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Chea Vannath [Cambodia, Activist]

Chea Vannath

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Interviewee: **CHEA VANNATH**
Interviewer: Kirpal Singh
Date: 24 February 2015
Location: Singapore

00:00:22

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you so much Vannath for being here at the Singapore Management University to help us document this interview.

00:00:30

[Chea Vannath](#)

My pleasure.

00:00:32

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Would you say, looking back Vannath, that overall, your home and your family, that kind of environment in which you grew up, would you say it was a happy childhood?

00:00:43

[Chea Vannath](#)

I think so because it coincided with the joy of living, the golden age of Cambodia. We got the independence from France. 1953. The King himself, he kind of... an exceptional personality, characteristics. Usually the King... you were not allowed to look up to his face, but he was not that kind of person. He just came to us, and put himself down to us, made us feel very comfortable. Also, the whole society, the development of human resource, progress of education, medicine, engineering and all fields... culture, arts. It's the golden age.

00:01:58

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now this golden age in a sense began to become a little bit less than golden in the '70s. Let's say about '73, '74. Did you feel that there were already signs that bad things were about to happen?

00:02:16

[Chea Vannath](#)

Since 1970, the National Assembly deposed the Head of State, Norodom Sihanouk, while he was on a state visit with Russia and China. Then the turmoil started since then. We started to have a lot of problems with the Vietnamese, mainly with the Vietnamese. At that time, Vietnam was divided in two, one capitalist and one communist. The same for Cambodia. When they deposed Norodom Sihanouk, they became capitalist, supported by the American government. Then it started bombing from the US military and South Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Another group, the Khmer Rouge started to grow, and North Vietnam joined forces with the Khmer Rouge.

00:03:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

All of these events that began to slowly unfold, ended up in what we know quite dramatically took place in 1975, all the killings and everything. Looking back at it now Vannath, what kind of memories come to you?

00:03:48

[Chea Vannath](#)

I feel that if we could avoid war, because in war, we cannot claim the loser and the winner. No, all are losers. In the case of Cambodia, the whole country, the whole population were losers. Not just that generation, but the generations to follow is still traumatised by the parents' experience, still have a lot of mental illness up to now, because the wounds that were so deep and the memories still very fresh until now. So, my memory is that how did we fall into that trap? How? That's why it pushed me to stand on what I feel... to be a peace activist.

00:05:00

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now that whole Khmer Rouge thing affected you personally, right? There came a time when you had to flee, you had to escape?

00:05:07

[Chea Vannath](#)

When I went through that, I did not feel much about the pain or the trauma. It's just like an instinct of survival only. Not pain, not traumatised, just survival instinct. So just a couple of months after the Khmer Rouge took over and we were evacuated to the countryside, I started to be sick already, because of starvation and then disease. I almost died one day, I feel so agitated. I felt that this is what people call agony, the last stage before death. I did not feel pain or anything. It's just like now, I faced death, so I accepted that. I joined my palms together, put them on my chest and I prayed for the mercy of Buddha and my parents. Telling myself that I'm going to die. I accepted that law of nature, of life and death. I did not protest, or antagonise, or anything. It's just instinct, no pain, nothing. After that, I felt less agitated, and little by little my heartbeat became normal. But the whole process of living under the Khmer Rouge, I just wondered why that happened, and how that happened. Why it became that way? So, more of the question than the pain.

00:07:10

[Kirpal Singh](#)

When you had to, in a sense, leave Cambodia and escape, were you helped by any kind of... a group of people? Was it a UN (United Nations) agency or...? Talk about the escape.

00:07:26

[Chea Vannath](#)

First, my sister-in-law, she was already at the refugee camp, the UN refugee camp in Thailand. She wrote a letter to me to join them. But it did not convince me to leave Cambodia. The reason for leaving Cambodia was that they tried to arrest my husband, because they perceived that my husband sympathised with the freedom fighters. They came already to my house, but he was not home. So, they said they would come back. At that time the revenge, the political chaos, the people took the law into their own hands. It was very unsafe. We talked, and we said that if we stay, we'll end up in prison, or die. So, we had no choice than to escape to the refugee camp in Khao-I-Dang, in Thailand.

In Khao-I-Dang, we came at the right time, very good timing. In 1980, mid-June 1980. It's very good timing. They started to recruit people to go abroad already. My husband, because he used to be military in the Khmer Republic and he had the picture as proof, then we got out quite quickly. We went to other refugee camps in Thailand. So, the whole, three refugee camps took about three months and a half. Then, we were brought to the Philippines, and

we stayed there for six months and a half. The reason they took that long because they were looking for sponsors to be able to bring us to the United States.

00:09:32

[Kirpal Singh](#)

In your case that sponsor came from Oregon?

00:09:35

[Chea Vannath](#)

Yes, they from Oregon.

00:09:35

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So you found yourself in Oregon?

00:09:37

[Chea Vannath](#)

Yes, ended up in Oregon.

00:09:40

[Kirpal Singh](#)

How was the experience?

00:09:42

[Chea Vannath](#)

It was a kind of irony that I went to the United States and I still have... even I thought I was a peaceful person, but in the United States, when discussing with friends and colleagues, I strongly argued with them that we have to destroy Communism. Communism was bad, we have to destroy it. The other colleagues, including one Catholic priest, tried to tell me that no, you don't use bullet, you use ballot. That means you go through election. I argued with them that, no, not with Communists, we need to destroy them. So, I felt...

00:10:32

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Kill them before they kill you?

00:10:35

[Chea Vannath](#)

Yes. I feel irony that me, being from war-torn society, country, but I still maintain a kind of lose and win, loser and winner... not the peace from the heart. That's the biggest lesson I learned about war and peace. It's like what the Catholic priest tried to tell me, that we need to use compassion and peace to counter the war and the destruction.

00:11:20

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was that because you felt just angry or sad or disappointed, or all of these combined, that made you so, I wouldn't say vengeful, so aggressive about the Communists?

00:11:32

[Chea Vannath](#)

I thought that it was the law of nature. Yes, life and death, until our enemy was dead that we don't have life, if we did not have life. That kind of simplistic understanding. That's when I reflect back I feel that... that's why in this world, why does so many people join violence, because of that kind of mentality, that we need to destroy the enemy. We are the good, they are the evil. We need to destroy the evil, that kind of mentality. Until I woke up and I realised the real law of nature. Yes.

00:12:28

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now, let's cut short in time. There you were in America, and you studied, you did a bit of work, you did a lot of writing, a lot of reading, met a lot of people. What made you want to come back to Cambodia? What brought you back?

00:12:47

[Chea Vannath](#)

I feel the two differences, it's just like its two sides of the coin. Both on the same planet, but somehow so different, like two extremes. I drove the car to go to work, and I felt that in the United States, of course I was an asset to the society, but without me, United States don't

lose anything. But if I come to Cambodia, maybe what I do that affect the change for the country. That means Cambodia need human resource to rebuild, to reconstruct the war-torn...

00:13:47

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Where did that come from? Did you always think that you would lead people? Because that's essentially a leader's role, right? You had a kind of calling to go back and serve the people.

00:13:56

[Chea Vannath](#)

I don't mean to lead anybody. It's just for my own... just my own instinct only. I did not plan to lead. I just feel that thing that I need to do, and I just do it.

00:14:09

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But many people in Phnom Penh, people I spoke to and speak with, for over the past four, five years, they look upon you as a leader. A leader of opinion, voice, but even when you were working for the Centre for Social Development, you were, in a sense, a leader. But that's a notional leader, right?

00:14:28

[Chea Vannath](#)

That's what people give to me, not what I feel about myself. I do not feel about myself that way. When they ask for my opinion, for me, I say that whatever I talk, whatever I share, whatever I express, it needs to be an asset to the whole society, to the country, and not for the sake of just speaking, not just talking, not just dialogue, not just deliberation. I just want to share my part to reconstruct the society. I just do it. Not because I am supposed to say, "Yes, I am a leader." Number one, I don't suppose to say anything. Number two, I never consider myself a leader. I just do it.

I feel strongly, the sense of duty, because before the Khmer Rouge, I was born in a family that I did not have to worry about to live or to survive, or to go to school. I took that for granted. I feel that for the country we have the politicians, or the leaders, who took care of the country, so I did not need to do anything. Just relax, take it easy. Then when the whole

country collapsed, when the whole thing collapsed, when the society went upside down, that was a wakeup call for me. I said, "Why is that? Why?" I trusted the leaders. I trusted the politicians. Or maybe I got the wrong perception about trusting. Then I said, "Okay, from now on, I need to be involved, I need to participate in the process. If something happens, either bad or good, at least I am part of that one. That made me change completely, yes. Because of that Khmer Rouge episode that woke me up. Without the Khmer Rouge, maybe I would still be like living in a golden cocoon.

00:17:00

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Was it difficult when you first took over CSD (Centre for Social Development)? Did you think you were going to have a lot of obstacles, or did you think, wow, here was a chance for me to like get on and do something quickly?

00:17:10

[Chea Vannath](#)

When I joined CSD, the main activity was good governance, transparency and accountability. Later on, when I joined, I saw more opportunity and I just add on and on and on to monitoring the National Assembly, monitoring the Senate, monitoring the Courthouse, the public forum to give the floor, to give the voice to the voiceless, to give the voice to the soft voiced, and to be the bridge between the policymaker at the very top level down to the people that are affected by those policies. We were the bridge. I built the bridge.

00:18:01

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Sure, and that was very, very important because the CSD gave you a kind of a venue, a platform. The King came, and Hun Sen came, so you had access to a lot of people. They were very proud of the work that you were doing, particularly Hun Sen. When he said he was happy with CSD doing the work that it was doing, was he being sincere, genuine and real, or did you think he was just being a politician?

00:18:34

[Chea Vannath](#)

Maybe both. Yes, both. Maybe because of the approach too, my approach. I am always very humble with anybody. especially with the authority. I respect their role and responsibility.

But I express the truth, nothing else than the truth. I don't mean to convince them to believe me, no. That's what I have to tell you. It's up to you how you do it. It's up to you. So, I need not press anybody to do anything.

00:19:19

[Kirpal Singh](#)

But when you gave voice to the people. You are in a sense bringing a truth, let's say the voice of the people, to a different group of people too, say the authorities, the people with the power. Now this puts you in a bridge-building role. But there must have been times when there were real deep-seated opposition, oppositional play of values. Did you get these kind of conflicts? Would you like to share an example or two?

00:19:53

[Chea Vannath](#)

Never give up. It takes time. It's a very, very slow process to change mindsets. We were in a war-torn country, society. People did not trust anybody. That's the way it was in any war-torn country, no trust. Then I understood that very much and the perseverance, the commitment. For me, the success is the challenge, the commitment, I don't care about the result. I don't care.

00:20:43

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now among the many activities that you have undertaken to bring about change in attitudes, to help people understand states of living and existence better, was the idea of bringing even the Khmer Rouge into the discussion table or to the discussion table, and this was seen by quite a few people in Cambodia to be not, like the right thing to do. Looking back at that, what can you say now? What made you do that? Did you feel that there was real reconciliation that you were trying to bring about?

00:21:20

[Chea Vannath](#)

Yes. I feel that the trial alone is not the answer. I got the idea... the eye opener for me when I traveled to the Khmer Rouge zone. Then I realised that no the trial is not the answer, the answer is the reconciliation. We need to be reconciled if we want to heal the past, if we want to build a better future. The Khmer Rouge themselves, they are part of the process. So, to discuss about peace and reconciliation without them, it means nothing. It's the reason

why I went and talked to them, and invited them to join in the public forum, with all people from all walks of life. Just to get the idea, just to get them to express themselves, to open themselves about what they want and how they view the reconciliation. I did that with no resentment at all. I just do it. I just do it. I feel that's what I needed to do. No resentment, no joy, no sadness, nothing. But from the other people's point of view, some accused me of stirring things up. Things went smoothly, peace went smoothly, why should I stir things up about Khmer Rouge issue again? A lot of questions asked about the reason behind why I did that. There's no reason behind it, I just did it for the sake of the country.

I feel that this is the whole process, because we cannot reconcile without social justice. Social justice, we mean the trial, the extraordinary chamber, court of Cambodia. This is the process again, how to go through the reconciliation process, also for the people, for the victims, for everybody, including the Khmer Rouge themselves, to be satisfied with the process. Not satisfied with the result of the court, but with the process. Yes, that's what we need to go through to open ourselves, to heal ourselves from the past, and be able to close the page and start the new future.

00:24:20

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Now when I first met you, you were still very active in CSD, but only for a few months, right? After that you stepped down, what made you step down? What made you move away from CSD?

00:24:32

[Chea Vannath](#)

Number one, I feel that there are a lot of young, bright people, younger generation. I feel that in any institution or society, or country, we need change. I look at it as the law of nature to allow new ideas, new blood, to come and let the process moving smooth, not to count on any charismatic leaders, that's number one. Number two, I feel that I am a spiritual person, and a lot of things about spirituality are still in my mind, but I worked so hard that I left the country that I did not have time to explore, to discover spirituality deeper. I feel that CSD was well established already. It was just handed over to somebody else, to build a bigger CSD, stronger CSD. That's the decision that I made at that time.

00:26:02

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Your Prime Minister, Hun Sen, feels that if you're a leader, you should lead forever, right? I hope I'm not being unfair to Mr Hun Sen, but he himself wants to be a leader until he's seventy-four. Is he seventy-four now?

00:26:16

[Chea Vannath](#)

No, sixty-four.

00:26:18

[Kirpal Singh](#)

So, he has gotten more years. That's a pretty long stretch, right? How do you feel about this? Do you feel that Hun Sen is doing well as a leader? Is he the same man he was many years ago, politically, at least? Or is he, now, genuinely trying to do good for the nation?

00:26:37

[Chea Vannath](#)

I think that his leadership, he become more and more mature now. But the problem to stay very long in power is not an aberration in the Cambodian politics. We did not have a term for the rulers. So, the same for the Prime Minister. Because of the political turmoil, the lack of trust, no democracy, no democratic process. Then, the alternative is to look for a strong man to lead the country to avoid any tragedy again. We have to keep in mind our background of the killing fields. This one comes and haunts us all the time. Then the United Nations, UNTAC, Transitional Authority in Cambodia, came in and planted the seed of democracy, every five years election. This smooth transition, smooth transition from a Communist absolute country to a more, not democratic, but at least an elected democracy. It's a smooth change, because if you change that drastic, the people might stay behind. The Cambodian people. So, even for democracy, we need to know, we need to learn, we need to train, and we need to experience. Now we experience for ourselves exactly what democracy is. I can say that the reason that he stayed that long is because maybe there is no better alternative, because we have five years election. But in 2013, everybody was surprised to see the opposition gain so many seats. I feel that democracy is moving forward, not rapidly. I do not want any rapid change at all. I do not believe in any rapid change at all because of the mindset. The mindset cannot change overnight, you cannot. You can change the regime of country, but you cannot change the mindset of the people. The sustained ability needs to go along with the mindset of the people. They need to experience democracy for themselves, like the way we are doing now. We need to go to vote every five years. We need

to challenge the politicians. We need to challenge the leaders. We need to go through the process.

00:29:49

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you very much, Vannath, for spending time here.

00:29:51

[Chea Vannath](#)

My pleasure and honour.

00:29:52

[Kirpal Singh](#)

Thank you, thank you.