

A short review of Khmer education history: Education during the Chenla period

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the education system in the Chenla Kingdom (approximately years 550-802 AD), an essential period in the development of Khmer culture from the Funan Kingdom to the Angkor Era. This paper considers educational literature, history, Khmer inscriptions, and the Chinese chronicles to study educational institutions, curriculum, accessibility, methods of instruction, and the sociocultural functions of education. From the results of the historical documents, it is clear that the education process was mainly conducted at religious institutions such as temples, shrines, hermitages, and Disāpāmokkha schools. Education was mainly accessible to the members of the ruling elite, such as the royal family, nobles, high officials, and religious leaders. The curriculum was deeply influenced by the Indian civilization and mainly consisted of religious studies, reading and writing Sanskrit, philosophy, ethics, mathematics, astronomy, and administration. Instruction was mainly done through apprenticeship and oral instruction. Education was very crucial in preserving cultural tradition and governance, promoting literacy, and laying the intellectual foundation of the Angkor Era.

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1. Introduction

The Chenla period (550–802 AD) is one of the significant stages in the historical development of the civilization and education of Cambodia. Being located between the fall of the Funan Kingdom and the emergence of the Angkor Empire, the Chenla period became a transitional period when politics, religion, literacy, and knowledge transfer systems were more systematized. Although there are no direct references to schools, the analysis of sources, such as Khmer inscriptions, Chinese historical chronicles, archaeology, and the history of education, suggests that education was an integral part of the process of preservation of religious knowledge, literacy, administrative skills, and culture (Em, 2025a). The evolution of education in the Chenla period facilitated the spread of knowledge and skills and was an essential intellectual foundation for further progress of the Angkor Empire (Chin et al., 2023; Em et al., 2023; Em et al., 2025; Huot, 2025).

It is essential to consider the development of education in Chenla in light of the larger process of the historical development of civilization in Cambodia. Before the emergence of the state,

prehistoric communities in Cambodia were imparting knowledge through observation, imitation, oral tradition, and experience. Through this informal process of knowledge transfer, the communities gained knowledge on hunting, farming, tool-making, building settlements, and organizing themselves socially. As the political and religious institutions underwent developments during the periods of Funan and Chenla, knowledge transfer became increasingly more structured and institutionalized. As a result, Chenla not only received its traditions of education from prior civilizations but also developed its own systems of education (Em, 2025b; Em et al., 2023).

2. Educational institutions

The major means of learning at the time of Chenla were the religious institutions. Temples, sanctuaries, monastic cells, and religious schools were the main places of learning and intellectual activity. According to Chin et al. (2023), the Disāpāmokkha schools, which existed during the Funan era, were still functioning during the Chenla period and played a crucial role in knowledge dissemination and preservation. The curriculum of such institutions comprised religious teachings, literacy, ethics, and culture (Em, 2023).

The information provided by the inscriptions in the Khmer language states that temples could also be used for educational purposes. There is a large number of inscriptions about donations to the religious institutions, the founding of sanctuaries, work of Brahmins and scholars, who were in charge of preserving sacred texts and performing religious rituals (Coedès, 1968; Jacques, 1979). The presence of religious professionals in the temples indicates that they were also the centers of education.

3. Access to education

Education in Chenla was restricted mainly to those of the ruling classes, which comprised the royal families, aristocrats, senior government officials, and priests. Education in this society was directly linked with the political, religious, and administrative leadership. As a result, learning was available mostly for those persons who could occupy important posts in the kingdom. Indian scholars, Brahmins, and teachers were instrumental in the teaching of the ruling classes and political elites (Chin et al., 2023; Em et al., 2023).

However, some evidence indicates that there could have been some form of rudimentary literacy and numeracy education available for common men. The nature and extent of such education are not clear, but knowledge of some basics of daily life, commerce, and administration could be transmitted through non-elite members (Chin et al., 2023). However, access to education was highly uneven and based on social hierarchy.

4. Curriculum and areas of study

During the Chenla period, the educational curriculum had a significant influence from Indian civilization, with Hinduism and Buddhism. The education was mostly religious and philosophical. The students learned holy texts, ethics, rituals, religious philosophies, doctrines, and other aspects associated with both religions. Religion was taught not just as a part of spirituality but also as an affirmation of the rules and morals of governance (Chin et al., 2023; Coedès, 1968; Vickery, 1998).

The Sanskrit language played a pivotal role in the educational system. It was used as the language of religion, scholarship, and administration at courts. Many Sanskrit inscriptions

found in former Chenla territories show how much literacy and scholarship were valued among the religious and political elites. Knowledge of Sanskrit helped participants in religious ceremonies, royal administration, and scholarly work. However, the Old Khmer language became widely used in inscriptions and in official documents and thus contributed to the emergence of Khmer culture (Coedès, 1968; Jacques & Lafond, 2007).

Apart from the studies in religion and language, mathematics and astronomy were among other key areas of education. Students learned math concepts that related to the measurement of land, trade, taxes, building, and administration. The study of astronomy was especially important in relation to agriculture since it helped determine the seasons and plant/harvest at the right time. This was an indication of the practical nature of learning in education during the Chenla period (Chin et al., 2023; Em et al., 2023).

5. Teachers and learners

Teachers in the Chenla era comprised Brahmins, monks, and religious scholars. The individuals had specific expertise regarding the texts, rituals, philosophies, and morality, which they transferred from one generation to another. Their functions went beyond that of teaching the religion to include giving advice to the ruling class, conserving culture, and promoting literacy.

The education system at the time was mainly confined to the people of royal families, the aristocratic class, civil servants, and the religious class. It was considered vital as a means of educating future rulers and administrators who would be able to manage the state well (Em et al., 2025). The general populace was taught by means of family traditions, community involvement, and occupational training through activities such as farming, business, craftsmanship, and other common practices (Higham, 2014; Vickery, 1998).

6. Religious influences on education

Religion played an essential role in the education system during the time of the Chenla civilization. In particular, the Hindu religion, especially Shaivism, had a significant impact on the cultural, educational, and political spheres. Therefore, all the processes associated with education were aimed at studying Hindu scriptures, religious philosophy, rituals, and ethics (Coedès, 1968).

Although the Hindu religion was widespread, Buddhism was also an important factor in the development of education in Cambodia. Based on archaeological findings and historical documents, one can say that Buddhist communities existed throughout the kingdom and played a considerable role in the preservation and spread of religious knowledge. Thus, the coexistence of Hindu and Buddhist religions increased the intellectual diversity of the country and promoted the development of different philosophies and ethical views (Higham, 2014; Jacques & Lafond, 2007).

The connection between education, religion, and government was an important characteristic of early Cambodian society. Not only did religious communities preserve holy books, but they also reinforced political power, social hierarchy, and culture. Consequently, the educational process combined spiritual development and state management (Huot, 2025).

7. Historical evidence from Chinese chronicles

Further information on the intellectual and cultural progress of Chenla can also be gleaned from the Chinese histories. As noted by Wei (1973) and Ouyang and Song (1975), both the *Sui Shu* (*Book of Sui*) and *Xin Tang Shu* (*New Book of Tang*) portray Chenla as a civilized state that had religious beliefs, diplomacy, and administrative processes. Although there is no mention of educational institutions such as schools, there are references to priests, learned members of the aristocracy, and administrators in these histories, which indicates the existence of some form of literacy in Chenla (Ouyang & Song, 1975; Wei, 1973).

These Chinese sources also note the Indian civilization's impact on the religious and cultural life of Chenla. This supports the idea of educated religious and political elites in Chenla, as inferred from the inscriptions and archaeological data available (Vickery, 1998).

8. Teaching methods

The teaching methods employed in the Chenla era often involved the use of an apprenticeship style. Through this teaching style, learners were taught individually through the guidance of Brahmins, monks, religious scholars, and experienced teachers. This method of teaching allowed the transfer of special knowledge as well as the acquisition of both theoretical and practical skills that would be useful for learners in their future careers within society (Chin et al., 2023; Em et al., 2023).

Education involved a lot of oral training as well as memorization. Since there was very little manuscript material available, learners depended on their hearing, memory, participation in religious activities, and observation of practical demonstrations. This mode of teaching was common in the educational system in South and Southeast Asia at a time when written education materials were not widespread (Coedès, 1968).

During the Chenla period, the process of assessment was informal and depended on learners' proficiency in religious knowledge, reading and writing abilities, morality, and practical skills. Unlike modern examinations, which involve the use of tests, teachers assessed their students using reciting techniques, understanding of religious texts, participation in religious ceremonies, and the ability to apply the knowledge gained in everyday activities and in management. Academic success was associated with the acquisition of more responsibilities in religious centers, royal courts, or even local communities. Such an approach to assessment, characterized by the connection of education, religion, and government, indicated that learning had both intellectual and social purposes (Chin et al., 2023; Coedès, 1968; Higham, 2014).

Figure 1. Temple courtyard of learning and devotion



Source: Author

9. Contributions to Cambodian civilization

It is evident that the education system during the Chenla period played a great role in the growth of Khmer civilization. With the encouragement of reading, religious studies, ethics, administration, and science, education systems made significant contributions to the improvement of the political structure and cultural continuity. The preservation and transfer of knowledge during this period played a major role in the creation of a sophisticated state system and the intellectual foundation of the Angkor Empire.

Education has also helped the development of an educated group that would help the administration of the state, preserve the religion, maintain the cultural traditions, and ensure economic and political stability. Therefore, the great success of the Angkorian civilization in terms of administration, architecture, literature, religion, and culture has been due to the traditions of education in the Chenla period (Chin et al., 2023; Em et al., 2023; Em et al., 2025).

10. Conclusion

Education in the Chenla era was an important milestone in the development of Cambodian educational history. Based on previous experience in knowledge transfer that was acquired by early civilizations and the Funan Kingdom, the Chenla era introduced more structured methods of education based on religion and the education of elite classes. The temples, sanctuaries, monasteries, and Disāpāmokkha were the main places where education took place; the Brahmins and the monks were the educators and keepers of knowledge.

The curriculum included religious education, study of the Sanskrit language, moral values, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, and administration. Inscriptions, foundation stones of the temples, educational history, and Chinese historical sources show that there existed an educated religious and political elite whose task was to preserve and pass knowledge down. Despite the fact that formal education was mainly accessible to the privileged groups, education had a key role in the preservation of culture and administration and the formation of the future Angkor Empire.

The process of knowledge and skill transfer was not the only role that education played in the Chenla Kingdom. Due to the interweaving of religion, politics, and learning, education facilitated the maintenance of the existing hierarchy and culture of the region. The foundations laid during this period were reflected in the later educational advancements in Cambodia and became one of the reasons for the establishment of the complex education and administration system in the Angkor Empire.

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Declaration of AI usage

The author used Grammarly to polish the language in some parts of the article. However, he declared that the content of the article is totally his and not generated by any means.

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