. It argues that Indian cultural diffusion and fusion in ancient Cambodia reflected peaceful coexistence and convergence of culture between the indigenous (*mulatthan* cheat) and imported (*mulatthan* borotesh) cultural foundations of Khmer civilisation. The strong historical and cultural ties are conducive to fostering bilateral engagement between the two nations.

Keywords: Cambodia, civilisation, cultural convergence, historical connections, Indianisation, Southeast Asia

INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

Indic civilisation spread to Southeast Asia extensively in the early centuries of the Common Era and has been well documented, as evidenced by literature, sculpture, and archaeology. The sacred terms *Suvarnavdipa* (Island of Gold) and *Suvarnabhumi* (Land of Gold) were used in Indian ancient literature sources to refer to insular and mainland Southeast Asian countries respectively. The debate on the exact location of the *Suvarnabhumi* toponym, especially, remains unabated and contentious. Cambodian and Thai nationalists and scholars alike claim the connection of the term to their respective countries, considering it a holy mantra despite owing its origin to Indian literature sources. Until recently, the seventeenth-century Sanskrit inscription was discovered in Cambodia, mentioning *Suvarnabhumi* for the first time and identifying it with the Kingdom of Chenla, the successor of Funan (Taing, 2018). For one thing, what we

can draw from the debate is that Southeast Asians, in any sense, acknowledged the Indian influences in the region as referred to as the concept of *Indianisation*. French scholar George Coedes has described the process of the diffusion of Indic civilisation to Southeast Asia as *Indianisation* which could be essentially understood as “the expansion of an organised culture that was founded upon the Indian conception of royalty, was characterised by Hinduist Buddhist cults, the mythology of the *Purana*, and the observance of the *Dharmasastras*, and expressed itself in the Sanskrit Language” (Coedes, 1968: 15-16). The *Indianised* kingdoms of Southeast Asia included Funan and Champa in the Indochina peninsular and Srivijaya and Majapahit in the Malay Archipelago. As one of the *Indianised* states of Southeast Asia, Cambodia enormously received the advent of Indian culture since its earliest Kingdom of Funan (*Nokor Phnom*), which was considered the cradle of Khmer civilisation. Established

in the first century CE and reputedly flourished till the sixth century CE, Funan was considered by historians the first political centre in the region, with its territorial jurisdiction covering most parts of mainland Southeast Asia (Hall, 1982: 90).

The founding legend of the country talks about the marriage between Indian Prince Kaundinya and Cambodian Princess Soma (Gaudes, 1993). As has been popular among local people, the legend traces the roots of Indo-Khmer cultural and civilisational connections back to the first century CE. Historically, over half a century after, Indian cultural elements were transmitted to Cambodia with a modified form and assimilated into its culture during the Funan period. Indian influences contributed to the rise of Cambodia to become one of the strongest empires in Southeast Asia, serving as a hub of maritime trade exchanges with India, China and others through its prominent port of Ou Keo (aka Oc Eo), which is in today's southern Vietnam. In this period, powerful political entities in India under dynasties such as the Guptas and Pallavas formed "coherent models of political, social and religious organisation" (Smith, 1999: 1). Hence, these political entities made India appealing to the rulers of Funan and other Southeast Asian kingdoms. It is worthy to note that Cambodia also had close relations with China during the times of Funan and later kingdoms but not on equal footing. In the third century CE, Funan sent its first envoy to the Chinese emperor court, offering as a present some musicians and produces of the country to the Chinese emperor. Before that, the kingdom received two emissaries from the Wu emperor court, Kang Tai and Zhu Ying. In the fifth century CE, the king of Funan sent a Buddhist monk, Nagasena, to the court of Emperor Wudi and brought with him two ivory stupas, among many others, as presents to the Chinese emperor. Funan had sent several other embassies to China during the successive centuries. "Yet, Cambodia

does not appear to have received any deep-rooted cultural influence from China" (Long, 1967: 8). However, the question is why the Funanese kings disfavoured neighbouring China as models for their state formation and organisation, given that it also possessed similar features that India had. According to Coedes (1968: xviii), "[the] Chinese never looked with favour on the formation of strong states in the southern seas, and it is a fact worth noting that the periods of the greatest strength of Funan, Cambodia, and the Javanese and Sumatran kingdoms correspond in general to the periods of weakness of the great Chinese dynasties." On the other hand, Smith (1999: 1) explains that "apprehension about Chinese expansion led the rulers of emergent chiefdoms in Southeast Asia to prefer the adoption of Indian political and religious iconography." For several centuries, Cambodia had absorbed the Indic civilisation - state formation, laws, religions, arts, and literature - and even developed it to the extent that the Khmer, as Cambodians call themselves, could establish the Angkor Empire in Southeast Asia from the ninth to the fifteenth centuries, the Golden Age of Cambodian history.¹ In the course of time, the Khmer civilisation extended its profound influence on neighbouring Siam (Thailand) and Laos (Mishra, 1996; Kasetsiri, 2003). According to Cambodian archaeological expert Long (1967: 8), there is consensus among scholars that "India was the only fountain from which Cambodia has received its culture." That said, Cambodians were not passive borrowers of foreign ideas. The assimilation, conventionalisation, and localisation of foreign beliefs and customs into the national character played a vital role in the Indo-Khmer historical and cultural intermingling that formed Khmer national identity.

In this context, the key objective of the present study is to examine the deep-rooted historical and cultural relations between India and Cambodia. The article

¹ By the fifteenth century CE, post-Jayavarman VII Cambodia faced persistent security challenges from two flanks, Siam in the west and Vietnam in the east. At the same time, an internal faction among the royal families weakened the country's ability to endure external aggression. So far as China is concerned, Jha (2009: 185) relates that Cambodians were helpless in defending their country against this existential threat because Chinese rulers were "jealous" of the glories of the Angkor Empire, and therefore, "they liked to remain silent spectators" while Cambodia was under

external invasion. The fall of Angkor marked the rapid decline of Khmer civilisation with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries considered the Dark Age of Cambodian history when its survival as an independent state was under continuous threat from and its territory was annexed by the two more powerful neighbors (Tully, 2005: 70-71). Fortunately, the establishment of the French protectorate in the late nineteenth century CE saved Cambodia from extinction.

elucidates how the locals view Cambodia's past connections with the South Asian nation. It seeks to understand why they did not resist Indian cultural influence as the intermingling between the two civilisations was peaceful and non-political in character. The article consists of six sections. Apart from Section I that is an introduction, Section II deals with the reconceptualisation of the Indian cultural diffusion and fusion around the conventional idea of *Indianisation*. Section III examines the influence, selective adoption, and enrichment of Indian ideas and customs in the ancient Cambodian Kingdom of Funan. An assessment of peaceful coexistence and convergence of culture is discussed in Section IV, followed by Section V, providing an overview of Indian cultural footprints in contemporary Cambodia. The final Section is the concluding remarks.

RECONCEPTUALISATION OF INDIANISATION

Indian cultural elements reverberate in various aspects of Cambodian society today. The Cambodians selectively borrowed Indian ideas and cultural elements to fulfil the needs of their pre-existing culture and traditions, and in some aspects, they even enriched the originals. The ancient Khmer technology used to construct many marvellous Angkorian-era temples - Angkor Wat and Angkor Thom - stands testimony to how the Khmer developed the Indian architectural skills they borrowed to a higher level. Moreover, the sculptures and Sanskrit inscriptions show deep-rooted Indo-Khmer links. In terms of literature, the Indian epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are just a few examples of Indian civilisational influences on Cambodia. In addition, many Cambodian animal fables have been taken from Sanskrit texts such as *Hitopadesha* and *Panchatantra*. The Buddhist *Jataka* stories from Pali texts are also influential in Cambodian society. In short, Cambodia is much more Indian than one might have ever thought, but with unique Khmer distinctiveness resulting from the process of localisation and indigenisation of the alien culture. As will be seen in the proceedings of the article, in the absence of significant conflict or local resistance, it can be said that the intermingling of Indian and indigenous beliefs and customs created a cultural convergence.

There are different interpretations of India's past cultural interactions with Cambodia among scholars across the region. As David Chandler notes, scholars hold

different opinions regarding the spread of Indian cultural influence in Southeast Asia; the French and Dutch scholars give less importance to the local choices, whereas the others appear to overstate the significance of the local components. Opinions varied dependent on their background of studies. He explains that generally, for those from the school of Indian culture, the emphasis is the "civilising mission" of India, and for those from the school of social sciences, "the indigenous response" holds prominent weight, but for historians like him, it is imperative to "deal with both sides of the exchange" (Chandler, 2008: 15-16). On the other hand, for Cambodian nationalist scholars, even though accepting the fundamental role of Indian culture, they tend to stress that the existing local culture was an essential foundation of Khmer civilisation before it could absorb foreign ideas (Sem, 1971; Teav, 1972; Troeng, 1974; Tranet, 2013). As a matter of fact, recent scholars believe that Southeast Asian societies developed well before coming into contact with the Indic civilisation (Marschall 1980; Smith 1999; Lockard 2009; Hall 2011). Hence, local people were not passive receivers of Indian culture but selectively borrowed some cultural elements from India to fulfil local needs. This view has led to the reconceptualization of the so-called *Indianisation* held by early scholars.

In an early tendency, the pre-independence India's nationalist scholars viewed India's cultural and civilisational expansion in ancient Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia, in terms of colonisation, Greater India, Farther India or Further India, to project their cultural supremacy over the region. Under the 1926-established Greater India Society, "[they] wanted to arouse Indian intellectuals to rise against the British oppression and subjugation" by tracing the vitality, roots, and influence of Indic civilisation in Southeast Asia (Jha, 1986: 35-36; see also Basa, 1998). For instance, Majumdar (1944a: 66) claimed that the appearance of the dominance of Indian influence in the development of Cambodian culture and civilisation in epigraphic evidence and chronicles could suggest that Cambodia was "colonised by the Indians". Some Western scholars have similar views about the influence of the Indic civilisation on ancient Southeast Asian kingdoms. Coedes coined the term *Indianisation* to describe Indian cultural impacts on the early kingdoms of Southeast Asia. He explained that the "least advanced Cambodia" owed its development to India's socio-political organisation,

religions, literature, language, writing system and arts (Coedes, 1968). While Majumdar (1941: 21), in his book *Greater India* described the pre-Indiansised people of Southeast Asia as those “who had not yet emerged from their primitive barbarism,” similarly, Coedes (1968: xviii) described them as the tribal or Pnong² in his so-called “crude formula,” saying, “Cambodia is an Indianised Pnong,” which, in a “reduced crude formula,” could also be “applied to the Burmese, to the southern Thai, to the ancient Chams, to the Malays, and to the Javanese before Islam”. According to him, Pnong remained in the stage of tribal organisation, had no religion but believed in animism, used the oral traditions to settle their differences, had no writing system, and their cosmology was unsophisticated. In this description, Cambodia had no civilisation before the advent of the high culture of India.

Later, as the ideas of Indian colonisation and *Indianisation* in classical Southeast Asia were rejected and reconceptualised, scholars paid more attention to the pre-existing culture of the region. Likewise, some Cambodian scholars have made considerable effort to dismiss or contest such a notion of being Pnong or primitive barbarism, which sounds highly unconvincing for them. One Cambodian scholar lays greater stress on the pre-existing Khmer culture that was well developed. He appears to have criticised Coedes’s view of indigenous culture as being too Indo-centric, expressing that “foreign civilisation could not spread to any country unless the indigenous cultural foundation including race and people possessed the pre-existing language, livelihood, ways of life, customs or certain knowledge” (Teav, 1972: 35). Hence, Coedes downplayed the significance of the pre-existing tradition of the indigenous people. In fact, every society has two fundamental components: the indigenous cultural foundation (*mulatthan cheat*) and the imported cultural foundation (*mulatthan borotesh*). It was the former that enabled the absorption of imported ideas and customs. In this way, Cambodia had an indigenous cultural foundation before accepting Indian culture and values into the pre-existing components of Khmer society.

Tranet, a well-respected Cambodian scholar of culture and history, seems to agree with this argument. He demonstrates that “Khmer people, even though were not civilised, were in a well-structured [social] system” because, he adds, “to be able to receive Indian culture, Khmer society was already in well-mannered, well-founded and sustained conditions - a fully developed society in all aspects” (Tranet, 2013: 146). Similarly, as Mabbett (1977: 14) puts it, “[unlike] the relationship between Australian settlements and the aborigines, for in Southeast Asia the indigenous people had, for example, a developed metal industry, some agriculture, and long-established contacts with the outside world.”

To examine the development of the pre-existing indigenous societies, we need to delve into pre-historical evidence based on archaeological discoveries with modern technology and greater availability of primary sources. Indeed, archaeologists have found that there were inhabitants of today’s Cambodia for several centuries before the Common Era. The artefacts found in historical sites across Southeast Asia show that the region was inhabited well and lively, and therefore “these regions sustained a long period of indigenous development” (Smith, 1999: 2). Moreover, recent scholars have shed light on the civilisation of Southeast Asia some 500 years before the advent of the Hindu religion and Sanskrit language, underlining the local people’s capability in doing maritime trade across Asia over long distances (Hall, 2011; Lockard, 2009). As can be seen, Cambodian society developed well enough, though it might not be so advanced or civilised, to respond to the introduction of Indian civilisation in the early stage during the Funan era. The same is true for other Southeast Asian societies. According to Wolters (1967), the increase in maritime trade around the Indonesian archipelago was not linked to Indian maritime trade, and it was instead an indigenous process. Some scholars even suggest that, in pre- and protohistory of Southeast Asia, the shipping capacity of Indonesians was highly developed and, in some aspects, even more advanced than that of Indians (Marschall, 1980; Kulke, 1990). That said, many scholars do not refute the concept

² *Pnong*, often spelt Phnong or Bunong, is an indigenous Cambodian minority ethnic group concentrated in Mondulkiri, an eastern province of the country. The majority of Phnong people believe in animism. In modern connotation, the term Phnong may be

considered derogative when referring to typical Khmer individuals to mean ‘backward or uncivilised’. However, the Phnong community has protested such usage.

of *Indianisation* completely, but they reinterpret it to give more importance to the indigenous cultural development in the region. In fact, the “convergence” of civilisational development occurred simultaneously in both Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent (Kulke, 1990). Therefore, it is remarkable that Cambodians could comprehensively amalgamate the foreign cultural influences and mix these with indigenous cultures, thereby establishing a unique national character as what it is today.

INFLUENCE, SELECTIVE ADOPTION, AND ENRICHMENT

Further, it is essential to understand how Cambodians incorporated Indian elements into their culture and enriched it in the process. Basically, Indian culture and civilisation spread to Southeast Asia by three groups of South Asian immigrants: adventurous traders or merchants (*Vaishya*), religious scholars (*Brahmins* and monks) and less likely warriors (*Kshatriya*). However, the first group received more general references in the literature than the others. The *Indianisation* of Funan and successive kingdoms of Cambodia involved selective borrowing, adaptation, modification, rejection, and even enhancement of Indian ideas and customs. In other words, the process of assimilation and conventionalisation shaped the foreign elements into the form of national character.

According to leading American historian Chandler (2008), Cambodian culture and society developed from its indigeneity of ‘Little tradition’ during the first millennium CE with the help of Indian immigrants, who had brought with them the ‘Great tradition’. While the former referred to Cambodia, Khmer, villages, and folk religion, the latter referred to India, Sanskrit, the courts, and Hinduism. There is a lot in Cambodia that describes Indic civilisation and culture. Indian cultural impacts on Cambodia can be seen in myriad forms such as languages, religious beliefs, iconography, astronomy, art, architecture, literature, statecraft, and the idea of universal kingship. However, Cambodians and Southeast Asians did not borrow Indian culture indiscriminately, nor did they change it entirely; they were free to select and adapt some elements for their comfort, or they would reject those elements that were in conflict with their pre-existing culture and traditions (Hall, 1964; Steinberg, 1959; Wolters, 1982). In other words, “Indian influences were selectively assimilated into a pre-

existing, well-developed cultural base” (Stargardt, 1990: 43). Concurrently, Indian immigrants assimilated themselves to the culture and habits of the local community and, at the same time, introduced Indic customs to the local community (Majumdar, 1944b: 7). Then, local elites and courts embraced Indian customs by which they could enhance their political legitimacy (Smith, 1999). As a result, a new elitist culture was established; thereby, “Hindu deities merged with local spirits” (Hussain, 2017: 149). For instance, the adoption of Hinduism provided Cambodian kings with the divine authority as God-king or *Devaraja*. Similarly, Buddhism gave them moral authority over their subjects by observing the moral duty of the rulers or *Rajadharma*, which constituted the cult of *Buddharaja* or Buddhist king. In this connection, Southeast Asian scholars opine that although Indian cultural influence penetrated predominately the elite, “[it] also enriched local Southeast Asian folk culture, through the introduction of new religious ideas, mythology and folklore that interacted with older stories and ideas” (Mahbubani & Sng, 2017: 20). The penetration of Indian religions within the populace can be seen in their religious rituals, worship of Hindu deities, marriage ceremonies and other traditional practices that are still alive today. Buddhism penetrated deeply among the people in mainland Southeast Asia, particularly in Cambodia, as early as the beginning of the Angkorian era and eventually became a dominant religion in the kingdom. Therefore, it is clear that Hinduism (Brahminism) and Buddhism played a vital role in Indian cultural dissemination in ancient Cambodia.

Nevertheless, Cambodians also rejected some cultural elements that were unsuitable for pre-existing local cults and traditions. The fourfold *varna* or caste system of Hinduism, for example, was not prevalent in Cambodian society as a whole (see Kishore, 1965; Mabbett, 1977; Acharya, 2013). However, “the Brahmans for many centuries maintained a powerful hierarchy” and as “the only one of the four castes that was really organized,” they enjoyed a supremacy status in ancient Cambodia as they did in India (Quaritch Wales, 1931: 58-59). Moreover, the low status of women in Hindu society was not adapted to Cambodian society, which was said to be matriarchal in some distant past (Chatterjee, 1928). These points show the limits of Indian influence. The Cambodians also evidently modified Indian cultural elements to the comfort of local beliefs and traditions.

One prominent example is the modification of ancient Indian epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, also known in Khmer as *Mahabharatayuddh* and *Reamker* (also spelt *Ramakerti*), respectively; the same happened throughout Southeast Asian countries. For example, there is a fundamental difference between the Khmer and Indian versions of *Ramayana*, traditionally attributed to the Maharishi Valmiki. In the Khmer version, the main character, *Preah Ream* or Rama, is interpreted as a human being subject to committing mistakes but is “[a] virtuous and righteous hero, far above all the vagaries of human imagination” (Pou, 1983: 257). In other words, the indigenised *Reamker* shows that the character and behaviour of *Preah Ream* are moulded to fit the Theravada Buddhist ideal of a hero who is an image of the Buddha (Pou, 1992). In contrast, Rama is treated as a god, the incarnation of Vishnu in India’s *Ramayana* (see Rajagopalachari, 1958). On the other hand, while *Mahabharata* is very popular in Indonesia but it is not so in contemporary Cambodia as compared to *Reamker*, likely due to the loss of its original manuscript Khmer language. The Khmer variation of *Reamker*, known for its perfect poetry, is prevalent and influential in numerous aspects of Cambodian society from top to bottom, from the royal place to the village. According to Tranet (1995: 1-2), Hindu *Ramayana* had been *Buddhisticised* and *Khmerised* to the extent that it no longer reflected the original theme of the story that featured *Yaksha* (giant), *Mara* (demon), and *Avatar* (incarnation).

Here is the final point that scholars often overlooked: the enrichment of Indian ideas in Khmer civilisation. One clear example is the twelfth-century majestic Angkor Wat and other Angkorian-era temples, which manifests the greatness of Khmer civilisation. In the World Heritage List, Angkor has been described as the centre of the Khmer Kingdom, with “a unique concentration of features testifying to an exceptional civilisation,” and further mentioned that:

Temples such as Angkor Wat, the Bayon, Preah Khan and Ta Prohm, exemplars of Khmer architecture, are closely linked to their geographical context as well as being imbued with symbolic significance. The architecture and layout of the successive capitals bear witness to

a high level of social order and ranking within the Khmer Empire. Angkor is therefore a major site exemplifying cultural, religious and symbolic values, as well as containing high architectural, archaeological and artistic significance (UNESCO, 2021).

Another important example is the flawlessness of Sanskrit culture in ancient Cambodia. An Indian leading expert in Sanskrit and Khmerology, Kamalesvar Bhattacharya, admires Cambodia’s Sanskrit language used in the inscriptions of various ancient temples, saying that the use of Sanskrit in Cambodian inscriptions was meticulous. In one of his seminal research projects on Cambodian inscriptions, Bhattacharya stimulated as in the following excerpt:

The authors of these *prasastis* [emphasis added]³ demonstrate their diverse knowledge. Compositions are teeming with allusions to epic and puranic myths, philosophical, grammatical, and political notions. Sometimes, they even remember classic poetic works. There is whole research on the literary sources of these inscriptions. Their vocabulary is very rich (Bhattacharya, 1964: 4; see also Seam, 2000: 4A)

PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE AND CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE

Indo-Khmer historical and cultural connections and interactions can be further examined in terms of peaceful coexistence and convergence of foreign and indigenous ideas. It is essential to remember that Indo-Khmer cultural interactions were peacefully flourishing and mutually influential; there was no significant conflict between the two civilisations. Scholars generally agree that the process of *Indianisation* of Southeast Asia “was accomplished by peaceful means and it was non-political in character” - it was not a result of the colonisation or invasion since India had never invaded Cambodia (Mishra, 1997: 800). In other words, Southeast Asians welcomed Indian culture because it came without “political strings” (SarDesai, 1997: 17). In general view, cultural diffusion and dissemination took place through multiple waves of immigration of Indian adventurous merchants and princes to ancient Cambodia over a

³ Prasasti, also spelt Prashasti, is a Sanskrit term for ‘praise’. It refers to the panegyric inscriptions composed by poets to praise their rulers, which were

prevalent in the Indian subcontinent in the past, as was the case with the broader Southeast Asian region.

period of several centuries. This natural process led to the establishment of Indian religions and culture in Cambodia as well as across Southeast Asia that maintained maritime trade links with South Asia.

From the Cambodian perspective, the Indian cultural predominant and influence that spread so easily to Cambodia and became a powerful driving force of the country's cultural development was because of the similarities in philosophy, religious ideology and mindset between Khmer and India (Sem, 1971; Teav, 1972; Tranet, 2013). In other words, in addition to geographical proximity, social proximity that is "similar social and political processes" came to play its part in facilitating the diffusion of Indian cultural elements to Southeast Asia, promoting the region to choose and adapt them preferably and peaceably (Marwah, 2020). For example, Khmer indigenous belief in animism or *Neak Ta* and Hinduism, especially Brahmanism, had similarities in practice (see Work, 2019). This had brought about religious and cultural syncretisation. From the gradual emergence to the dominance of Mahayana (Tantric) Buddhism (c. 12th-13th) and Theravada Buddhism (c. 13th-14th) in several waves of *Indianisation*, religious syncretism was adopted to harmonise different faiths. One well-respected Cambodian anthropologist stimulates that "[...] since the time of ancient Cambodia the main enduring characteristic in the elaboration of Khmer religious thought was the search for harmony between the local animistic foundation and Indian philosophico-spiritual contributions" (Choulean, 1988: 36). For this reason, the local people and elite accepted Indian cultural traits comfortably in the classical age of Cambodia. This view is, in fact, suggested by French scholar Paul Mus who explains that both Southeast Asia and adjacent regions of India had common cults and beliefs prevalently before Indian culture found its way into the region (see Mus, 1933).

An excellent example of peaceful coexistence between Cambodia's Brahminism and Buddhism through religious syncretism is the *Krong Peali* ritual. In almost all religious ceremonies in Cambodia such as *Sima* boundary demarcation ceremonies, housewarmings, and weddings, the *Krong Peali* ritual is always performed before the main content of the events. This ritual is performed to worship the local deities (*mchas toek mchas dey*) so that the ceremony goes in a peaceful, smooth manner without any obstacles (perhaps known in India

as *bhumi puja*, ritual worship of the site). This ritual is related more to Hinduism than Buddhism, although some people try to explain it in a Buddhist way. It is the common view of Buddhism that happiness or unhappiness is not dependent on the good day or the blessing of deity, *deva*, *Indra*, and *Brahman*, but on one's own deeds that determine the happiness or unhappiness that we often hear as *karma*. So, the ritual is not consistent with Buddhist practice. In fact, *Krong Peali* is referred to as "the Bali of the Hindu myths who extended his authority over the three worlds (heaven, earth, and underworld), then was overcome by Vishnu and banished to the underworld, where he rules as king" (Gaudes, 1993: 349). However, the coexistence of Brahmanism and Buddhism in Cambodian society over the centuries has made it very difficult to separate Brahmanical beliefs from Buddhist practitioners because some beliefs have become part of the tradition or identity of the Khmer people who have turned to Buddhism. Therefore, whether one likes it or not, these beliefs have come to play an important role in Buddhist rituals as a Khmer tradition, and this tradition has not caused much controversy in the minds of most Buddhists. In this sense, we could not agree more with Marwah (2020: 21) when she candidly puts it, "The synthesis of culture and faith in the shared space between India and Southeast Asia is one of the great outcomes of this inclusive philosophy."

From the above perspectives, it is clear that Cambodians were not passive receivers of Indian cultural diffusion; they had the ability and agency to selectively adopt and integrate it to fit in with the local needs for cultural enrichment and renovation. However, the manifestations of the character of Indian culture remain acutely felt in Cambodia. On the other hand, the dynamic interactions between the imported and indigenous cultures, which had shaped Khmer civilisation, suggested that "such indigenisation or localisation [of Indian culture] would produce a convergence of culture" (Acharya, 2013: 42). This means that when different cultures interact with each other, gradually, they become similar or even blend together without conflict. In other words, they are compatible with one another because "the activities of one of them don't have a negative effect on the well-being of the other, and vice versa" (van Velsen, 2000: 96).

More recently, scholars and think-tankers tend to look at the cultural fusion between India and Southeast Asia in a two-way process. A recent study finds that India's Northeast region shares a cultural link to neighbouring

Southeast Asia in terms of a common language family and matrilineal customs. According to Sanyal (2016: 61), “India’s population mix includes people who speak languages related to Vietnamese and Khmer!” and the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya remains “matrilineal” to the present day. The novel idea of two-way cultural fusion is a catalyst for deepening cultural cooperation between India and neighbouring Southeast Asian countries. On the whole, the fusion of cultural past and shared civilisation have become a powerful instrument in governments’ public diplomacy or, in other words, soft power.

In recent years, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has missed no chance in promoting the country’s civilisation and ancient heritage as a source of soft power, which has become one of the cornerstones of his foreign policy in South Asia and beyond (Lahiri, 2017).⁴ In Southeast Asia, India has capitalised on cultural connections with Cambodia to boost bilateral and multilateral relations between the two countries, especially in the frameworks of Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC), which is central to New Delhi’s Act East Policy towards the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). India has deep cultural and civilisational bonds with five Mekong countries, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. While the first four are the countries with a Buddhist majority, Vietnam, despite being a Confucian civilisation, is exploring cultural and historical connections with India by deploying the ancient Hindu-Buddhist temples of the Champa kingdom. For instance, a Vietnamese chief monk claims that his nation received Buddhism not from China in the first or second century CE, as the established views reveal, but directly from India a century or two earlier (Chaudhury, 2016). Driven by strategic convergence, this re-assessment of historical ties with India seems to take shape in the Vietnamese narrative. Nevertheless, building on historical connections through Buddhism to deepen a modern-day relationship between India and

mainland Southeast Asia is but a logical move. A policy-resource think tank based in New Delhi suggests the idea of “cultural integration” through various cultural initiatives, including strengthening educational links; opening India studies centres in Mekong and Mekong studies centres in India; promoting tourism in all dimensions; involving youth, facilitating festivals, music, cultural exchanges programmes, and setting up a network of media; setting up digital networks and archives; cultural resource management and building networks of museums; and documentation of civilisational ties and undertaking new research projects in joint collaborations (ASEAN-India Centre, 2017). For the realisation of the proposed idea, a pragmatic cultural policy is required “[that] could drive a convergence of interests towards cooperation in finding common solutions” (Chaturvedy, 2016: 56). Concurrently, Buddhism has become the pillar of India’s cultural diplomacy towards the Mekong region and elsewhere, and Cambodia has received that well, though there is much more to enhance (Bunthorn, 2019).

INDIAN CULTURAL FOOTPRINTS IN CAMBODIA TODAY

Looking back to the nineteenth century CE, as a result of the *Indianisation* process, Cambodia was “an Indian-seeming place”; the way people ate, behaved, and dressed, to name a few, was recognisable as Indian (Chandler, 2008). Similarly, in his lecture at the Calcutta University in December 1922, the famous French scholar, Alfred Foucher, affirmed how much Cambodia was Indian in general feeling. He said that modern Cambodia, not to mention the ancient one, “is still full of Indian traditions and customs. Nay, I dare say it has remained in many ways more Indian, I mean more like old-fashioned India, than your modernised Bengal” (Foucher, 1922: 26).

Today, Indian cultural elements exist in Cambodia with compelling evidence in the forms of ancient temple

⁴ While South Asian countries have drawn attention to utilising soft power in foreign policy, some scholars such as Rahman (2014) also suggest that “Pakistan needs to spot on its soft power seriously” and that tourism is one of the tools to do so. It is relevant to mention that Pakistan is home to one of the ancient Buddhist universities known as Taxila (Takshila), which is very famous in Buddhist history and literature. South Asian nations such as Nepal, Sri

Lanka, and India are major beneficiaries of Buddhist tourism. Considering over 500 million Buddhist popular concentrating mainly in Asia, it is Pakistan’s long-term interest to use one of the world’s oldest religions associated with the Taxila archaeological site to attract tourists from East and Southeast Asia and to develop and strengthen bilateral ties with countries in the region beyond its traditional foreign policy boundary.

architecture, iconography, sculpture, and most notably, Buddhist belief and literature as well as royal ceremonies. For several centuries, Indian cultural elements had been modified and assimilated into Cambodian culture. Pali and Sanskrit are the *sine qua non* of Khmer language and literature. To deeply understand them, one has to have knowledge of Pali and Sanskrit. Many Khmer words are borrowed from Pali and Sanskrit, particularly the formal ones, not to mention plenty of their conjugations. Some Cambodian linguists find more than 6,500 Pali-Sanskrit loanwords in the Khmer official dictionary,⁵ making up about 37 per cent of the total number of over 17,700 master words (Chhun & Chrin, 2010). The two Indian ancient languages have been taught as compulsory subjects in the Buddhist schools and universities in Cambodia nowadays. In this respect, it is interesting perhaps to refer to Sachchidanand Sahai, an Indian epigraphist known for his profound knowledge of Khmer civilisation. Sahai (2018) nicely elaborates on his impression of some standard Khmer vocabularies that have Pali-Sanskrit roots, such as *durasabda* (telephone), *desa* (place) and *kala* (time), *neary* (*nari*) (woman), *sneha* (love), and *pinai* (*vinaya*) (fine or penalty). All these words should sound familiar to most Indian readers as well. Moreover, it is very common for Cambodian parents to name their daughters in Pali-Sanskrit. For example, *Socheata* (*Sujata*) is a Khmer popular female given name, meaning one who was born “from a good family origin”. *Socheat* (*Sujat*) is its male alternative.

⁵ There is no secret that the Khmer dictionary, the noble work of Samdech Preah Mahasumedhadhipati Chuon Nath (Jotaññāno) (1883-1969), Kana Mahanikaya Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia, indicates all Pali-Sanskrit loanwords with an adequate explanation of their roots and usages. The dictionary has been endorsed by the Constitution in order to prevent anyone’s attempt from substituting it with other versions, which could modify the basic tendency of pro-Pali-Sanskrit conservation in Khmer language. Samdech Chuon Nath and his associates, who were members of the Cultural Committee, encouraged the use of Khmer language and the creation of the modern vocabulary deriving from the ancestral roots to Pali-Sanskrit while rejecting the French influence. During his time in the 1960s, there was a parallel movement called Khemarayeanakam (Khmerisation) led by France-educated Keng Vannsak. One of its pro-French intentions was to exclude as many foreign loanwords

With the influence of Buddhism - along with Hinduism in the Funan kingdom, reaching a peak during the Angkor Empire - today, Cambodian people profoundly follow the Buddhist way of life. Unlike the first five hundred years of the current era, Hinduism can hardly be openly recognisable in the contemporary Cambodian social institutions, followed by: for laypersons, though Hindu rituals remain virtually practising in the royal ceremonies. *Purohits* (Brahman religious authority), who are considered to have a special ritual knowledge, still play an essential role in the royal ceremonies such as the coronation of the king for obtaining his kingship legitimacy and the royal ploughing ceremony. Besides, worshipping *Shivalinga* is still practised in some areas or at least it has been integrated into Cambodian culture in the form of traditional cakes. For instance, Num Ansorm represents the phallus of Shiva (popularly known in Cambodia as Preah Iso), and Num Korm cake represents the vagina (genitals) of Neang Uma, the wife of Shiva. These sticky rice cakes are commonly prepared and eaten on most Cambodian traditional ceremonies and festivals. In contemporary times, indigenous animistic beliefs of worshipping ancestors or *Nak Ta* that have existed since the early Kingdom of Funan seem to have been practised noticeably in present-day Cambodia. In addition, Article 43 of the 1993 Constitution of Cambodia states that, with a special difference from Hinduism, “Buddhism shall be the State Religion”. However, there is assurance and guarantee of the freedom of religion and belief. It is a fact that Buddhism has been entitled to this

from Indian languages as possible from Khmer language. It also dealt with how the borrowed vocabularies should be orthographically spelt and new ones be coined. It reinterpreted the Khmer cultural and civilisational base by downplaying the significance of Indian connections. However, the Cultural Committee led by Samdech Chuon Nath succeeded in its mission. It is worth noting that Samdech Chuon Nath was probably the most influential, most knowledgeable, and most respected Buddhist monk Cambodia had ever had (see Hideo, 2015). According to a series of his Khmer literature talks in the 1960s, we come to know that he visited India (at least once) in the early 1950s, during which he went on a pilgrimage to Bodh Gaya. There, he had a historic meeting with Brahman Mahant Harihar Giri at his Bodh Gaya Math, where he earned the Mahant’s lavish praise for being well-versed in Sanskrit and Hindu mantras (Seam, 2002).

privilege since the reign of Jayavarman VII in the thirteenth century CE onwards, with its exception during the communist Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979). Because of that, Buddhist institution became an indispensable part of various national festivals and ceremonies – Khmer New Year, Pchum Ben (Ancestral Day), Visak Bochea (Buddha Jayanti), wedding, funeral, among others. On the other hand, Brahminic rituals and mythology exist alongside Buddhism due to their shared transitions, rituals, and holidays. Furthermore, like other Theravadin societies in Asia, Buddhist institutions play a crucial role in Cambodian society. Generally, Buddhist monks tend to be the guardian of the Khmer culture and traditions, and therefore, they are the protector of the ancestral roots and connections with India.

CONCLUSION

The shared civilisational and historical connections between India and Cambodia reflect a peaceful coexistence and convergence of culture. From the Cambodian perspective, Indian culture and tradition were not in conflict with but complementary to the pre-existing local customs. Through the assimilation and conventionalisation process, Indian ideas and traditions were remoulded into Khmer national character. The religious transition from Brahmanism to Buddhism and from Mahayana to Theravada happened in a peaceful process, thanks to the syncretisation of new and old cultures asserting an underlying unity and inclusivity and the bond of true compatibility of Indian culture and the indigenous mindset or psyche. The cultural similarity and affinity between the two civilisations enabled the Khmer to absorb more advanced ideas and customs of India apparently without resistance. The Khmer culture owes its richness and enrichment to the Indian subcontinent.

In contemporary times, although Cambodia is a Buddhist kingdom, it retains the strong influence of Indian Hindu and Buddhist rituals, mythology, and idolatry. This influence is evident in many of its rituals, having a resemblance with Indian culture and traditions. Moreover, when one sees the magnificent Angkor Wat temple, which appears on their national flag as the pride of every Cambodian, one may inevitably think of India as a source of ideational inspiration by which it was built, though its architecture is distinctly Khmer. In other words, as some historians put it, Angkor would never have existed without India, but Angkor was never an

Indian capital.

As can be seen from the discussion above, the millennium-old Indo-Khmer bonds also prove the harmonisation of foreign elements and local customs of the glorious Khmer civilisation in *Suvarnabhumi*. In turn, cultural aspects can be the vital instruments and aspirations of India's soft power projection and promotion in Cambodia. More importantly, the past connections create a positive, peaceful image for India, which could bring tangible positive effects and potentially transform bilateral political and economic relations and cultural cooperation with Cambodia. Cultural convergence could be a catalyst for the convergence of interests in broader areas of regional engagement and trust-building. In this regard, it is significant for researchers and policymakers alike to engage in a more in-depth study on the possibility of regional cultural integration within the broader regional frameworks such as ASEAN and the subregional frameworks such as MGC between India and mainland Southeast Asian countries. Similarly, the Indian and Cambodian governments should draw more attention to strengthening and elevating bilateral ties with India to new heights by increasing further interactions at all levels – government-to-government, business-to-business, and people-to-people. In modern days, human contact is dependent upon air and physical connectivity. Fast-track policy formulation and implementation in this area will deepen regional cultural integration and boost the spirit of political and economic cooperation. India must not lag behind other country in enabling infrastructure connectivity with Southeast Asian nations. It is widely believed that people-to-people interactions will produce a spillover effect in different sectors of regional engagement, such as tourism, trade and investment, and mutual understanding in areas of conflict of interests. In the long run, the deep-rooted historical and cultural bonds between India and Cambodia will remain an essential cornerstone of their bilateral and multilateral relations based on a new maxim: a convergence of culture, a convergence of interests.

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