

# The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

## People and Places

# The Gone Glory of the Khmers

By A N Welsh

THE addicted traveller's shopping list will always include the legendary monuments of earlier civilisations. Macchu and Pichu, the fabled cities of the Inca and Maya; Mohenjo-daro and Harappa, the ancient cities of the Indus valley; the Taj Mahal; the remains of the Mediterranean and Egyptian kingdoms; and the Venetian cities. The list is a long one, but here in the east the three great temple complexes of Borobudur in Java, Angkor in Cambodia and Pagan in Burma must surely rank very high in the world's list of great architectural wonders.

For me, this time it was Angkor — a short drive out of the northern Cambodian town of Siem Riap. It has to be a short drive. The roads are so damaged that a long drive anywhere is out of the question. The legacy of Pol Pot's terrible reign from 1976-79, when the country's infrastructure was systematically destroyed and up to 3 million people died, is everywhere apparent. Cambodia has no newspaper and no radio station. No telephones are in Siem Riap, and you get there by short daily flight in a propeller driven Antonov from



Angkor Wat's forgotten splendour is being restored by an Indian team. A feature of this temple is the extensive bas-reliefs recalling Khmer history and scenes from daily life, a characteristic it shares with the Bayon in nearby Angkor Thom.

was said to house a million people — many of whom were probably slaves. The houses, from the royal palace down, were made of wood and have disappeared. Archaeologists of

relics, though many tourists spend only one day seeing Angkor Thom's temple, the Bayon, and Angkor Wat, which is more or less a separate 'city', a temple, tomb, and observatory built as a royal memorial by Suryavarman II. The central statue of Vishnu was dedicated in 1131, but the buildings were not completed till about 20 years later.

One has to say that Angkor is a great experience, one of the great experiences; the scale, the setting, the atmosphere and the sheer beauty and quality of the remains puts Angkor in a class apart. The imagination is powerfully stirred, though knowledge of actual Khmer history is very limited. One description by a Chinese envoy Chou Ta-kuan, who visited in 1296-97 (from D P Chandler, A History of Cambodia, Westview Press,

made of gold and silver... Then come other palace women, carrying lances and shields, the king's private guards... Carts drawn by goats and horses, all in gold, come next. Ministers and princes are

from about 850 AD, but the reign of Jayavarman VII was the high point in Khmer achievement. Subsequently Cambodia's regalia, documents, customs and learned men were transferred to Ayudhya,

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mounted on elephants, and in front of them one can see, from afar, their innumerable red umbrellas. After them come the wives and concubines of the king, in palanquins, carriages, on horseback, and on elephants. They have

the then capital of Thailand. The rigid Brahmanic disciplines were replaced by Theravada Buddhism and we can assume that the Buddhist Sangha (clergy), absorbed much of the wealth and resource that went into the

Hindu temple building. Cambodia became more of a trading nation and developed relationships with Malaya, China, Thailand and later Vietnam, which were better handled further south than the new capital Phnom Penh on the Mekong River, and Cambodia ceased to be an up-country inward looking rice based economy.

The country was still a powerful and prosperous nation down into the eighteenth century, but Cambodia never again achieved the greatness represented by Angkor.

Getting to Cambodia is neither very difficult or expensive. Our arrangements were handled very competently by Prism Travel in Wyndham Street which has good connections in Vietnam. From Hong Kong one can fly to

bustling, prosperous and quite well ordered place (though I had a pocket expertly picked in the market) and the fine French colonial architecture and amenities are being restored. The highlight of the visit was a trip to Cuu Long on the Mekong Delta — an unspoilt area peopled by fisherfolk and small farmers where there is always a catch to be had in the broad waterways and fruit on the bough. This is not the poor area of Vietnam, which is in the centre and to the north, but some people do aspire to better their lot, taking their boats mainly to Thailand and becoming 'refugees'.

There are beggars in Vietnam and in Cambodia, but everywhere we went people smiled and waved — they seem healthy, friendly and very hospitable. We were glad to have gone before major tourist development takes place and in-

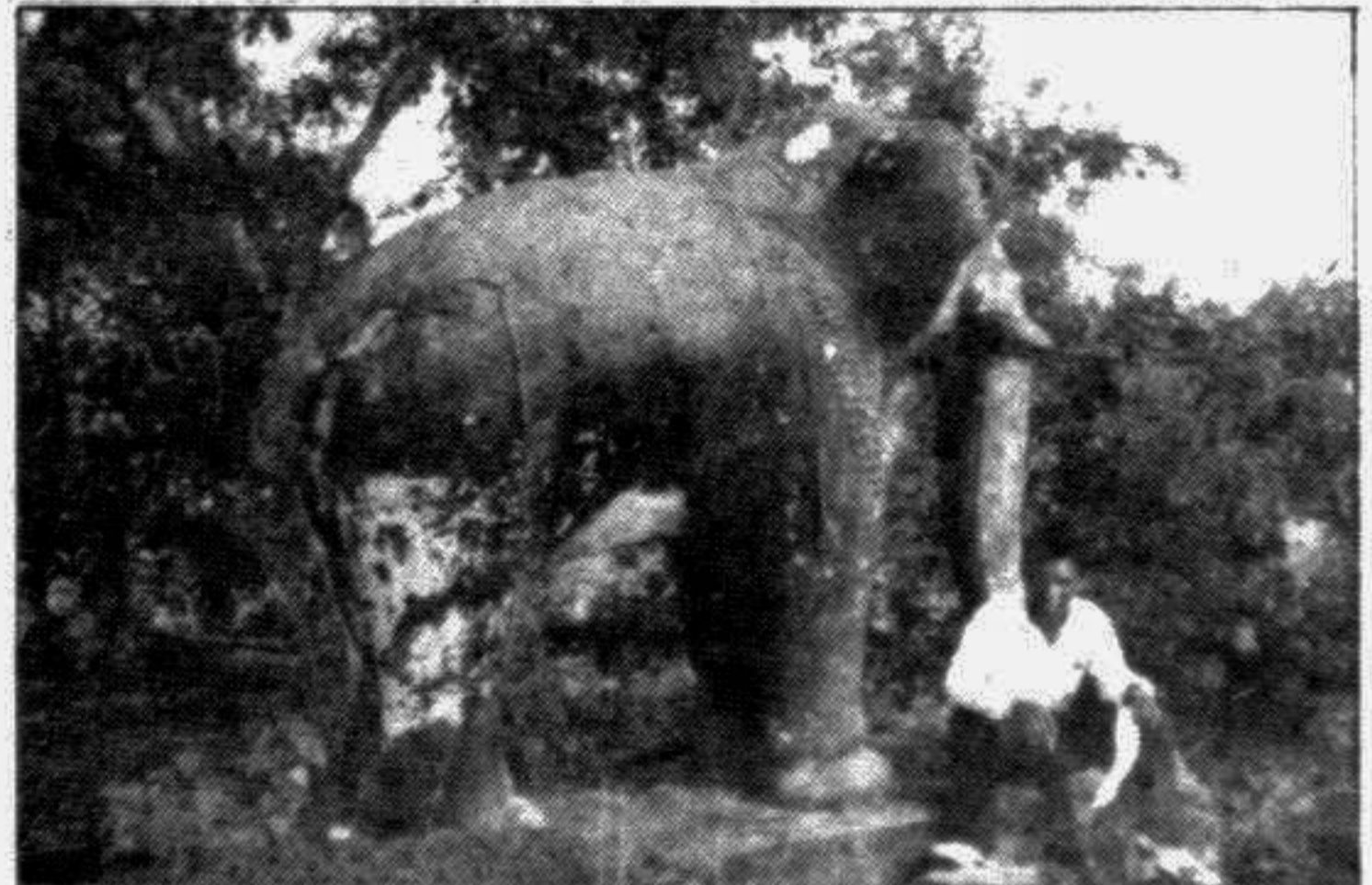


Rows of shophouses in Siem Riap, which formed part of the market square in colonial times, has fallen into disuse.

Phnom Penh via Bangkok or via Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon). We chose the latter which enabled us to spend a few days in Vietnam en route. Saigon is a

inevitably spoils the magic. And magic there undoubtedly was.

By arrangement with the Executive, Hong Kong.



Originally the temples were adorned with statues of gods, serpents and animals, like this elephant, together with inscriptions, scenes from the Ramayana and ornamental carvings. Unlike later Buddhist temples or the wooden palaces, the stone seems to have been left natural, though one temple was sheathed in copper or bronze, and on another there are traces of red paint. The famous silver temple in Phnom Penh has a floor of tiles of silver. One of its Buddhas is made of emerald, others of gold.

Phnom Penh. Our accommodation was comfortable enough — large bedrooms and bathrooms with air-conditioners, mosquito nets, and electricity and water most of the time, even a murky swimming pool. Khmer food is excellent, and we could have eaten and drunk Western style had we wished. Your laundry can be done cheaply during the day and all you really need are cameras, camcorders, sun protection gear, stomach and malaria tablets, a few good paperbacks and a supply of US dollars in ones and fives. There were not many tourists when we were there — much more in evidence were United Nations (UNTACS) troops trying successfully to repatriate refugees and unsuccessfully to persuade the guerillas to disarm. They very hospitably invited us to celebrate Haj with them.

The Angkorean sites cover a vast area in beautiful unspoilt surroundings. There are 50 or so major monuments. What you see is the city walls, the temples and the remains of the lakes and moats. The Khmers operated 'hydraulically' with enormous irrigation and water storage works enabling sufficient rice to be grown. Angkor Thom, the last city, covers nine square kilometers and

the future will have unlimited scope. The earlier Khmers followed Hindu religious practices, but the great Jayavarman VII (1178-1220), builder of Angkor Thom, was influenced by Mahayana Buddhism and eventually Cambodia became a primarily Buddhist nation. The sites were more or less abandoned in the fifteenth century and the jungle reasserted itself. French archaeologists worked on Angkor before the Pol Pot era and now an Indian team labours worthily to restore the great temple of Angkor Wat; it is said to have sponsored two million man-hours of work in the past six years. There is a very little control of the sites — many statues and carvings have been robbed and a romantic aura of leafy decay abounds. Temple artefacts of variable provenance can be picked up cheaply in the antique shops in Phnom Penh, but Khmer statues of the better sort seem readily available in Hollywood Road.

Visiting Angkor is guide and driver stuff. Two hours scrambling over the ruins in the heat is exhausting and the day has to be punctuated with welcome 'rests'. We spent four nights in Siem Riap. This is just enough to see the main



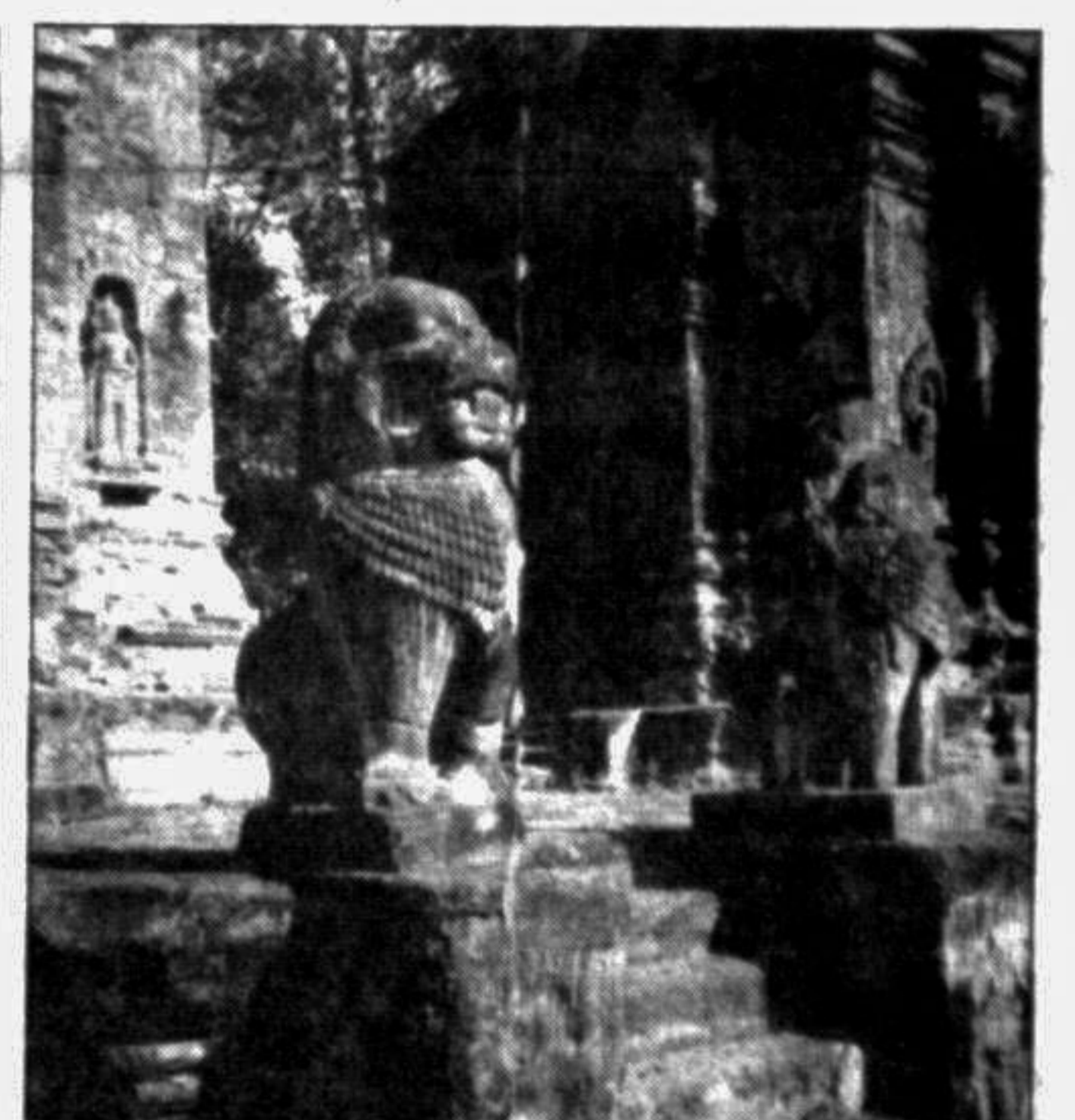
The ninth century temples were finished in brick with laterite cores. As the skills of the woodcarvers were taken up by the stonemasons, the use of sandstone became general, the stone being brought some distance by elephant.

1983), is worth quoting. "When the king goes out, troops are at the head of the escort; then come flags, banners, and music. Palace women, numbering from three to five hundred, wearing flowered cloth, with flowers in their hair, hold candles in their hands, and form a troupe. Even in broad daylight, the candles are lighted. Then come other palace women, bearing royal paraphernalia

more than a hundred parasols, flecked with gold. Behind them comes the sovereign, standing on an elephant, holding his sacred sword in his hand. The elephant's tusks are encased in gold." The bigger temples housed maybe 10,000 persons and had 80 or so villages dedicated to providing food and clothing for them. The Khmer empire started to build these "hydraulic" cities and temples



The Garuda, flanking the entrance to Preah Khan, the 'Huge Temple', was built by Jayavarman VII to honour his father. To walk across the temple and back is two kilometers.



Sandstone dogs guard the entrance to Preah Ko, the first major temple of the Khmer, dating from the middle of the ninth century.



The Victory Monument in Phnom Penh is the focal point of the Cambodian capital which is home to 300,000 people. Many of the city's buildings still show extensive damage it suffered under Pol Pot's repressive regime, during which the city was evacuated.



The pavilion in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh is now the home of Prince Sihanouk. In ancient times, the King appeared to gatherings of his subjects in the square in front to watch displays of acrobatics and fireworks.

## Of Janmastami and Lord Krishna

by Mahanambrata Brahmachari

TODAY is Janmastami — the anniversary of the birth of Lord Krishna and beginning of Krishnabda. As the Hindu scriptures say, this day, 5209 years back, an act of incarnation took place and God descended in human form on this earth to establish virtue, piety and honesty. He was born to Deboki and Basudcva in the gloom of a prison cell of a tyrant king Kangsa at a moment when torrential rain was inundating the land all around. His life began and continued for 125 years, what was divided into four episodes — Brindaban, Mathura, Kurukshetra and Dwarka (all places are in India now). Krishna spent his boyhood in Brindaban, teenage and adolescence in Mathura and from twenties until death he passed his eventful years in Dwarka and Kurukshetra and played a significant role in the battle that broke out between Pandavas (the followers of truth and justice) and Kurus (the perpetrators of tyranny and injustice).

and is very easy to recognise Him. The function of Guru is to show man the path of emancipation and prosperity. Guru does this in two ways — by offering advice to his disciples and by practising rites in his own life. The solemn promise of a Guru is human welfare. And that was the aim of life of Lord Krishna — the world Guru. In Brindaban episode he has shown that the heart's affection by which one's kith and kins may be loved, God may also be loved. God may even become a close relation. This wisdom and learning was unseen and unstinted before. By his love and care He established love for all human beings. The other name of this love is (God's) benevolence to mankind.

In Mathura episode he crushed infamous Kangsa, reconstructed the devastated kingdom (Mathura) and reinstated them who fled for fear of Kangsa. It may be termed as the norm of the society. Sree Geeta teaches us lessons from the battles of Kurukshetra. Advising anxious Arjuna, He proclaimed the virtue of the right to survive. Claiming the earth a place for decent and peaceful living for human beings was the aim and theme of His life. The lessons offered for men and women have been preserved for centuries. That is also the virtue of the Vedas. It shines by its own glory. He taught politics to people

reason he didn't kill anyone. He killed Kangsa to release Ugrasena, the old father of Kangsa, from the prison and enthroned him again. By killing Jarasandha he returned the throne to Shabadeva. In Brindaban Krishna danced with Gopies in His so many human forms. In the marriage ceremony of the queen consort in Dwarka he had His profiles of God. It was that excellence and marvel that being God Krishna is human, being human He is God. The scripture describes of His four forms — calm and quiet, calm and liberal, calm and sharp and calm and elegant. When Krishna was in Mathura he was quiet like Ramchandra, the earlier incarnation of God in the Treta era. When he was in Dwarka, as the state organiser like Arjuna, and again when he was in Kurukshetra, he was calm and liberal like Yudhisthira, the eldest brother of Pandavas. When he was in Brindaban He was the God of love and attraction of all eyes and minds. One Krishna is four in four forms. He is a typical masculine, excellent in dealings. Krishna's eventful life is an embodiment of decency and prosperity. He is the saviour of mankind, and the heart of the followers.

Translated into English by Naren Paul (Dr Mahanambrata Brahmachari is the chief of Bangladeshi Sant Mahamandali.)