

IFLA/FAIFE World Report: Libraries and Intellectual Freedom



Cambodia

03-08-1999

Cambodia presents a different set of problems relating to intellectual freedoms and promotion of libraries to many other countries. The reasons lie in Cambodia's recent past.

The Cambodian Constitution of 1983 recognizes the local application of the UN human rights Instruments including Covenant on Civil and political rights. Therefore, it can be argued that legal provisions for unfettered intellectual freedoms exists in Cambodia.

However, the reality of the application of this right is determined by a the political reality of the Khmer Rouge revolution (1975-1979) and subsequent political reality under several regimes till 1993 May elections.

The physical destruction almost all the documents, books and other records during the Pol Pot's regime is well known. It is one of the most complete destructions known in world history. Besides the actual destruction there was also the destruction by neglect. As complete evacuation of towns was one of the main political items which was meticulously carried out all library facilities that may have remained from direct destruction was neglected.

Among the major losses were the Buddhist documentation. Once centre of Buddhist research , there was much material gather here. All this has been loss. So are documents relating to law. medicine and other important subjects.

However, the greatest loss came by way of near complete destruction of the intellectual groups of the country. Here the term intellectual was connected with any form of learning that may be associated with "the Enemy class". This went to extent of some one who may have a taxi drivers knowledge of a foreign language.

Subsequent to Pol Pot regime

Cambodia was exposed to great isolation in the eighties. Besides the new regime which came to power with the help of the Vietnamese also followed a the Socialist path and there was not much effort to promote intellectual freedoms. Even apart from the Socialist objections, the very process of being involved in infra-structural reforms in agriculture and establishment of basic administration did not leave much room for other developments.

However, this period did saw the restart of the university in Phnom Penh and some training relating to professions conducted mainly through the help of Vietnam socialist countries. In the field of law, as the new legal principles were those introduced by the Vietnamese experts, the need books and documents of the former time did not arise.

A New Era

A new era began with the start of a new government in September 1983, which theocratically accepted a liberal democratic form of government. From this time there is a greater emphasis on capacity building and receipt of other sources of information.

Attached to various ministries now there are small libraries. There is also incoming of many documents as donations. Interest in Buddhism has revived and there are various organizations including some monasteries which has established small libraries. Various university faculties and other educational institutions have also brought in new documentation. There also the initial beginning of a public library.

However, the achievement in the area of library development is very negligible. This is not due to any formal objection but due to lack of investment on this project. Which foreign donors play a major role in other areas of development, no one has yet paid any noticeable attention to this area. There are significant budgetary allocation either.

Those who are concerned with library development and development of librarians as profession need to special attention to Cambodia, if the damage done during the revolution is to be reversed. A very important component of translations need to be included if the loss of the intellectual group is to be compensated in some way.

Population:	10,273,000 (1996)
GNP per capita:	\$ 300 (1996)
Government / Constitution:	Republic
Main languages:	Kmer
Main religions:	Buddhism, Islam
Literacy:	65% (1995)
Online:	-