



SPECIAL FEATURE

HISTORIC INFLUENCE OF HINDUISM IN CAMBODIA IN ARCHITECTURAL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL AREAS

Compiled by : KIDAMBI RAJ

A Brief History of Cambodia's Hindu Heritage

Cambodia was first influenced by **Hinduism** during the beginning of the Kingdom of Funan. **Cambodia** is the home of the holy temple of Angkor Wat, the largest **Hindu** temple in the world. The main religion adhered to in Khmer kingdom was **Hinduism**, followed by Buddhism in popularity. While Buddhism may prevail across Cambodia today, Hinduism was once one of Khmer Empire's official religions. A visit to Angkor Archeological Park pays testament to this fact, with 12th century Angkor War standing as the world's largest.

Hindu iconography can be found throughout many of the temples in the park, which have provided historians with evidence of the Kingdom's religious history. These include Khmer versions of **Ganesha** and **Hanuman**, as well as relief carvings depicting scenes from the **Ramayana**, which is called the **Reamker** in Cambodia and still features heavily in traditional performances. While Hinduism is no longer the ruling religion in Cambodia, its influences remain. The Royal Palace in Phnom Penh houses a sword said to have been presented to the royal family by Hindu deity, Indra. The National Museum of Cambodia is also home to a series of Hindu Statues.

Khmer versions of **Ganesha** and **Hanuman** were present throughout the city and both **Ramayana** (known as **Reamker** in Cambodia) and **Mahabharata** loomed large in popular imagery. In Angkor Wat, the 12th century Hindu temple that draws millions every year, Hindu deities loomed larger than life, including a statue of Vishnu at the entrance now worshipped as a Buddhist shrine. Additionally, one will be drawn to the similarities between the ancient **Khmer script** (which has roots in **Southern India**) and **Tamil**. Yet, so much of Cambodia's cultural heritage and lot of its tourist dollars are devoted to an era in which Hinduism was either the dominant religious tradition co-worshipped with Buddhism or patronized by Khmer rulers. Even at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, much is made about a sword believed to have been given to the ancestors of the royal family by the Hindu deity **Indra**. At the national museum, the various forms of Hindu divinity dominate the exhibit galleries, while visitors are unable to tell between multi-armed form of **Buddha (Lokeshvara)** and **Vishnu**, may be because the statues were worshipped as both at different periods of Khmer history. Additionally, Cambodia has celebrated the return of figures from the Ramayana that were looted from the country in the years during and after French Colonization. Even though Hinduism no longer exists as Cambodia's dominant religion, its impact on the culture and lasting physical legacy cannot be understated.

Temples in Cambodia that stand as Epitome of Antiquity

Cambodia, a country in Southeast Asia,

known to be alluring travelers with its temple ruins that prettify the landscape. The temples in Cambodia have tales to narrate, but most importantly they stand as architectural gems. The rock cut art and carvings in these landmarks have their own old world charm, something that will urge you to capture for lifetime. The following stunning Cambodia temples are a must visit during one's trip to the country. As you read, you will also get to know important details regarding each one of them while exploring the Cambodia temples history.

1. Angkor Wat



Aerial view of Angkor Wat

Angkor Wat (means the City of Temples) is a complex in Cambodia and the largest religious monument in the world by land area, on a site measuring 162.6 hectares (402 acres). This temple complex at Angkor, was built in the 12th century by **King Suryavarman II** (reigned 1113 C – 1150), is a typical Hindu Temple, expressing the King's devotion to the Hindu deity Vishnu. The temple was built as a Palace of Vishnu, who was enshrined there, to allow the founder to receive His beneficence. The vast religious complex of Angkor Wat comprises more than a thousand buildings and it is one of the great cultural wonders of the world. Though just one of hundreds of surviving temples and structures, the massive **Angkor Wat** is the **most famed** of all Cambodia's temples and it appears on the nation's flag and it is revered for good reason. Angkor Wat was shared by two religions. **Khmer King Suryavarman II** built this huge complex in the 12th century who was a descendant of the Cholas, the rulers of **Tamil Nadu, India**. You will find **Tamil-Brahmi Inscription** and sacred prayers in Sanskrit on the walls of these unique temples. Towards the end of 12th century, it was transformed into a Buddhist temple.

2. Banteay Srei

Banteay Srei is a 10th century Cambodian Temple dedicated to the **Hindu God Shiva**. The inscriptions later found at the site places its consecration very precisely on 22nd of April, 967 AD. This is located in the area of Angkor and lies near the hill of Phnom Dei, 25 Km north-east of the main group of temples that once belonged to the medieval capitals of **Yasodhapura** and **Angkor Thom**. Originally, this was called **Tribhuvanamahesvara** and the



Banteay Srei Temple

name **Banteay Srei** is a modern one, meaning **Citadel of women** or **Citadel of Beauty** or the **Pink Temple**. People speculate that this is due to its miniature scale, the pink colour of the limestone and the elaborate decorative carvings of many **devatas** (female devatas) that grace its walls. The red sandstone is a construction material that can be carved like wood. It is the only major temple not to be built by a King. The construction of this temple is attributed to **Yajnavaraha**, a courtier and King's counsellor. This temple is often referred to as the art gallery of Cambodia, and is indeed confined in size, but the artistry which you will witness are beyond perfection. This is the only temple in Angkor which was not commissioned by a ruler, but a Brahmin.

3. Neak Pean



Neak Pean Temple

Neak Pean, (means **the entwined snakes**) is a small temple located on an island in the center of the now dry Jayatataka baray, a water reservoir 3,500 meter long and 900 meter wide. Initially dedicated to the Buddha, the temple was rededicated to **Lokeshvara**, the **Bodhisattva of compassion**. as many historians believe the structure and its surrounding represent **Anavatapta**, which is a **mythical lake** said to have water with medicinal properties in the centre of Buddhist cosmology. Much of the temple area is flooded during the rainy season. Scattered around the central sanctuary are several lingas (the representation of Shiva), and Yonis (the female counterpart of the linga). In front of the East entrance stands a statue of the flying horse Balaha, often partly submerged in the rainy season. The central pond is a replica of Lake Anavatapta in the Himalayas, situated at the top of the universe. The lake gives birth to the four great rivers of the earth. These rivers are represented at Neak Pean by sculpted gargoyles corresponding to the four cardinal points Lake Anavatapta was fed by hot springs and venerat-

SPECIAL FEATURE



ed in India for the curative powers of its waters. The orientation of the ponds at Neak Pean ensured that the water was always fresh because the pods received only reflected light.

4. Banteay Kdei



Banteay Kdei Temple

Banteay Kdei, Built during the twelfth century, will mesmerize you with its ornate *garudas*. Also called the Citadel of Chambers, the temple was beautified with sculptures of women. Today it lies in ruins and is usually less crowded, making it a perfect spot for a tranquil time. Banteay Kdei is located within Angkor Archaeological Park, so a temple pass is needed to visit. It is also part of the small circuit, which is a 17 Km. loop that contains all of the must-see temples within Angkor Park. Banteay Kdei was built in the late 12th and early 13th centuries under the reign of King Jayavarman VII. However, it is small in size compared to other Angkor temples. The layout of the temple is **three enclosures within an outer compound wall**. The inner enclosure is lined with galleries that run along its axis and lead to the main temple. The interesting part of its style is that its gates are adorned with the same face towers, called Gopuras, as Angkor's five gates. The most agreed theory among historians is that the face towers as *Jayavarman VII's* signature, and represent both himself and the *God Lokeshvara* (also known as *Avalokiteshvara*). Within the courtyard, if you look up at the towers, you can see the historic and interesting devatas. These designs are well preserved in comparison to the rest of the ruins.

5. Ta Prohm



Ta Prohm Temple

Ta Prohm is the modern name of the temple in *Siem Reap*, Cambodia, built in the Bayon style largely in the late 12th and 13th centuries and originally called *Rajavihara*. As you walk through the premises, you will see how nature has dominated man-made remnants, but this blend is something that makes Ta Prohm stand out. It is the undisputed capital of the kingdom of trees. It has been left untouched by archaeologists except for the clearing of a path for visitors and structural strengthening to prevent further deterioration.

A Sanskrit inscription on stone, still in place, give details of the temple. Ta Prohm has 3,140 villages. It took 79,365 people to maintain the temple including 18 great priests, 2,740 officials, 2,202 assistants and 615 dancers. Among

the property belonging to the temple was a set of golden dishes weighing more than 500 kilograms, 35 diamonds, 40,620 pearls, 4,540 precious stones, 876 veils from China, 512 silk beds and 523 parasols. Ta Prohm has been an important and impressive monument.

6. Bayon



Bayon Temple

The Bayon is a richly decorated Khmer temple at the centre of Angkor Thom in Cambodia, built in the late 12th or early 13th century as the state temple of the Mahayana Buddhist King Jayavarman VII. Dedicated to Buddha this temple was by the King and this was originally called *Jayagiri* (meaning **Victory mountain**), but was renamed *Banyan Temple* sometimes after the period of French occupancy. Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment after a long period of meditation beneath a **Banyan tree**. However, the local Khmer who worked on the restoration of the temple were responsible for its final name change. The workers mispronounced the name as **Bayon**, instead of *Banyan* and the name stuck.

7. Banteay Samre



Banteay Srei Temple

Banteay Samre (the Citadel of Samre) is a temple at Angkor, Cambodia and built during the reign of Suryavarman II and Yasovarman II in the early 12th century. It is Hindu Temple in the Angkor Wat style of construction and art is a large, relatively low rise temple. The temple pediments and lintels are decorated with very intricate and well preserved carvings of Hindu mythological stories and Buddhist depictions. They include well preserved carvings of: A scene from Ramayana epic – a fight between the hero *Rama* and ten-headed *Ravana*. Indra, the God of war riding his three-headed elephant *Airavata*.

Another scene from Ramayana: *Lakshmana*, brother of *Rama* is badly wounded during a battle with *Ravana* and dying. It was decided that **Hanuman** must go to the *Himalayas* to fetch a herb that could cure Lakshmana. As Hanuman did not know which herb was the correct one, he picks up the whole mountain and flies it back to *Lanka*. The herb is given to Lakshmana, who is immediately cured.

8. Phnom Bakheng

Phnom Bakheng is a temple built more than two centuries before Angkor Wat and lays claim as the first of the mountain temples in that

region. This stood as an architectural landmark for the first capital of Khmer Empire,



Phnom Bakheng Temple

Yasodharapura. The five-tiered shikhara of the temples catches the eye and so do the four towers established on the summit. This temple is primarily visited during late afternoons by many tourists as it serves for a magnificent vantage point for sunset views.

9. Preah Khan



Preah Khan Temple

Preah Khan is the ultimate fusion temple operating as both a Buddhist and Hindu place of worship. This temple was built by *King Jayavarman VII* in the 12th century, making the defeat of Chams. As the name Preah Khan literally translates to *Holy Sword*, we can imagine the pride the King took in the event and the building of the structure. It is also believed that Preah Khan served as a residence to the King as he waited for Angkor Thom to be completed. This was indeed a grand Cambodia temple as it was dedicated to about hundred gods and there were eighteen grand festivals it served as venue of.

10. Pre Rup



Pre Rup Temple

Reminiscent of a miniature Angkor Wat with its five lotus towers, the temple of Pre Rup was built in 961 by *Rajendravarmen II* as the state temple of the King. The name translates to turning the body, Pre Rup has been associated with funerary rituals as it refers to a cremation method of tracing a corpse's outline in ashes. Dedicated to Lord Shiva, this temple consists of a three-tiered pyramid-shaped temple mountain and would have once been covered with intricate carvings. The site is especially picturesque at sunset when the dying light causes the warm tones of the brick and laterite to softly glow.