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The Buddhist Cultural Heritage of Cambodia and its Indian Linkages: An Exploration of Evidence and Significant Inscriptions.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of Cambodia's Buddhist heritage, with a particular emphasis on its connections to India through the historical lineage of Buddhism, extending from the early period to the present. Cambodia, an early Indianized Theravada Buddhist and Hindu kingdom in Southeast Asia, adopted Indian culture before the 1st century CE. Indian missionaries and traders significantly influenced Buddhism's development in the Funan Kingdom. Indian merchants, adventurers, and monks played key roles in introducing Buddhism to the Khmer Empire, which blended Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The architectural diversity of Buddhism is illustrated through its temples, sculptures, and bronze art. Angkor Wat, originally a Hindu temple, was later converted to a Buddhist temple. The Bayon temple is for Mahāyāna Buddhism, then Theravāda Buddhism. Currently, more than 4,000 monasteries in Cambodia serve as symbols of the country's national identity, representing its Buddhist heritage, and are significantly shaped by the influence of religion. All temples are narrated in accordance with the Buddha's teachings and Cambodia's cultural traditions, including Viharas, Chetiyas, and stupas. Buddhism has profoundly influenced the lifestyle of the Cambodian people, motivating them to enhance their quality of life. The Buddhist heritage of Cambodia is inextricably linked to Indian culture and has profoundly influenced its civilization, education, and customs, continuing to play a critical role in the architecture and tradition of Cambodia today.

Keywords: Cultural heritage, Buddhism, linkage, evidence, inscription, sculpture, temples, tradition, Southeast Asia, Cambodia, significance, India, Cambodia, connection.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to enhance the understanding of Cambodia's Buddhist heritage by analyzing existing evidence on the evolution of Buddhist practices within the region. As an Indianized state in Southeast Asia, Cambodia has long been influenced by Buddhism, with evidence of Theravada Buddhism dating back to the 5th century CE. Buddhism became the official state religion in the 13th century, except during the Khmer Rouge period. Approximately over 95% of the population identifies as Buddhists, as enshrined in Article 43 of the 1993 National Constitution of Cambodia (Ratana, 2019).

India's rich cultural heritage has spread globally through trade, missionary efforts, and migration. Its historical ties with Southeast Asia date back to ancient times, significantly impacting cultural, trade, religious, and political relations. Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia through Aśoka's mission to Suvannabhumi (the Golden Land) following the Third Buddhist Council. Historically, Buddhist monks and Brahmins accompanied the mercantile class and assumed a leading role in disseminating religious and cultural messages throughout the Southeast Asian region.

The Funan, an early Indianized kingdom in Southeast Asia, adopted Buddhism in the fifth century. A seventh-century sandstone Buddha statue, resembling the Indian Gupta style, was found at *Wat Toul Preah-Theat*(Kumar, 2000). Recent discoveries in Kampong Speu have unveiled an inscription that includes the term "Suvannabhumi," which has linked numerous Jataka tales and evidence within Buddhism to the route employed by ancient missionaries during the reign of Aśoka. In the 3rd century B.C., following the Third Buddhist Council at Pataliputra, which Emperor Aśoka endorsed, India emerged as a pivotal player in

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disseminating the teachings of Buddha to neighboring regions and beyond. The Dipavaṁsa and Mahavaṁsa of Sri Lanka assert that King Aśoka actively promoted Buddhism in Southeast Asia by dispatching the two monks *Sona and Uttara (*Oldenberg, 1879*)*. Over time, Buddhism underwent several changes in India, with the Mahayana school emerging as the dominant one by the first century AD. By the 7th century AD, Buddhism had lost its influence in India, and the Theravada school had almost disappeared from its homeland. Meanwhile, Ceylon became the main center of Theravāda Buddhism, where it was widely accepted and expanded rapidly(Hazra, 1982).

Funan, established in the first century CE, flourished until the sixth century CE and is seen as the first political center in mainland Southeast Asia(Bunthorn, 2022; Hall, 1981). 'Funan' derives from a Chinese term, while the modern Khmer word 'Phnom' means "mountain." Khmers called their country '*Nokor Kouk Thlouk'* in a historical narrative. Its capital is *Vyadhapura*. Funan flourished through maritime trade routes connecting India and China, enhancing its economic growth with advanced irrigation and transport systems. At Oc Eo, archaeologists discovered statues of Hindu deities Vishnu and Shiva, a Sanskrit seal ring, and Funanese coins from AD 152 featuring Roman Emperor Antonius Pius. These artifacts reveal established trade links between India, China, and Rome (Glover & Bellwood, 2006). Evidence indicates that the Gupta period was a time of wealth, with people skilled in weaving textiles, making gold jewelry, metalwork, sculpture, and creating beautiful objects. These artifacts, found in Oc Eo port of Funan and elsewhere in Southeast Asia, show a clear connection to India. There was high demand for Indian goods, and trade between India and Southeast Asia prospered, as these regions were rich in spices and rice. Funan, located in the Mekong Delta, was the first trading hub for Indian traders. They settled there and expanded trade to other parts of the region.

India and Cambodia share a rich history and cultural connections that have fostered a conducive environment for the development of bilateral relations between the two nations since the early part of the century. The influence of Indian culture has permeated the region since the first century of the Common Era or beyond. In ancient times, Cambodia was referred to as Kambuja-deśa, encompassing a significantly larger expanse than contemporary Cambodia(Majumdar, 2020). The formidable Mekong River meandered through Kambuja-deśa, which is often likened to India's Ganges River. The term originates from the Pāli or Sanskrit words "Kambuja desa," meaning "Land of Kambuja." According to legends documented in the 10th-century *Baksei Chamkrong* inscription, the name Kambuja is attributed to Kambu Svayambhuva, a mythical Indian hermit who journeyed to Indochina and wed the celestial nymph, Mera, thereby merging the Indian and Indigenous populations(Bunthorn, 2019; Coedes, 1975).

This Indian cultural model was adopted within the Royal Court, where languages such as Sanskrit and Pali were employed for official and religious purposes. As Chandler elucidates, "This was the phenomenon known as Indianization, whereby elements of Indian culture were assimilated or deliberately selected by the Cambodian people in a process that endured for over a millennium" (Chandler, 2018). Scholars explore the authenticity of Buddhism's arrival in Cambodia, a complex subject, and lack sufficient evidence to prove it. The background of Cambodian Buddhism is intricate, with most inscriptions written in Sanskrit, a language used by the Mahayana traditions and Brahmanism or Hinduism. The Theravāda tradition, centered in Sri Lanka, was introduced by Mahinda Thera from India, who used Pāli as the primary language for the Pāli Canon, also known as the Tipitaka. G. Coedés asserted that Hinayana Buddhism was present in Cambodia, which utilized the Sanskrit canon, a claim corroborated by various inscriptions. Therefore, the landscape of ancient Cambodia (6th–14th centuries CE) was characterized by hundreds of religious structures, many of which are identified by Sanskrit-derived terms, as evidenced by stone inscriptions found at their respective sites. It is important to observe that when Buddhism was first brought to Cambodia, the Brahmanical system was already widespread in the society. Although the Cambodian people initially adopted Buddhism, it did not immediately become the dominant belief system. Over time, the practical philosophy resonated with the people, and its influence gradually expanded across the country. Buddhism flourished in Cambodia with the backing of the royal family. While each of the three schools of religion — Theravada, Mahayana, and Hinduism — had unique aspects, their core aim was the same: promoting peace of mind, ritualism, and harmony within Cambodia's syncretic religious landscape. It is a longstanding tradition of peace that transcends all religions within society. Khmer rulers have tolerated all followers present within the kingdom.

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In ancient times, Southeast Asian countries such as Cambodia were heavily influenced by Indian culture and religious concepts in their daily lives. According to Chinese historical records, numerous Buddhist monks traveled to China to disseminate and translate the Dhamma, promoting Buddhism. Chinese records further indicate that Bhikkhu *Nagasena* traveled from India to China and resided in Funan to teach Buddhism(Sengupta, 1994). Bhikkhu Paramartha, a distinguished monk from Ujjaini, India, also played an active role in promoting Buddhism in Funan prior to undertaking the translation of texts in China. During his time, Funan was recognized as the first Indianized state, flourishing from the first to the sixth century CE. This region, particularly the Oc Eo port, was vital for international trade, gaining prosperity through maritime commerce and agriculture, covering modern Cambodia, parts of Thailand, and southern Vietnam's Mekong Delta (Mishra & Sheel, 2023; Paul, 1982). Hinduism and Buddhism, two major Indian religions, significantly influenced Funan's social structure and sought to alter indigenous practices. During the Angkor period, these religions coexisted with local cults in the Khmer Empire. Buddhism significantly influenced architecture and literature, evolving from Funan to the Angkor period. Buddhist heritage is evident in the Theravāda and Mahāyāna forms at the Bayon Temple and Angkor Wat. Buddha statues from the 6th and 7th centuries were discovered in Angkor Borei. At the same time, *Wat Toul Preah Theat* illustrates Buddhism's impact in Cambodia during the pre-Angkor period and many evidence of Bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism and deities on the walls of certain Cambodian monuments, resembling the grandeur carvings of Indian temples from the early period or same era due to their scale, extensive stone bas-relief carvings, and the widespread Indian influence in the region.

The History of Buddhism in Cambodia and Relevant Inscriptions

Ancient Cambodia's religious history centers on Hinduism and Buddhism. From the Funan Kingdom to the 14th Century A.D., these two Indian religions significantly shaped Khmer society through syncretism. Introduced via merchant exchanges with Indian traders and missionaries, Buddhism gained favor among trading communities, facilitating the spread of the Dhamma and Indian culture. Their impact is evident in Cambodia's sacred monuments and inscriptions. The Khmer rulers consistently demonstrated considerable tolerance toward diverse religious practices and extended support to both Hinduism and Buddhism since these religions arrived in the region. The earliest archaeological evidence from the Funan period is predominantly Buddhist, suggesting that Buddhism may have preceded Hinduism in the post-Angkor period(Glaize, 1963). The archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest form of Buddhism was brought into the present-day Mekong Delta during the Funan period (c.100 BCE and 500 CE) by traders(Gyallay-Pap, 1996). The earliest epigraphic evidence relates to the Vo-Canh Inscription, which was uncovered in Nha-Trang, Southern Vietnam. However, the contents of this inscription remain considerably obscure. Although certain scholars have posited that it functions as a Buddhist record(Khat, 1961), this interpretation has been subsequently discredited by Bhattacharya (1961:11). Chutiwongs noted that the Vo-Canh inscription employs the Pallava script of South India, which exhibits similarities to that utilized in the Buddhist inscriptions of the Andhra region in South India. However, the text itself does not display any distinctly Buddhist characteristics (Chutiwongs, 2002). Ven. Pang Khat, a scholar of Cambodian Buddhism, confidently asserts that the Vo-Canh inscription was strongly linked to Cambodian Buddhism during the Funan period despite its inscription in Sanskrit. Furthermore, it was commissioned by King Sri Māra of Funan to adhere to the principles of Buddhism. Ven. Khat acknowledges the inscription as the most significant evidence of Buddhism in Cambodia (Khat, 1961). L. Finot notes the inscription is in Sanskrit without a date, but it likely originated in the second or third century by a king claiming descent from Sri Mararāja of Funan, Cambodia. The text mentions Srī Mārarāja and his successor, Fan Chan, emphasizing trade relations with India and China, focusing strategically on their ancient commercial interests. The stone inscription does not conclusively indicate the author's religion, though some expressions, such as:

Prajānāṅ Karunā… compassion for creatures…”

Lokasyāsya gatāgati coming and going of this world,”

[Prajā]nāṁ priyahite sarvaṁ visṛṣṭaṁ mayā all is given up by me for the satisfaction and good of creatures,” might give out a Buddhist inspiration(Mittal, 2002).

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However, in 1968, Jean Filliozat's re-edition confirmed the Vo-Canh inscription as evidence of Brahmanism (Filliozat, 1966; Sotheara, 2003). Later inscriptions noted donations for religious constructions and political events from the 6th and 7th centuries. Of around two thousand inscriptions, over one thousand have been studied by scholars of Cambodia's ancient history, culture, and religion. Peter Skilling examines the literary and archaeological evidence related to early Buddhism, focusing on Theravada Buddhism in Mainland Southeast Asia during the first millennium CE. He concludes that although Buddhists were active in Khmer (Cambodia), Buddhism was not the dominant religion, as monarchs and noble families primarily supported it(Skilling, 1997). Accordingly, it occupied a central position within the Funan kingdom, coexisting with other faiths. As a result, two distinguished monks (Sanghapāla & Mandrasena) were dispatched to China to translate Buddhist texts into Chinese. Between the late 5th and mid-6th centuries A.D., three inscriptions reflecting Hinduism and Buddhism were discovered. George Coedes, a prominent French archaeologist, stated that royal patronage supported Buddhism in Cambodia during this time. He claimed that Hinayana Buddhism and the Sanskrit canon are confirmed in the inscriptions of Jayavarman and his successor Rudravarman, from this period(Coedes, 2015).

Despite royal Chenla's support for Hinduism, Buddhism thrives, with the king participating in Buddhist initiatives. An inscription on the Buddha indicates the presence of Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia, written in Pali. It likely originated from Angkor Borei, the ancient capital of Funan. French scholar George Coedès closely studied the undated inscription. In 1936, he declared K. 754 the earliest known Pali epigraph from Cambodia in "The Oldest Pali Inscription of Cambodia." This inscription commemorates a donation by Srīndravarman in the Saka era 1230 (1308 CE) from Kok Svay Chek, south of the Western Barāy near Angkor Wat (Cœdès, 1936; Skilling, 2019). The bilingual record on a 1.70 m stone stele features twenty lines of Pali verse and thirty-one lines of Khmer prose. While we believe the Angkor Borei inscription predates the Kok Svay Chek inscription, Coedès regards K. 754 as the earliest Pali-Khmer bilingual inscription. Vong Sotheara notes the Khao Rang inscription (K.505) dates to 639 A.D. from Aranh Prathet, near the Cambodia-Thailand border. Inscribed in Pāli, it is one of the oldest Buddhist inscriptions in Cambodia. The inscription mentions the donation of an unidentified man, Sināhv, to a Buddhist temple called *Vihāra.* Coedès also asserted this inscription in his book(Sotheara, 2003). Moreover, Skilling supported the declaration that the undated Angkor Borei inscription is a citation from classical or canonical literature. He stated that K. 754 is the earliest dated Pali composition from Cambodia(Skilling, 2019). Other Pāli inscriptions from Wat Prey Vier, K. 49, dated 664 A.D., were found in Kampong Trabek, Prey Veng. It mentions two monks, Bhikkhu Ratana Sinā and Bhikkhu Ratana Bhānu, who were family members of King Jayavarman I (652-681 AD) and donated to the Lord Buddha. The King instructed Subhakīrtti, a grandnephew of the monks, to inherit their assets (Sotheara, 2003). The title of these two bhikkhus is derived from the Pāli language. After Funan's decline, the Chenla kingdom maintained the glory of this civilization from the 6th to the 8th century A.D., flourishing for approximately two centuries. However, Buddhism did not experience significant growth following the reigns of Jayavarman and Rudravarman. This information was recorded by the Chinese pilgrim I-Tsing during his travels to the region from 671 to 695 A.D. He writes thus, "setting out south-westwards (from Champā), one reached within a month, Poh Nan, formerly called Funan. Of old, it was a country, the inhabitants of which lived naked, people were mostly worshippers of the Devas, and later on, Buddhism flourished there, but the wicked king has now expelled and exterminated them all, and there are no members of the Buddhist brotherhood at all."(Sengupta, 1994) Upon reviewing the account, I-Tsing does not comment on the specific school of Buddhism that was prevalent in Funan during that period.

As power waned, Chenla split into Land and Water Chenla. *Isanapura*, the central city of Chenla, is now in Kampong Thom province. In the 6th–7th century, the Buddha statue at ***Vat Tuol Preah Theat*** in Kampong Speu province evidences the early establishment of Theravāda Buddhism in Cambodia. According to R.C. Majumdar and K. Bhattacharya, this structure was constructed during the reign of King Rudravarman (514-539 AD). *At Vat Toul Preah*, also known as *Preah Theat*, a statue of the Buddha bearing the inscription "*Ye dhamma hetuprabhava...*" has been discovered(Sengupta, 1994). The "Ye dhammā" stanza, widely recognized in Asia, is inscribed in Pali, Prakrit, and Sanskrit. It often appears in ancient Buddhist inscriptions on clay, stone, metal, palm leaves, paper, and walls. Evidence supports Theravada Buddhism's presence at the end of

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the Funan and early Chenla Period. This Pali inscription quotes verses from Gotama Buddha after his enlightenment, representing the most quoted inscription. The stanza can be found in the Mahavagga, Vinaya Pitaka for the Pali canon and from the Mahavastu for the Sanskrit version as follows:

ye dhamma hetuppabhava

yesam hetum tathagato aha

tesari ca yo nirodho

evamvadl mahasamano ti (Gnanarama, 2000; Skilling & Cicuzza, 2009).

The Pali inscriptions are primarily consistent with the text, although the word 'tesaṁ' is occasionally inscribed as 'yesaṁ.'(Skilling, 2019) The Sanskrit version shows some variance from the Mahavastu, suggesting the potential existence of another lost version(Liebenthal, 1947). This inscription plays a significant role in the context of Pali citation inscriptions in Southeast Asia and early Middle-Indic inscriptions found in ancient Cambodia, highlighting the influence of Pāli. This undated inscription, discovered in Angkor Borei, southern Cambodia, is associated with the ancient kingdom of Funan. Based on paleographic analysis, it may be dated to the 7th century CE.

During this period, Buddhism, alongside other religions, assumed a significant role within the kingdom. Furthermore, it is recorded that Mahāyāna Buddhism was first introduced to Cambodia in the 8th century, as evidenced by the Ta Keam inscription dated 791 A.D. in Siem Reap province(Coedes, 2015). Certain studies classify this inscription as the earliest known reference to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Cambodia, specifically referring to the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara(Sahai, 2014). The pre-Angkor period of the Wat Sithor inscription is attributed to the reign of Jayavarman V, who succeeded his father, Rājendravarman, in 968 A.D. This inscription honors the Buddhist *purohita*, or high priest, Kīrtipaṇḍita (‘renowned teacher’), at the temple of *Wat Sithor* located in Kandal province. The inscription distinctly reflects elements of Mahayana Buddhism, while also demonstrating characteristics of Vajrayāna Buddhism(Sharrock, N.D). Kīrtipaṇḍita began his discourse by invoking the Buddha, Dharma, and Bodhisattvas. His respect for the Trikāya, the Buddha's triple body, highlighted the importance of Nairātmaya (Emptiness) and Cittamatra (Subjectivity), like the sun signaling dawn. References to the Tattvasamāgraha and Madhyantavibhāga indicate the influence of the Yogācara School of Mahayana Buddhism. K.214, from Phnom Banteay Nāng and dated 928 A.D., is linked to Jayavarman V's reign, which evidences the practice of Mahayana Buddhism in the 9th century in Cambodia.

Recent Discovery of the Term “Suvarnabhumi” in Cambodia and Its Relevance

The legend of Suvarṇabhūmi, meaning “Golden Land,” dates back to Indian records from the third century BCE, and it has been recognized as a site of wealth since antiquity, with assertions from ancient Indian literature sources. While scholars investigate its exact location, it is generally believed to be in Southeast Asia. Historical documents include the Arthaśāstra by Kauṭilya, which mentions agarwood from Suvarṇabhūmi called Agāru (Wheatley, 1961). Suvarṇabhūmi is well-documented in Indian literature like Kautilya's Arthaśāstra and Buddhist Jatakas from the 3rd century BCE, as well as in Greek accounts (Olivelle, 2012). The term ‘golden’ is frequently linked to geographical nomenclature across Southeast Asia. Ptolemy’s Geography mentions the ‘Golden Khersonese,’ which represents an early name for Southeast Asia, translated as ‘golden peninsula(Bennett, 2009).’ References in Buddhist literature, especially in narratives associated with the past lives of the Buddha, indicate the use of the term as a destination reached after sailing across dangerous seas(Majumdar, 1986). Numerous Jataka tales and Buddhist scriptures reference this name.

The *Mahāniddesa*, a revered scripture within Buddhist Pali literature, encompasses a compilation of significant port cities from that era, which include *Gumba, Takkola, Takkasila, Kālamukha, and Pahammukha(*Beaujard, 2019*;* Wheatley, 1961*)*. Another Buddhist Pali scripture, known as the Milindapañhā, dating from the third to the fourth century CE, also comprises an additional list that includes Vaṇga, Takkola, Cīna, Sovīra, Suraṭṭha, Alasanda, Kolapaṭṭana, and Suvaṇṇabhūmi (Wheatley, 1961).

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The Jataka texts in Buddhism reference 'Suvannabhumi' in antiquity. Since the pre-Christian era, various titles have described Southeast Asia, especially under Emperor Aśoka of India. The Mahāvaṃsa chronicle, from the fifth century AD, recounts that monks Soṇa and Uttara were sent for missionary work during King Asoka's reign in the third century BC (Oldenberg, 1879). Sanskrit texts denote it as Suvarnabhumi (Pali: Suvannabhumi, meaning the Land of Gold) or Suvarnadvipa (which signifies 'the Golden Island' or 'Peninsula'). The term Suvarṇabhūmi, however, has been the focus of attention and much debate for years. The French art historian Nicolas Revire cautions in his article *Facts and Fiction: The Myth of Suvannabhumi through the Thai and Burmese Looking Glass* that both Burma and Thailand claimed to be the 'Buddhist Golden Land. Most scholars believe the term 'Golden Land' (Sanskrit, Suvarṇabhūmi; Pali, Suvaṇṇabhūmi) was initially used by Indian traders for a vast area beyond the subcontinent, likely in Southeast Asia, where some Pali texts connect Suvaṇṇabhūmi to the spread of Buddhism in the region(Revire, 2018). The search for Suvarṇabhūmi became central to intellectual history in Europe and Southeast Asia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Revire states, "For the Buddhist devotee in the Theravada world, Suvarṇabhūmi is more than a name. Scholarly discourse has focused on identifying Suvarṇabhūmi's location, partly motivated by the national pride of claiming the first Buddhist state in Southeast Asia(Assavavirulhakarn, 1990).

Whenever we examine the history of Southeast Asia, Cambodia is recognized as an Indianized state, as well as a country with significant Buddhist and Hindu influences from its inception. Indian culture began diffusing into Cambodia at the start of the Christian Era and continued into the Angkor period. Interaction between India and Cambodia started early in Angkor, when Indian traders, adventurers, teachers, and monks significantly influenced the region, often governing its earliest states. Hinduism and Buddhism spread from India, coexisting for centuries, with mainland states eventually favoring Buddhism. Funan, established in the first century A.D., was Cambodia's first major "Indianized" state, adopting Indian traditions in religion, politics, philosophy, language, and the arts. Various historical records from India and China reference states like Funan as being influenced by Indian culture (Kumar, 2000).

The key evidence for Buddhists in Asia, especially Cambodians, is the term "Suvarnabhumi" (Sanskrit) or "Suvannabhumi" (Pāli), an artifact from 633 A.D. during the Chenla period. This inscription was discovered by local villagers around twenty years ago at Vat Kiri Sdech Kong, also known as Vat Boeung. The pagoda is in Trapeang Khtum Village, Svay Cacep Commune, Boset District, Kompong Speu Province. The inscription, entirely in Sanskrit, contains twenty lines in eleven stanzas, carved in two columns with a calligraphic style. Since its discovery in December 2017, the inscription has drawn attention in Cambodia and internationally. The key term is the Sanskrit "suvarṇa-bhūmi" in stanza IV, a combination of "suvarṇa" (gold) and "bhūmi" (earth). This term reflects the reign of Khmer King Īśanavarman from 616 to 637 A.D., who is celebrated for ruling over the golden land. Although various Southeast Asian regions claim 'Golden Land,' this is the only documented instance in the area's epigraphy. Several elements emerge in the verses translated by Dr. Chhom Kunthea and published in Kambuja Surya Magazine by the Buddhist Institute of Cambodia. The stanza IV references the term, which I shall describe as follows:

samudraparyyantasuvarṇṇabhūmipr̥ ṣthaikarājendraparākra maśrīḥ samastasāmantaśirodhr tājñaś śrīśānavarmmā Jayati kṣitīśaḥ

English translation

Victorious is the lord of the earth Śrī Īśānavarman, whose commands were carried on the head by all the vassal kings, whose glory (*śrīḥ*) and heroism (*parākrama*) are those of Indra, who is the unique sovereign (*ekarāja*) on the surface (*pr ṣṭha*) of the golden earth (*suvarṇabhūmi*), up to the oceans (*samudraparyanta*).

Or

whose glory (*śrīḥ*) and heroism (*parākrama*) are those of a king of kings who is alone on the surface (*pr ṣṭha*) of the golden earth (*suvarṇabhūmi*), up to the oceans (*samudraparyanta*)(Chhom, 2019).

This evidence is crucial for Cambodia, as it affirms the location mentioned in Sri Lankan Buddhist texts, particularly the Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvaṃsa, from the fourth to fifth centuries CE. These texts mention

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Suvaṇṇabhūmi, where monks *Soṇa and Uttara* were sent as missionaries in the early third century BCE during Asoka's reign. Nicolas contends that, notwithstanding the frequent references to this 'Golden Land' in various ancient and classical South Asian texts, none provide definitive evidence of its existence or offer detailed information regarding its geographical location. Certain Jātakas, such as the Mahājanaka jātaka and the Supāragajātaka, illustrate maritime expeditions to the mythical Suvarṇabhūmi; however, these voyages are invariably impeded by severe weather conditions. Consequently, the textual references do not unequivocally delineate the ultimate destination(Revire, 2018). However, Ashley stated that "not all instances of Pāli usage in Cambodia definitively indicate the presence of Theravāda as it has been previously defined. Similarly, the occurrence of Sanskrit does not universally imply non-Theravādin practice. Ultimately, the absence of Pāli fails to confirm the nonexistence of Theravāda" (Thompson, 2022).

Evidence of Buddha statues at *Wat Romlok* in Takeo Province, dating from the 7th century in Angkor Borei, clearly shows significant post-Gupta Indian influence on early Khmer sculpture and art (Jessup, 2004). This highlights a strong connection with India from Chenla onward. Similarly, sculptors and artists merged original Indian motifs with local artistic elements to craft uniquely Cambodian and Southeast Asian styles, resulting in their own stylized masterpieces. Inspired by Gupta period icons, Cambodian sculptures from the 8th to 13th centuries differ significantly in appearance and form. Nevertheless, they are exquisite works depicting stylized figures of gods, goddesses, the Buddha, Apsaras, and demons, all bearing Cambodian features and intricate carvings. In February 1923, George Groslier discovered a Buddha statue and transported it to the National Museum in Phnom Penh. Numerous Sanskrit inscriptions exist in Cambodia, including one at Ta Prohm temple that mentions King Kaundinya Jayavarman and his son Rudravarman, both patrons of Buddhism. One stanza invokes the Buddha, while another refers to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Although undated, this inscription is classified as mid-6th century A.D. based on paleographical evidence (Jasrotia, 2023; Sengupta, 1994).

Nancy Dowling identifies similarities between the "Hīnayāna" imagery of Dvāravatī and standing Buddhas in the Phnom Penh National Museum, dating them to the Zhenla (Chenla) period, 610-665 A.D. She notes the abrupt conclusion of the Khmer people's experience with Buddhism by the late 7th century, highlighted by the travels of the Chinese monk Yijing in the region. He reported that, despite the previous flourishing of Buddhism there, it had been eradicated by the actions of "a wicked king." (Yijing, translation by Takakusu1896: 12)(Dowling, 2000). Most evidence of Buddhism in Cambodia shows significant Indian art influence from the Gupta period (3rd CE) on Khmer art, especially in Angkor Borei, a key Buddhist center in Southeast Asia, located in present-day Takeo and Kampong Speu provinces.

On January 4, 2024, local news reported that Prey Top village residents in Sra Nge commune, Traing district, Takeo province, found two ancient Buddha statues (Times, 2024). Both statues are authentic 7th-century artifacts in the Phnom Da style, now displayed at the National Museum of Phnom Penh. Similar figures were found in the neighboring kingdom of Dvāravati, dating from the 6th to 8th century A.D. (Le May, 1938). The Dvāravati style derives from Gupta art.

This article examines historical records about Funan and Zhenla during the Liang Dynasty. The Liu Sung History states that Kaundinya Jayavarman dispatched the Indian monk Bhikkhu Nagasena in 484 A.D. to communicate with the Chinese emperor. Notably, Saivism was the official religion of Funan, alongside Buddhism (Le May, 1938). Sonia has conducted an extensive study on the evolution of Buddhist forms that have been predominant and thriving in Cambodia from the 2nd century A.D. to the present, which can be categorized into three distinct Buddhist schools.:

1. Hinayana Buddhism or Sarvastivada (from the 2nd to the 8th centuries AD)

2. Mahayana Buddhism (from the 9th to 13th centuries AD)

3. Theravada Buddhism (from the 13th up to the present)

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In the fifth and sixth centuries A.D., George Coedes proposed that Mahāyāna Buddhism was not present in Funan. He observed the existence and flourishing of Theravada Buddhism, along with the accompanying Sanskrit language (Jasrotia, 2023).

The Angkorian Empire was founded in 802 CE when Jayavarman II (r. 802-835) declared it. Although records of his achievements are scarce, he is widely recognized as the first Khmer king and is honored in many later inscriptions (Coe & Evans, 2018). Khmer rulers historically endorsed religious systems for their advantage. Jayavarman VII (r.1181-1218 CE) notably committed to Mahāyāna Buddhism, shown by his support for Buddhist monuments and Sanskrit inscriptions (Nietupski, 2019). Jayavarman VII adopted this religion, which was influenced by his wife's beliefs before his reign. Inscriptions state that his subjects' afflictions became his spiritual tribulations (K.485, 12th century). He ruled the Khmer kingdom from 1181 to 1218, uniting the decentralized Khmer and Cham [Champā] states through political and military alliances. Brahmanism, or "Hinduism," along with Mahāyāna Buddhism, was crucial to Khmer society. Jayavarman VII unified territories through conquests and diplomacy, overseeing extensive architectural projects. The Khmer civilization thrived from the early ninth to the mid-fifteenth century, with fluctuating boundaries alongside Champa, which served as both allies and foes. During this period, he commanded a vast empire shaped by political alliances and conflicts.

During the reign of Jayavarman VII in the late 12th century, Mahāyāna Buddhism emerged as the state religion, leading to the intricate visual representation of the life of the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas being sculpted in all of his temples throughout the Empire (Roveda, 2005). As a result of this religious influence, the Cambodian populace adopted the Sanskrit language, incorporating its profound linguistic and cultural elements into their everyday communication, and subsequently utilized Pāli for further expression.

The significance of Hinduism in the social development and prosperity during the Angkor period is prominently illustrated by the substantial evidence that endures today, including temples, excavated reservoirs, and moats. These remarkable accomplishments were often commemorated by stone inscriptions, denoting that they were constructed by kings and their officials who traditionally held Hinduism in high respect. Among the Buddhist monarchs, King Jayavarman VII (1181-1218 A.D.) distinguished himself by initiating monumental construction projects that rivalled the prestige associated with his Brahmin ancestor(Coedes, 1975).

Theravāda Buddhism was first introduced to Cambodia through trade, missionaries, and itinerant monks during the 5th-6th century pre-Angkor period. This period primarily used Sanskrit, which complicated the identification of its teachings within Southeast Asia's diverse Buddhist traditions. Religious relations with Sri Lanka date back centuries, originating through trade and influence. Sri Lanka reached Southeast Asia, particularly Cambodia, despite limited evidence of this, such as the Pāli script found on the Buddha statue from the Zhenla period. Ceylonese Buddhist monks are believed to have visited Cambodia often. Therefore, ***Tamalinda***, son of King Jayavarman VII, learned about Ceylon as the most important center of Buddhism(Hazra, 1982). He went there and then received re-ordination at the Mahavira monastery, studied, and returned to his country with Buddhist scriptures and books. Majumdar also supports this evidence. He mentioned that in the latter half of the 12th century A.D., Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka had a significant influence as a major religious center in Cambodia and other parts of the Southeast Asian region. During this period, a prince from Cambodia went to Sri Lanka to study Theravada Buddhism under the guidance of scholarly monks(Majumdar, 1953). This visit marked the beginning of religious exchange between Cambodia and Sri Lanka, a relationship that continued intermittently, ultimately leading to the deep-rooted presence of Buddhism in Cambodia today. According to Chandler, conversion was a crucial factor during the reign of Jayavarman VII. He mentioned that Cambodian Buddhist monks specifically traveled to Ceylon to study Theravada Buddhism and acquire clerical credentials. This exchange of knowledge and religious authority played a significant role in the spread and development of Buddhism in Cambodia later (Chandler, 2018).

In the early 13th century, Pou Savros observed a significant shift from Sanskrit to Pali inscriptions related to Theravada Buddhism, replacing the previous use of Sanskrit. Theravada Buddhism became dominant in Khmer society, reflected in various documents showcasing the people's devotion to the Buddha (Pou, 1988). Cambodian scholars, including Vickery, support Dr. Savros's views on religious practices in the early 13th century. This era witnessed significant changes, with Mahayana Buddhism prevailing under Jayavarman VII

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and the introduction of Theravada Buddhism, linked to Sri Lanka, in the 12th and 13th centuries. Manuscripts and epigraphy offer valuable insights into Theravāda Buddhism, particularly from Zhou Daguan's 1296-7 visit to Angkor. Theravāda was established before Zhou's visit and coexisted peacefully with other religions, reflecting the Kingdom's tolerance. During the Angkor period, multiple religions existed without tension. Zhou's work remains a key reference for late Angkor Theravada Buddhism scholars. Zhou's writing gives us a unique insight into day-to-day life in Angkor during the final years of its glory. He recorded:

The Buddhist monks (Chu-Ku) (Prah Kru) shave their heads, wear yellow robes, bare the right shoulder, knot a strip of yellow cloth around the waist, and go barefoot. Their temples, which are often roofed with tile, contain only one statue, closely resembling the Buddha Sakyamuni, which is called Po-lai (Prah)... The food of the bonzes is universally fish or meat, which is also set as an offering before the Buddhas, but no wine may be drunk. They content themselves with one meal a day, which is partaken of at the home of a patron, with no cooking being done in the monasteries. The numerous holy books that they scan are made of strips of palm leaf neatly bound together. These strips are covered with black characters, but as no brush or ink is used, their manner of writing is a mystery. Certain monks are given the right to use palanquins with golden shafts and parasols with gold or silver handles. These men are consulted by the King in matters of serious import. There are no Buddhist nuns(Daguan, 2007).

This account reveals widespread Buddha worship, with each village having a temple or stupa. Monks resided there, studying palm-leaf manuscripts considered holy texts. Zhou does not mention the Buddhist Canon, a Theravada sacred book, but notes the recognizable Theravadin monks in yellow robes and bare shoulders, indicating the religion's acceptance among ordinary Cambodians. Theravāda Buddhism has persisted from its arrival in Funan through the Angkor and post-Angkor periods, receiving varying support from monarchies and officials. By the early 14th century, as recorded in the Kok Svay Chek inscription (K.754) of Pāli from 1309 A.D., Theravada monks had gained respect from the monarchy. This highlights that Theravada Buddhism sought to survive with Hinduism, which had numerous Brahmin priests, followers, and other Buddhist sects in Khmer society (Sotheara, n.d).

After the post-Angkor period, the Mahayana tradition and Hinduism significantly declined in Cambodia during King Panyā Yāt's reign, continuing until the 15th century A.D. Only traces of Hindu influence remained, seen in popular festivities and royal ceremonies. Their legacy persisted even as national celebrations merged Hindu and Buddhist elements. As a result, Mahayana temples transformed into Theravada Buddhist structures. The social and cultural characteristics of contemporary Cambodia—a Theravada Buddhist nation with a rich Brahmanical (Hindu) history intertwined with indigenous traditions—emerged around this time. Therefore, Middle Khmer art offers invaluable insights, functioning as both a material and spiritual reflection of its time amidst the intricate transition between Cambodia's historical past and present state (Thompson, 1997). The Khmer populace continues to reflect upon representations of their historical description. The predominant form of Buddhism in mainland Southeast Asia since the thirteenth century, known as Theravada Buddhism or Pali Buddhism, presents a complex and multifaceted paradigm that adapts to the varied contexts of diverse populations across different regions and historical periods(Skilling, 1997; Thompson, 2020). Since the 15th century, Theravāda Buddhism has been essential to Cambodian society, embraced by monarchies and the populace. It became the state religion post-Angkor, supported by royalty, nobility, and common people alike.

For centuries, the country faced conflict, threatening Buddhism during Cambodia's dark age of warfare. This challenge persisted through the French Protectorate and the reforms of the 19th century. In the 1970s, Buddhism experienced a surge in popularity, revitalizing after a period of decline, and led to the reconstruction of monasteries and advancements in modern Buddhist studies.

CONCLUSION

Buddhist monks and Brahmins (Hindu priests) traveled with the mercantile class, playing a key role in spreading Indian religions and culture across Southeast Asia, especially in Cambodia. Their main aim was to introduce their religion and culture to regions beyond India. They had no political motives and lived in hermitages and ashrams. The local people invited them to reside near their village to preach the Dhamma of Buddhism and Hinduism. Therefore, merchants, monks, and Hindu Brahmin priests frequently traveled to

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distant kingdoms such as Cambodia, Champa, and Indonesia, facilitating the spread of India's culture, religion, and civilization across various parts of Southeast Asia. The kings and the elite wore Indian-made silk and brocade textiles during ceremonial occasions and adorned themselves with jewels imported from India. Printed and woven textiles were eagerly sought after by the common people. Indian religion, political thought, literature, mythology, artistic motifs, and style were deeply absorbed into local culture as greater interaction with Indians who settled in the courts of Cambodia and Southeast Asia took place. Buddhism was introduced to Cambodia and Southeast Asia from India in the 3rd century BCE, when King Aśoka sent two monks, Sona and Uttara, to promote it for the benefit of the local people.

The connection between India and Cambodia profoundly shaped Cambodian culture and religion. Indian culture arrived through trade, missionary work, and convergence by marriage to local princesses. Buddhism and Hinduism entered Cambodian society early on, coexisting in mutual tolerance. Unique art and architecture have been integral to Cambodian civilization since its inception, stemming from its rich religious heritage. Inscriptions reveal the coexistence of active Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism alongside Hinduism. Theravada became the state religion in the twelfth century and remains significant today.

Indian culture had a significant influence on Cambodia in the early centuries, shaping its Buddhist heritage, as evident in temples, sculptures, and architecture. Deep ties between India and Cambodia are rooted in peaceful coexistence and cultural exchange. Cambodian culture integrated Indian traditions, with transitions from Hinduism to Buddhism and Mahayana to Theravada occurring without conflict. This blending enriched Khmer culture with Indian influences. The Indo-Khmer relationship exemplifies the fusion of customs vital for India's soft power in Cambodia, enhancing its positive image and strengthening political, economic, and cultural relations. Moreover, cultural convergence fosters mutual interests in regional engagement and trust-building between the two countries. The influence of India has significantly contributed to the advancement of Cambodian civilization, resulting in a notable increase in sophistication from its inception to the present.

Today, Cambodia remains a Buddhist kingdom, yet it still strongly reflects Indian Hindu and Buddhist influences in its rituals, mythology, and worship. These influences are visible in many local customs that resemble Indian traditions. Additionally, the impressive Angkor Wat temple, featured on the national flag and a symbol of Cambodian pride, often evokes thoughts of India as an inspirational source, despite its architecture being uniquely Khmer in style. Cambodia's Buddhist heritage vividly reflects India's ancient spiritual and cultural influence. From the Funan and Angkor eras to contemporary Theravāda practices, Indian Buddhism has significantly influenced Cambodia's religion, art, and architecture.

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