



Growth of Buddhism in Cambodia

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Received: 14 Jan., 2023

Revised: 25 Mar., 2023

Accepted: 02 Apr., 2023

ABSTRACT

Cambodia, (*Kampuchea*) is land of Buddhism. Cambodians ethnically and historically known as the Khmers. It covers the bottom of the Indochinese peninsula, having an area of 181, 0355 sq kms. Cambodia comparatively is a small country of South-East Asia, Cambodia has a population of 16 million, (16,133,484) of which the Khmers who comprise 94 percent from the majority. The other sizable ethnic groups are of Vietnamese and Chinese origins. According to the Samantapasadika, the commentary on Vinaya Pitaka, and a Sri Lankan chronicle Mahavamsa, after the third Buddhist Council which was held at Pataliputra (Modern Patna), India, in the third century B.C., under the presidentship of Thera Mahamoggaliputta Tissa, and was patronized by emperor Dhammasoka, sent a Buddhist mission headed by two monks, namely Sona and Uttara from Jambudipa (India) to Suvarnabhumi in order to propagate the Buddha's teachings there. In ancient times Suvarnabhumi covered a large part of South-East Asia including Cambodia. Suvarnabhumi covered modern Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Malaysia, and some parts of Indonesia. Ancient inscriptions and various historical documents explain that in Cambodia Buddhism has existed in the country since the third century B.C., although practice of Buddhism (Mahayana and Theravada) changed according to the faith of the king. This paper is covering the Historical, Political and Social impact of Buddhism in Cambodia. This paper explains the introduction and growth of Buddhism in Cambodia.

Keywords: Hinduism, Buddhism, Growth and development of Buddhism, Theravada, Mahayana Buddhism



To understand Cambodian history we have to go through the ancient social and political system. The peoples of maritime South East Asia i.e., Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines are thought to have migrated to south from southern China between 2500 and 1500 B.C.

Indian traders, adventurers, teachers and priests continued to be the dominating influence in Southeast Asia until about A.D. 1500, and Indians often ruled the earliest states in these regions. Hinduism and Buddhism both spread to these states from India and for many centuries existed there with mutual toleration. Eventually the states of the mainland became mainly Buddhist. Cambodia (Funan). The first of these “Indianised” states to achieve widespread importance was Funan, in Cambodia, founded in the 1st century A.D. According to the tale, after the marriage of an Indian Brahman into the family of the local chief. These local inhabitants were the Khmer people. Khmer was the former name of Cambodia, and Khmer is their language. The Hindu-Khmer Empire of Funan flourished for some 500 years. It carried on a prosperous trade with India and China.

Local rulers promoted Hinduism during the early Common Era as it greatly boosted the legitimacy of their reign. Historians gradually argue that the process of Hindu religious diffusion must be recognized by the initiative of the local lords. Buddhist teachings that almost simultaneously arrived in Southeast Asia and developed through centuries marked a glorious phase and eventually came to be perceived as more appealing to the demands of the general population, a belief system and philosophy that addresses concrete human affairs. Emperor Ashoka initiated the tradition to send trained monks and missionaries abroad who spread Buddhism that includes a sizable body of literature, oral traditions, iconography, Art and offers guidance to common people and emphasis on individual effort and conduct.

It should be noted that at the time when Buddhism was first introduced to Cambodia, the Brahmanical system was already prevalent in the country. Although Buddhism was accepted by the Cambodian people at the time of its introduction, the new belief did not become dominant at the beginning of its dawn. Later the practical philosophy suited people of that time, its influence gradually spread all over the country.

According to Goege Coedes, the existence of Buddhism in Cambodia during the 5th and the 6th centuries A.D. was because of the royal patronage. The forms of Buddhism that have been prevalent and flourishing in Cambodia from the 2nd century A.D. up to the present can be classified as under: The three Buddhist Schools are:

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)

Buddhism flourished in Cambodia and got royal patronage. The three schools may have differences but the root was the same. They were known for their own special characteristics.

1. Hinayana Buddhism or Sarvastivada (from 2nd to 8th centuries A.D.) after 100 years that elapsed after the Buddha's parinirvāṇa, important development took place within the Sangha – the first major schism took place where the Sangha was split into two groups, namely into Sthaviravāda and Mahāsaṅghika. According to the accounts of the schism presented in the Sri Lankan chronicles, the Dīpavaṃsa and Mahāvāṃsa. The schism in both these two lineages occurred during the 2nd century after the Buddha's parinibbāna. The Sthaviravāda were later supposed to have split into 12 sub-groups. But according to Vasumitra, a prominent scholar-monk of this school, the Sarvastivada branched off directly from the Theravada.

It became very popular in the first century A.D. during the reign of King Kaniska who sponsored the Fourth Buddhist Council held at Kashmir, in which the Sarvastivadins were represented in a large number. Its literature became famous and wide spread after the composition of the commentaries called Vaibhasas Shastra.

It is not clear, about how Mahayana Buddhism was introduced in Cambodia, and who brought it here. Gorge Goedes, a French naturalist and archaeologist, says that during the 5th and 6th centuries A.D. Mahayana Buddhism did not exist at Funan but Theravada Buddhism with its Sanskrit language existed and flourished there.

In this connection, it is interesting to note the statement made by Taranatha in his “History of Buddhism” that the Dharma was introduced into Indo-China by a disciple of Vasubandhu at the end of the 5th century A.D. Furthermore, it is said that the First Buddhist text to be taken there was the Madhyanta Vibhashasastra, which was composed by Vasubandhu himself.

In the beginning of monk-hood, Vasubandhu was Sarvastivadin but later he moved to Yogacara School because of the influence of his elder brother, Asanga.

Buddhism never vanished or been destroyed from this land. Even during the reign of terror of the Democratic Kampuchea (Cambodia), which officially banned the practice of Buddhism as well as other religions and closed down Buddhist temples and schools. During Khmer rouge rule Cambodian Buddhists secretly, practiced the religion. Some monks were forced to leave the monk-hood to observe the ten precepts (Dasasila) in secret and lived as the “Homeless persons” “Anagarikas”.

Buddhism in Cambodia have observed oscillation which were due to the support system received from the followers. At the early centuries, the Cambodian kings, nobles as well as the masses, were not well-grounded in a particular doctrine. It was like swinging between Mahayana and Theravada. But nevertheless, it is surprising to see that Buddhism has continued, through its entire vicissitudes, in Cambodia up to now. The present form of Buddhism is Theravada.

There are many Sanskrit inscriptions, which have been found in the Cambodia, A Sanskrit inscription found at Ta Prom temple, in the district of Bati, the province of Takeo, Southern Cambodia, refers to King Kaundinya Jayavarman and his son, Rudravarmān, who patronized Buddhism. The inscription begins with an invocation to the Buddha in one stanza, in another; there is a reference to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. There is no date to this inscription but on paleographical ground, it

belongs to the middle of the 6th century A.D. According to R.C. Majumdar and K. Bhattacharya, it was erected during the reign of king Rudravarman (514-539 AD). A statue of the Buddha with an inscription “Ye dhamma hetuprabhava...” has found at Toul Preah or Preah Theat in the province of Prey Veng, South-eastern Cambodia.

Although the usage of Sanskrit for inscription during this period cannot determine the existence of Sarvastivada, it can serve as a hypothesis till more evidences are found. Based on the Sanskrit inscriptions and Chinese sources, Ray Pok is his “Cambodian Buddhism” believe that Buddhism in the flourishing condition during Funan period was of Hinayana and Sanskrit language was the medium of instruction. I-Tsing’s stated in his records that when he was travelling in Southeast Asia in 671-695 A.D., Sarvastivada School was flourishing in Cochin-China at that time. Cochin-China which is now called South Vietnam was earlier part of Cambodia.

Therefore, the above evidences show that Sarvastivada School was existing and flourishing in Cambodia during the 5th, 6th, and the 7th centuries A.D., king supported to other religions also. It was a practice of the ancient rulers in Asia to render support to all religions under their sovereignty.

Mahayana Buddhism (from 9th to 13th centuries A.D.)

At the end of the sixth century A.D., Hinayana Buddhism decline because of political changes and less or no patronage from the king. Brahmanical system, on the other hand, gained more popularity than Buddhism because of king’s adherent of Brahmanism. An inscription belonging to the reign of King Isanavarman I (611-631 A.D.), son of King Bhavavarman at Prasad Sambor Preikuk or Isanapura, in Kampong Thom province, North-eastern Cambodia explains the Naga who protected the Buddha with his folds. This indicates that Buddhism was still existing in Cambodia at the time.”

After that in the second half of the eight century A.D Sarvastivada School declined and Mahayana Buddhism appeared in Cambodia. The religious history of the country shows that Mahayana Buddhism flourished at the end of the eight and at the beginning of the ninth centuries A.D. An inscription dated 791-792 A.D. found at Prasad Ta Kean in the district of Kralanh, the province of Siem Reap, Northern Cambodia, records the erection of image of Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara. This Mahayana form of Buddhism was probably introduced from Java, Indonesia, for at this time Java Island under rule of Sailendra Dynasty made a great influence over Cambodia. During the reign of King Jayavarman II (802-850 A.D.), the founder of Angkor or Kambuja (802-1432 A.D.), Vaisnavism and Shaivism became more prominent than Buddhism because King was a follower of that religion. But the reign of King Yasovarman I (889-900 A.D.), the son of King Indravarman I (877-889 A.D.), was important from the Buddhist point of view. He was a Buddhist (a follower of Mahayana Buddhism) and rendered patronage to Buddhism as well as Vaisnavism a lot. Several inscriptions record are found which explains the political and religious conditions of the Angkor Kingdom. These inscriptions reveal that Buddhism and Vaisnavism flourished at this time under the royal patronage. Mahayana Buddhism was predominant in the country during the period from the 9th up to the 13th centuries. Mahayana and Brahmanism were on the decline and eventually disappeared from Cambodia in the reign of King Po Ngea Yat in the first

half of the 15th century A.D., leaving only some Brahmanical traces in the common festivities and in the royal ceremonies. Mahayana temples and religious monuments were later converted to the Theravadas.

Theravada Buddhism became popular and gained the patronage of the king. Theravada Buddhism still continued to flourish in Cambodia in the 16th century AD. King Ang Chan (1516-1566 AD), a relative of King Dhammaraja, was a devout Buddhist. In the reign of King Hariraksaramadhipati Ang Doung, Buddhism grew more in importance. He was so devoted to the faith that he offered his own palace to be established as a Buddhist University to which he admitted both monk and lay students to study all streams of knowledge. He himself was a poet, great writer and lecture at the University.

King Norodom (Narottama), the eldest son of King Ang Doung, succeeded him on throne. Keeping his father's tradition, prince Norodom got himself ordained as a Buddhist monk for some years before becoming the king. During the reign of King Norodom Sihanouk Varman, Buddhism became more popular and prosperous. He constitutionalized Buddhism as the State religion, which the State has duty to protect and expand it. His reign was coincident with the independence from France (Nov. 9th 1953), so Buddhism took a big leap in both popularity and development, especially, in monastic education. Besides supporting the already established Buddhist Primary Schools and Secondary Schools in the whole country, he established a new Buddhist University, which was named after him-the University of Preah Sihanouk Raja, in the capital in 1954.

Buddhism was also greatly patronized by King Norodom Suramrith who came into the throne on the abdication of his son, King Norodom Sihanouk, in 1955. After his consecration one year (in 1956), King Norodom Suramrith, organized the celebration of the 2500th Year Anniversary of Buddhism-Buddha Jayanti-which was the greatest Buddhist Celebration ever done in the whole history of Cambodia.

After the death of King Norodom Suramrith in 1964, Queen Sysowath Kosomanearirath Serey Vatthana (Kusumanariratana Sirivaddhana) became the symbol of the throne. Besides helping all monasteries in the whole country, she took a keen interest in providing the medical facilities for the treatment of the sick monks. For this she built a hospital in the capital exclusively for monks, which was named after her-Preah Kosomak Hospital, popularly known as the Monks' Hospital. At present the hospital provides the medical treatment to both monks and lay people. For the caring of sick monks staying in the hospital "The Queen's Hospital Association" was set up. At present, Buddhism (Theravada) is the state religion of Cambodia, which has been written in the article 43 of the Constitution of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia. So Buddhism is over again under the state patronage.

Buddhism has seen bad phase in seventies, the practice of Buddhism was totally banned, and Buddhist temples and schools were closed down, by the government of the Democratic Kampuchea headed by Pol Pot. Not only that, this government evacuated the people from the city and forced them to work on the field, and also killed. From 1975 to 1978, about three millions Cambodians are estimated to have been killed or died of starvation. Innocent monks were forcefully expelled from the monastic life and made cowherds and so on. Almost all learned monks were barbarously killed. Ven. P. Payutto Tipitaka Acharaya, well versed in the Pali Canon, Achariya at Nava Nalanda Institute in his, "Thai Buddhism in the Buddhist World" reports state that in April 1981, a senior Cambodian monk, who is the spiritual

leader of several Cambodian communities of refugees in the United States, gave an address in the City Hall of Boston, saying “As you know, more than one third of Cambodian people were killed in the past ten years, including’s 80,000 Buddhist monks”.

At present Buddhist monastic education in Cambodia has been in rapid progress. At the present the two sub-sects (Nikayas) of Cambodian Sangha have been re-established. In fact, the present Dhammayuttikanikaya was officially revived by a royal decree issued by H.M Norodom Sihanouk in 1991. When Buddhism was re-established in 1979, only Mahanikaya (the major sub-sect of the two) was re-established. Now, Buddhism has regained its lost position and popularity with the number of monasteries and monks exceeds that prior to 1975. Buddhism is again followed by a high percentage of Cambodian population and now Buddhist monasteries and monks have been among the services to the people and the nation as a whole. Buddhist monastic education has also been re-established and expanded far and wide, with the strenuous patronage of the king and the Government; it has significantly been in a great progress taking the short period from its re-establishment into consideration.

Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs of Cambodia which is responsible for Buddhist education should have a long term planning with a clear vision to improve and better the quality of Buddhist education in the whole kingdom. PSR Buddhist University signed MOU with many Indian Universities for mutual cooperation in academics. Indian Council for Cultural Relations also working with the Buddhist University for betterment of Buddhist education by sending professor from different part of countries to propagate Buddhist education, and scholarships schemes has been launched for monks to study in India. Buddhism is to receive the status as “The State Religion of Cambodia” as mentioned in the Constitution of the Royal Kingdom of Cambodia so that teachings of the Buddha can be protected for the next generation.

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