

# A Journey of Discovery in Cambodia

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The past week was meaningful with encounters, unexpected learnings and variant understandings that helped me in deconstructing, rediscovering, reflecting and reformulating my objectives in life and ministry.



“Wow! It looks similar to Kerala!” That was my first impression when the bike passed through the Kompong Cham market and entered into the muddy road on the banks of the Prek Koy River. I could see palm trees, coconut trees, mango trees, banana plants, guava trees and many other species of plants everywhere. “No!... wait!!... It is entirely different!!!” I thought, as I could see the wooden houses on pillars, and people with round hats, women working hard, running shops, and travelling on all different kinds of vehicles. Some of those vehicles were connected with trailers of



different types, shapes and sizes. Later, I understood that these vehicles are normal two wheelers attached with the trailers to make these strange looking ones. As I reached the home of Mr. Phen Sary, the first thing I noticed was a long array of the big pots, kept along the side of the house. It

was strange! Why are there so many similar pots in a house? I wondered! “Yes, I have a lot to learn from this context.”



I shall share my experience, joys, challenges and learnings, reflecting from my faith, ministerial experience and knowledge. To use the sociologist’s term, I chose to be a participant observer and positioned myself into that context, to understand by participating.

From my observation, mission in the rural Cambodian context is entirely different from that of Kerala. I might be limited in my analysis as I was exposed only to the ministry, led by Mr. Phen Sary, in this village, under the Shalom ministries. Church, here, is in its early growing stage. I would categorise them as five areas of ministry.

1. **Small Group:** The small group of 12 children and two adults meet in a house every Sunday morning. This well-disciplined group is committed to learning the Bible stories and verses by heart and singing.
2. **The Worship:** The worship on Sunday afternoon had only women and children. The worship was participatory,





led by the young girls. They sang well, prayed with dedication, and listened to sermon with commitment, submitted offerings with thankfulness and had cheerful fellowship with one another.

**3. Children's Ministry:** The children's meeting



before the worship was well attended. In fact, they came early on that Sunday afternoon and were waiting for the pastor to come and begin their meeting, when we reached there.



**4. House Visits:** House visits were very informal and Mr. Phn Sary was a known person and welcome in homes. Though I was a foreign



presence among them, the families accepted me as part of the meetings and tried to communicate with me. Although the houses were small, the people have a big heart.



**5. Meeting people in their workplaces:** Evenings were spent with people in the fields. Mr. Phn Sary was very familiar to the people who were working in sugar cane farms, chilli farms, and taking care of cattle. Meeting the people, sitting on the ground and chatting with them is very normal.



I found many things as interesting and joyful here.

**Connections to India:** The relationship between India and Cambodia started in the ancient days and still continues. One of the examples of these long-standing connections is the involvement of people from South India in the construction of Angkor Wat, an architectural wonder, built in the ancient days. Presently these two countries are collaboratively reconstructing this demolished temple complex.



**Transportation:** Multi-purpose vehicles that transform two-wheelers into multi-wheelers, depending on the need.



**Marriage:** marriages are celebrated for two-days and the groom washes the bride's feet and then bride does it for the groom during the ceremony. After marriage, the groom lives in the bride's home.

**Rain water harvesting:** Most of the homes are equipped with facilities for harvesting the rain water. They also use natural ways to clean the rain water for drinking purposes.



**Utilizing the potential of modern media:** Pastor Chinho, from Phnom Penh, talked to the church committee meeting in Kompong Cham, over the phone kept in speaker mode.

**Enthusiasm of the children:** Children were waiting for the pastor to come and open the church for Bible lessons and singing.

**Interactions with people:** Could interact with people of various age groups from different walks of life. It was wonderful as I had to use alternate ways to communicate to them.

**Variety of food:** The family whom I stayed with provided me a variety of food that is common in the Cambodian village context.

I felt really at home in this rural village of Kompong Cham. The climate, trees and fields stirred up nostalgic memories of my childhood. At the same time it evoked a pain of losing vegetation, and environment-friendly community life due to urbanisation and shifts in the employment habits as it had happened in my village, which I witnessed as I grew up.

I travelled to Siem Reap. The visit to Angkor Wat brought proud memories of the long-standing relationship and cultural exchange between Cambodia and India.

As I travelled through the rural, semi-urban and urban areas of Cambodia, I was startled by the erosion of traditional values and growing westernisation. There are many visible signs of transformation in the lifestyle of the people, their architecture, and land utilisation.



The well-built highways provide mobility and contribute to growth and development. The demand for large commercial establishments along the reach is visible. As a result, agricultural lands have been filled up and transformed into commercial or domestic spaces to meet such demand.

The growing shift in the architectural style is evident in the new houses and buildings. The environment friendly, traditional Cambodian architectural style, with wooden walls, tiled roofs, lots of air-circulation and convenient utility space, is giving way to more closed, concrete-structured constructions that demand air-conditioning.

I wonder if it is a sign of changing mindset of the people. The houses in the semi-urban and urban areas are increasingly separated using plant fencing or brick walls. It is completely different from the rural setup that represents the openness and sense of togetherness evident in their life. This very nature of openness in rural people also contributes to the success of the mission among

them. Many among them are ready to accept the Gospel, and the Buddhist parents do not hesitate to send their children to small group, children's ministry or worships.

It is evident that the people's lifestyle is changing to a large extent. This includes a shift from an agrarian community to a more industry-dependent lifestyle. Migration to cities has become rampant as people go in search of greener pastures and education. Education is gaining importance and people need to spend large amounts for education. Higher education is only available in the cities and can cost a person some US\$3,000 per year. However, interestingly, youths who studied in cities have encountered the Gospel, and on their return to the villages, they lead worship as well as attract children to Christ.

There are evident changes in the composition of the family too. The number of children in a family has dropped from double digits to two or three. The landholding of each family has also been reduced considerably, and this has affected the unemployment rate and intensified migration in search of jobs.

Cultural hybridity is commonplace. This is evident in their interactions, dress patterns, automobile usage, gestures, and gadgets used. The same person would talk in Khmer, use Facebook on a smart phone equipped with English or Khmer language, dress up with suits or shorts, watch WWF at the cafes, do makeups and hairstyling, use motorcycles, greet others with Anglicised gestures, and visit pubs, but use the traditional dress, run a small shop, eat from local shops, use traditional greetings in different contexts. That might also be one of the reasons that enable Buddhist parents to accept their children going to Christian meetings.

My visit to the killing fields and the museum evoked pain, agony, questions and realisation about the sinful nature of humans. The question that kept popping



up in my mind was, "How can human beings become that cruel and inflict such pain on their own people?" Would the history have been different had they

received the Gospel before? It also reminded me of the ambivalence of human mind and reality of cruelty and insanity within it!

However, I am glad that the country is moving forward and becoming a 'living field' today. As I walked among the mass graves of the massacred people, I was praying that there should be no more genocides anywhere in the world. I understand that, it reveals the darkness in human mind, which could be cast out only with the light of the Gospel.



I believe that special ministries of education, healthcare, leadership development, child care, cleanliness training, etc. need to be focused to achieve this. Obeying the words of Jesus, who asked us to teach, heal and preach the Good News is very much needed in the rural areas of Cambodia as most of the mission works in the past were confined to the urban limits.

Yes, there is a long way to go. Mission possibilities are seen everywhere in this country.

*Anilal M. Jose was one of nine students of Asia Gateway Training who went on a one-week mission trip to Cambodia as part of their seven-week residential training. He is a priest in Kerala, India, and is pursuing his Doctorate in Communication.*