

BOOK REVIEW

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**RAMAYANA in Cambodian Sanskrit Inscriptions, Sculptures, Ramleela & Paintings by
Prof. C. Upendra Rao, EASTERN BOOK LINKERS, 1sted.2024**

“Today, we are restoring and renovating the temples in Angkor Wat. These are contributions which we are making outside because the civilisation of India has gone beyond India” - S. Jaishankar.

This is what Jaishankar remarked as India reinforced its soft power prowess in Cambodia, by underwriting the revamping of temples in the Khmerian nation at the close of 2022. With New Delhi's soaring interest in Suvarnabhumi,(ancient Indian terminology for Southeast Asia), Prof. Rao's book entitled “Ramayana- in Cambodian Sanskrit Inscriptions, Sculptures, Ram Leela & Paintings” adroitly articulates the umbilical civilisational chord that binds Phnom Penh to New Delhi. This treatise factors into Prof. Rao's holistic experiences in the Austroasiatic Nation while tendering a comprehensive evaluation of Ramayana's permeation into the social fabric of Cambodia. Prof. C Upendra Rao is an erudite professor at the School of Sanskrit and Indic Studies at the eminent Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Prof. Rao notes that the Khmerian populace became conversant with the Ramayana of Valmiki from as early as 6th Century, but this was wholly not manifested in Reamkerti, the Khmerian avatar of Ramayan (16th-17th CE) for the Khmerian Reamkerti was conceived by Buddhist scholars, who aligned the text with Indigenous postulates of the Theravada Buddhism, which showcases the customisation of Ramayana pursuant to local cultural and social paraphernalia, as echoed by Saveros Pou, a French linguist of Cambodian origin, “It was made of a Valmikian wrap into which Khmer authors wove a gamut of weft-yarns drawn from their Buddhist culture.”

The linguistic contribution of Sanskrit and Pali to Khmer, the official language of Cambodia (p.58), epitomizes the Indian influence in the literary affairs of Cambodia and underpins robust society to society connect between two vibrant civilisations. Prof. Rao's detailed tabular analogies between Sanskrit and Khmer enrich the readers with scholastic insights into the Khmer-Sanskrit confluence (p.60-p.61).

The paramountcy of ethnic agencies such as Ramayana, for South Block in the diplomatic high-table, especially of South Asia, had been, in letter and spirit, terra incognita until the resurgence of nationalistic fervour in India attributed to the rise of right-wing parties. Cambodians have subsumed family ethos from Reamkerti in an enhanced vogue vis-à-vis India due to the transliteration factor, for instance, as Prof. Rao writes, Riem, (Khmerian pronunciation of Ram) implies elder brother, which in turn makes the fraternal ties between Ram and Lakshman, "one of the most revered themes in Khmer people's mind", and Sita, which is linked to furrow in India, is construed as an epitome of chastity as they trace the origin of name, 'Sita' to Pali term 'Seta' which is associated with the 'concept of purity'(p.79). Though Cambodians have intrinsically espoused Buddhism as their official religion, they have not renounced non-vegetarian dietary preferences as Prof. Rao writes, "Even though majority of them are buddhists, Buddhist prescriptions have never kept Cambodians from eating meat; it just kept them killing animals." Prof. Rao's opinion highlights that this propensity is symptomatic of a universal theory that counsels that religious precepts are amenable to domestic attitudes, geographies and contingencies du jour.

However, what can be flagged as a lacuna in his intellectual work is a mere allusion to Khmer rouge, which profoundly afflicted the cultural paradigm of Cambodia, in lieu of its contextual delineation. Similarly, repeated references to the war between Cambodia and Thailand as a prelude to the decline of the Sanskrit language should have been propped up in brief elucidation. His elaborate description of variations in different Reamkertis pertaining to the birth of Sita and Hanuman portends alterations stemming from oral traditions and diverse interpretations of an epic that is relatively exotic to them. Albeit pictorial demonstrations and glossaries augment the book's connection with ordinary readers, most of whom are oblivious to the cultural realm of foreign countries, in academic vitality, the book ought to have delved deeper into fundamentals of evolving soft power diplomacy of New Delhi as respects South East Asia to minister to pedagogical expediency of International Relations.

Prof. Rao's book serves as a ready reckoner for appraising cultural adhesion between Cambodia and New Delhi. As New Delhi aspires to become Vishwa Bandhu, Indian citizens must peruse such literature to be abreast of India's expansive cultural network underlying contemporary diplomatic engagements. Prof. Rao's attempts to excogitate literary heritage as a driver of ties not only between New Delhi and Phnom Penh but also with other South Asian nations, accord a renascent dimension to high-profile parleys in global theatre. While this book is prescient to New Delhi's Act East policy framework, it also exalts the scholastic equations between the two nations. As the Chinese leviathan exerts belligerence in the Asian sea, South Block must leverage the civilisational network, as indicated in the book, to encash what Jaishankar calls "global contradictions".