

Cambodian Monastery New Delhi: Religion, Social Space, and the Experience of Home among Cambodian Students in New Delhi, India

Sothee Chhun¹, Morm Savonn¹, Ann Savy²

¹Research Scholar, Department of Buddhist Studies, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

²Research Scholar, Dept. of Indian Languages and Literary Studies, University of Delhi

ABSTRACT

The essay investigates the roles and importance of the Cambodian Monastery New Delhi, via personal experiences of Cambodian students living and studying in New Delhi, India. The goal is to understand how these students, who are not a homogenous residential group, use the space of the monastery, and how these interactions influence their everyday life. This study, which uses an ethnography technique, draws on field notes, participant observation, semi-structured interviews with seven Cambodian students, and in-depth informal discussions with key temple associates. The main analytical frameworks for the thematic analysis of the collected material were Henri Lefebvre's idea of social space and Meredith B. McGuire's concept of lived religion. The results demonstrate that the Cambodian Monastery in New Delhi has a different meaning in the daily life of students. It is an important hub for forging intra-group relationships, participating in religious and cultural events and creating a sense of belonging and proximity to home through similar language, food and group activities. Students also use the monastery as a place to relax, and sometimes as a temporary place to reside. These various patterns indicate that the monastery's importance is rooted in personal needs and subjective experiences, well beyond institutional religious activity. Finally, the study shows that the meaning of a sacred space is not only an outcome of institutional requirements but is also constantly produced and transformed by ordinary spatial practices. This article combines live religion and social space in an effort to demonstrate the entanglement of religious, social and cultural practices in the ongoing production of space. The Cambodian Monastery New Delhi case underscores the necessity for contemporary research on religion in diaspora or transnational contexts to move away from the rigid institutional functions and static community structures and to focus on the flexible ways in which people experience places, navigate space and practice vernacular religion in their daily lives.

Keywords: *Cambodian Monastery New Dehli, Cambodian Students, Lived Religion, Social Space, Everyday Life*

1. INTRODUCTION

“Venerable, let's have a meal together at the temple this weekend.”

*Corresponding Author Email: asean_2015@yahoo.com

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The researcher routinely receives such requests from Cambodians studying in New Delhi. Therefor the important question is not only the students inviting each other to the temple, but also why such mundane activities as cooking and eating together take place so often in Cambodian Monastery New Delhi. These students do not live together as a Cambodian community in New Delhi and the temple was not built to specifically serve a Cambodian community in the area.

Observations of the historical displays and dozens of casual conversations with the abbot and others associated with the Monastery during fieldwork at the Cambodian Monastery New Delhi show that construction of the Cambodian Monastery New Delhi began in 1991 under the direction of Preah Maha Rishi Prasert Eka-Panyo and through the efforts of The Indo-Khmer Theravada Buddhist Society of New Delhi. At present, Venerable Rin Ran serves as the abbot of the monastery. Its goals were to propagate Theravada Buddhism and to enhance cultural relations between Cambodia and India. Hence, the temple was not primarily established to serve a Cambodian community in New Delhi. Rather, it was built as a site of worship and cultural exchange between India and Cambodia, as well as a destination for Cambodian pilgrims visiting the Buddhist holy land.

This is different from studies of Cambodian Monastery in migration situations, which usually describe the temples as centers of immigrant communities, locations for performing rituals, passing on language and culture and encouraging interaction between members of the community. While Ledgerwood (1995) and Marston (2005) demonstrate how Buddhism and ritual maintain Cambodian cultural continuity and identity in the face of socioeconomic change, Ebihara (1968) underlines the role of kinship, social relationships, and ritual in Cambodian social life. Sophea (2023) then illustrates how rituals and temples aided in maintaining Cambodian identity in the US. Conversely, Numrich (1996) and Cadge (2004) argue that Asian Monastery in the US function as sites of social networking, identity negotiation, and the adaptation of religious rites to a new society.

But these approaches tend to focus on temples as community organizations or on the relationship between Monastery and immigrant groups that have settled nearby. Such a paradigm would be inadequate for understanding Cambodian Monastery New Delhi as Cambodian students in New Delhi are in a variety of institutions, dormitories, and other sorts of housing. They go to the Monastery on the basis of their own requirements and on holidays and occasions. In this way the temple becomes a space of encounter for people coming from many social contexts, and not only the center of an explicit community.

This topic could be approached through the concept of lived religion, as proposed by McGuire (2008), which calls for the study of religion based on the actual behaviors and experiences of individuals in everyday life more than on the doctrines or institutional structures of religion. In this sense, activities of cooking, eating, speaking Khmer, seeing friends or relaxing at the temple, while not necessarily ritualistic, may be related to religious and cultural experience. At the same time, Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space helps demonstrate that space does not have a fixed meaning determined solely by institutional purpose or design. Rather, it is the creation of people's experiences, interactions and their use.

Initial fieldwork shows that the physical nature of the temple might be used in several ways. For example, the temple could be used for cooking, socializing, relaxing, using the area during the summer and temporary lodging for some students. Use patterns are different among people and time. For instance numerous Cambodian pilgrims visit India and spend time at the temple between November and February. Students tend to come to the temple more regularly during weekends. This affects how students interact with the place. The findings indicate that the Monastery is used in different ways with regards to users, activities and the historical environment.

For seven Cambodian students interviewed, visiting the Monastery means several things, including speaking Khmer and building a sense of familiarity with home. Other definitions are meeting people and developing relationships, cooking and eating together, and participating in religious and cultural activities. Some referred to the temple as their “first home,” “second home,” or a place where they “feel at home.” Others referred to the peaceful atmosphere or found it convenient to adapt the place for their own use. These differences demonstrate that different pupils have diverse views of the temple. Instead, its meanings are grounded in heterogenous spatial patterns of use and experience.

Our work does not fill the void that is the paucity of scholarship on Buddhism in migrant situations or Cambodian Monastery. Rather, it is to make sense of a scenario where temple customers do not form a long-term community, and the temple is not the center of an ethnic group. This study, thus, analyzes the role and importance of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi from the point of view of Cambodian students, focusing on the relationship between everyday experience, social contact, religious and cultural activities, and space utilization. The primary question is: how do Cambodian students in different parts of New Delhi utilize a religious site that is not embedded in a large Cambodian community, and what does this use mean for them personally? The study tries to understand how people’s activities and experiences contribute to the production of meaning in religious space in daily life, drawing on Lefebvre’s notion of social space and McGuire’s notion of lived religion.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to explore the role and relevance of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi in the daily life of Cambodian students residing in New Delhi. The research design of the study is qualitative with ethnographic approach. The study looks at how the students use the monastery and participate in its social, cultural and religious activities.

The study was conducted at Cambodian Monastery, New Delhi. What this study does is look at how Cambodian students in different parts of New Delhi visit the monastery and use its space for different purposes as opposed to looking at it as the center of a settled Cambodian population.

The main informants were seven Cambodian students pursuing their undergraduate, post graduate and PhD degrees in various colleges of New Delhi. They were interviewed in a semi-structured format to explore why they visited the monastery, what activities they engaged in, how they related to monks and other Cambodian students and their experiences. Pseudonyms were adopted to protect the privacy of the informants.

Field notes and participant observation are also used in the study. The researcher observed and participated in activities such as cooking Cambodian foods, eating, offering to monks, and socializing at the monastery. They also included weekends, festivals, and periods when pilgrims from Cambodia stayed at the monastery. Additional information was obtained through informal interviews with the monastery patrons to determine their usage patterns and the setting.

The data was analyzed using a thematic analysis. After identifying common themes in the field notes and interviews, the conceptual frameworks were used to interpret the findings. Lefebvre's concept of social space serves to understand the significance that social relations and activities confer on the monastery, while McGuire's concept of lived religion helps to explain the ways in which religious experience is articulated in everyday practices. Thus the study begins with the students' experiences, and uses these ideas to explain how their use of the location develops meaning.

3. THE MONASTERY AS A PLACE FOR ENCOUNTER AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Cambodian Monastery New Delhi is a place where Cambodian students come to interact, talk, make and share meals, as well as attend religious rituals, based on field observations. These activities are usually held on the weekends and free time when students from numerous colleges might be gathered in one place. Thus, the visit to the monastery is not an occasional visit to a place of prayer, but a normal part of their lives social.

One may see this tendency in the interviews. "I go to the monastery on weekends and on Buddhist holidays, and I like being with other Cambodian students and monks," said Sok. They meet and talk about the day-to-day concerns, their school work and their lives in India. He feels more at ease and at home when he talks to other Cambodians and speaks Khmer (Sok, personal communication, September 3, 2026). Similarly, Meas said, the monastery gives her a chance to connect with other Cambodian students, to talk about their daily lives and studies, to share a meal and to help out with events. She has a feeling of mutual support and is able to share her experiences with individuals who have similar cultural origins (Meas, personal communication, August 22, 2026).

Such social relationships are strengthened even more when individuals cook and dine together. Bopha spoke of her visits in terms of meeting Cambodian students and cooking Cambodian food together, and Piseth said he would go to the monastery to meet other students, talk, eat, and help out with activities (Piseth, personal communication, August 25, 2026; Bopha, personal communication, September 1, 2026). Mao recounted visiting other students and joining in cooking and eating activities but he visited less often, mainly between Pchum Ben and Khmer New Year. This means that students do not use the monastery in the same way or with the same regularity (Mao, personal communication, August 26, 2026).

These practices can be viewed via McGuire's (2008) concept of lived religion that stresses the importance of the lived and performed aspect of religion in everyday life, rather than merely in formal teachings or institutional activities. The monastery is a place for meeting people, for talking, for cooking and eating, and for offering to monks. So, the daily lives of students often

include both social and religious practices. The importance of a visit goes beyond religious practice, and is based on the relationships and experiences that are built while at the monastery.

Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space provides another perspective on this process. Lefebvre argues that space is not a physical place but a product of social interaction and behaviors. The Cambodian Monastery in New Delhi, intended for religious purposes, derives new meanings from the students' regular connections and activities. They not only fill an existing space, but also help to transform the monastery into an important social space, meeting, cooking, talking and spending time together.

But the data also shows that it's interpreted differently by each student." Mao's visits were less frequent here and he focused on calm, meditation, Khmer art and important festivals. Students can experience and use the monastery in many ways. So Cambodian Monastery New Delhi is not only a place of worship or congregation. The significance of the location comes from the diverse actions, relationships and experiences of the people who use it.

Figure 1. The Main Shrine Hall and Sacred Space within Cambodian Monastery New Delhi: Main Shrine Hall, Entrance, Interior, and Temple Grounds.



Source: Photograph by CM,2026.

4.RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL PRACTICES IN DAILY LIFE

Field research suggests that Cambodian students still take part in religious and cultural events at Cambodian Monastery New Delhi. They also use the monastery as a meeting spot. These customs are more than ritualistic. They involve cooking, feeding the monks, making merit and participating in the major Cambodian celebrations. These events assist students in India to carry on integrating religious and cultural norms in their daily life.

Kountea, a female student, described her visit to the monastery to make merit and feed the monks, including cooking and sharing meals. She said that she liked to participate at these activities and make offerings. She further contends that the monastery provides a natural

context for religious practice in daily life, as monks perform religious activities there, and people are able to come and make merit (Kountea, personal communication, August 28, 2026).

Seng also participates in religious and cultural events regularly and during holidays such as Pchum Ben and Khmer New Year as well as other Buddhist activities. It makes him happy and brings back memories of Cambodian traditions when he helps cook meals and gives it to monks, he said. Therefore, these practices have a value that is not limited to religion; they are connected to memories of the cultural customs that he grew up with in Cambodia (Seng, personal communication, August 24, 2026).

Piseth emphasizes the importance of visiting the monastery on weekends, and Buddhist and Cambodian holidays, particularly while cooking as part of religious ceremonies. He views participating in such activities as a way to continue Cambodian Buddhist traditions. He also feels more at home during religious activities and celebrations (Piseth, personal communication, August 25, 2026).

These results are accounted for by McGuire's (2008) theory of lived religion, which focuses on religion as it is lived and practiced in everyday life instead of only formal teachings or rituals. In this case, giving meals and taking part in festivals and merit-making are part of the students' daily lives. They are not, rather, activities in which students participate actively on the basis of certain events and the conditions of their Indian existence.

Crucially, these traditions are often both religious and cultural. Cambodian meal preparation is not simply a cultural ritual, but is part of the offering itself. Providing food is an act of merit-making. The same applies to participation in Pchum Ben and Khmer New Year. Such festivals are not just a time for enjoyment but also a way for children to join in traditions that are popular in Cambodian society. Religion, then, is expressed in the monastery in practices that knit together culture, memory, and everyday life.

Cambodian Monastery New Delhi is notable for reasons other than just being a Buddhist religious landmark (McGuire, 2008). It also provides students an opportunity to experience religious and cultural practices that are important to them while studying and living in India.

5. FAMILIARITY, LANGUAGE AND THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING AT HOME

Another clear element that comes out from the field data is the feeling of comfort and closeness to home that some Cambodian students feel at Cambodian Monastery New Delhi. Though the students may live in India for long periods of time and not live together as a Cambodian residential community, the monastery provides a sense of familiarity with the language, culture, social interactions and environment of living in Cambodia.

Meas calls the monastery his "second home" where he can relax after the trials of life and study in India. This is related to the sensation of being in a familiar environment, with people who share similar cultural backgrounds (Meas, personal communication, August 22, 2026). Kountea, however, described the monastery as her "first home," and how it makes her feel snug and protected. This emotion is not only a product of the physical location, but also of her connection with the people and social setting of the monastery (Kountea, personal communication, August 28, 2026).

Another important factor in building up this feeling of familiarity is the Khmer language. Sok explained he feels more connected to people and environment at the monastery when he speaks and hears Khmer. It also reduces his longing for his family and the community he left (Sok, personal communication, September 3, 2026). Bopha, as well, underlined the importance of speaking Khmer. "Speaking Khmer and being around other Cambodians at the monastery makes her less homesick, she explained. To Bopha (personal communication, September 1, 2026), being able to use her language and connect with others in familiar ways is just as essential to her as the physical location.

These meetings suggest that "home" in Cambodia is more than a place to reside. Language, people and common routines that children are familiar with might help them feel at home. This experience is explained by McGuire's (2008) idea of lived religion which emphasizes religion as experienced and enacted in daily life. Here, a sense of familiarity is not solely derived from religious practices. Also, it grows because of regular interactions that allow kids to return to a social and cultural milieu where they are comfortable.

The meaning of space is made up of encounters and social activities (Lefebvre, 1991). Therefore, Cambodian Monastery New Delhi is not simply a place where students come but becomes important because of their regular visits, discussions in Khmer and participation in the events that are connected to their everyday life in Cambodia. We might think of the feeling of "being at home" as an effect of how a physical space is filled with familiar relationships and experiences.

But not every student has the same interpretation of what "home" means. Mao has less time to spend in the monastery, and enjoys the peaceful and beautiful setting more. He takes the place for rest and contemplation. His anecdote shows the monastery's familiarity and importance is a personal experience not shared by other Cambodian pupils.

Figure 2. Religious, Cultural, and Social Activities at Cambodian Monastery New Delhi



Source: Photograph by CM,2026.

6. THE MONASTERY AS A PLACE ADAPTED TO THE NEEDS OF THE USERS

The field statistics also show the importance of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi as a place that students can use according to their different needs and circumstances. Besides religious and cultural activities, the monastery is sometimes used for short-term housing, recreation and escape from an unfavorable environment. This indicates that the use of the monastery is flexible and that it can accommodate the needs of its patrons and the exigencies of everyday life.

Mao said the monastery has several rooms available on a temporary basis for students needing long-term accommodation in New Delhi. This is why the monastery is especially crucial throughout students' transitions of life in India. He also described that the monastery is a peaceful and beautiful place for him to relax or do meditation (Mao, personal communication, August 26, 2026). This demonstrates that the monastery may fulfill a number of needs, such as providing a place to relax and reflect, or temporary accommodation during a period of change. Hence it is important to students not just for religious activities but also because it can cater to many aspects of daily life.

Field investigations in May and June also showed that some students had visited the monastery during periods of unusually high temperatures in New Delhi. There were not many locations with air conditioning, but the monastery building provided a place to unwind and escape the heat outside. Also at this time the researcher took shelter from the heat in the monastery. This example demonstrates that the use of the monastery is not limited to instances when people wish to participate in religious activities. It might also be a function of the physical and environmental situation of the city. The monastery can be used in various ways according to people's pressing requirements when the external environment becomes difficult for daily living.

The utilization of the monastery also depends on the amount of tourists and the season. A monk said to me in passing that the monastery is visited more often by kids during the school holidays. Between November and February, however, students usually come less often, as many Cambodian pilgrims go to India and remain at the monastery at that time (Informal discussion, December 22, 2025). It implies that the monastery is not utilized only by one type of people and that the pattern of use shifts when different groups come into the area.

Lefebvre's (1991) concept of social space also sheds light on these phenomena. For Lefebvre space is not merely a place, that serves a function, it is also a space that is made meaningful via social practices and human acts. The same physical space of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi can be used for different purposes depending upon the situation. It can be used for religious and cultural activities, student meetings, short-term accommodation and life's relaxation. These meanings are not separate from place, but emerge via people's use of place.

This point further highlights the relationship between space and its users. It is not just the institutional function of the monastery as a place of worship, nor its physical characteristics, that give it importance. It is contingent upon the people, on the events and the situations that happen there. Every now and then a student would come to the monastery to pray, or to relax, or to stay overnight. When many pilgrims stay at the monastery, several parts are used in a different way.

So, it is reasonable to view of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi as a place which serves variety of purposes, while yet being a place of prayer. This flexibility permits the integration of the monastery into students' everyday lives in a number of circumstances, therefore helping to keep it relevant even to Cambodian students who are not living nearby or in a permanent residential community.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

This study of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi via the experiences of Cambodian students in New Delhi shows that the importance of the monastery cannot be explained by its position as a place of worship. Cambodian students live across different residential areas and universities, so it cannot be assumed that the monastery is the center of a well-established Cambodian residential community in New Delhi. Yet they use the monastery for socializing and bonding, cooking and eating together, participating in religious and cultural activities, speaking Khmer, relaxing, and sometimes short-term accommodation. The significance of the monastery is not determined only by its formal function but is shaped by the activities and experiences of its users. Consistent with McGuire's (2008) notion of lived religion, these results underscore the importance of religion as it is experienced and practiced in everyday life, rather than through formal rituals, institutions, or theology. Activities such as offerings, cooking, sharing meals, praying, celebrating holidays, and talking with other Cambodians happen in the same social milieu at the monastery. The line between religious and secular action is thus not always clear. Cooking can be a social activity, a way of preparing food for monks, and a way of maintaining ties to familiar cultural practices, for example.

Moreover, the data contribute to our understanding of lived religion among overseas students. Religion is not only something that students encounter when they intentionally engage in religious activities. It can also be associated with speaking Khmer, eating familiar food, socializing with other Cambodians, and being in a familiar place. For some students, daily practices that regularly bring language, food, people, and religion into their lives help them feel "at home" or "close to home."

Another approach to understanding the multiple meanings of the monastery is through Lefebvre's (1991) notion of social space. Lefebvre argues that space is produced by social activities and interactions and given meaning, rather than being just a physical site that people visit and use. Thus, it is vital to understand Cambodian Monastery New Delhi not only through its architecture or religious function, but also through the activities and interactions of people there and their perceptions of the space. According to this approach, students do not merely "use" an existing monastery. Their activities also contribute to its social meaning. Speaking Khmer creates a sense of familiarity; cooking and eating together make the monastery a site of social engagement; religious rites connect the space to cultural memories; and temporary housing connects the sacred space to the realities of city life. Such meanings are not determined by its original institutional purpose but shift and develop over time through the monastery's use.

This finding raises an important issue concerning the interaction between the institution and its users. The institutional objectives and history of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi include promoting Theravada Buddhism, nurturing cultural links between India and Cambodia, and

providing accommodation for pilgrims. However, the monastery's importance extends beyond these purposes as Cambodian students from around New Delhi make use of it. This does not mean that the monastery is no longer a place of worship. Instead, religious, social, and everyday activities take place in the same space.

Reading McGuire and Lefebvre together can be helpful. Lefebvre describes how these actions help create social space, while McGuire illustrates how religious meaning emerges through the lived experience and practice of individuals. Put another way, social space accounts for how people's activities create meaning in space, while lived religion accounts for how people live their religion. Together, the two concepts show that the monastery is not only a site for student activity, but that student activity also makes the monastery meaningful.

However, the field data suggest that Cambodian students experience the monastery differently. Some value its quiet atmosphere, opportunities for leisure, or practical uses in particular situations, while others mainly see it as a place to meet people and build relationships. Others place greater emphasis on religious and cultural events. This difference is of theoretical importance because it cautions against conceptualizing "community" and "identity" as homogeneous notions. Not all Cambodian students have the same experience at the monastery. The meaning of a place depends on the context, needs, and experiences of its users.

Cambodian Monastery New Delhi is not simply a community center or a place of ceremony, but can be understood as a sacred space that acquires new meanings through people's everyday lives. Cambodian students do not all live in the same residential neighborhood, but they come together in one place to socialize, speak Khmer, cook, eat, practice their religion, and participate in shared activities. Such activities create a meeting point for people who would otherwise be dispersed around the city. Its importance lies in what happens there, rather than in an abstract notion of "Cambodianness."

In principle, this study contends that established residential groups should not be the exclusive subjects of studies of religion among those who live abroad or in other countries. It is also important to consider how meaning is created through habitual activities and movement into shared spaces. The Cambodian Monastery New Delhi shows how a place may become socially, culturally, and religiously relevant to people distributed across a city, even when there is no large Cambodian community. A shared space can thus emerge from repeated use of the same place and does not always depend on people living together in one location.

The importance of Cambodian Monastery New Delhi ultimately lies in the link between site, practice, and experience. The monastery remains a place of worship but, through people's use, also becomes a social, cultural, and everyday space. The study shows how religious spaces can acquire meanings beyond their original institutional functions in contexts of mobility and life outside one's country of origin, as users transform existing spaces through everyday activities into places of familiarity, relationship, and lived experience.

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