

EPIC - THE SOURCE OF THE “SOFT POWER” OF INDIAN CULTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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Abstract. The power of each nation is determined by many factors, including the role of its culture. Culture is seen as an effective tool of soft power to affirm the image of our country in the international community. As one of the originating centers of Asian civilization and one of the largest, oldest civilizations in the world, India's soft power exists naturally in its own long historical culture. The Indian epic is considered to be the source of soft power, the link between the world and Indian culture, helping Indian culture expand its influence on other countries and the world. In this article, we focus on presenting the unique features of thinking, soul, thought, and “Indian spirit” reflected in the epic - the source of Indian culture and the epic continuation in countries in Southeast Asia. Thereby, this article helps its readers have a comprehensive view of the Indian epic - the source of “soft power” of Indian culture in Southeast Asian countries to strengthen and develop the relationship between India and other countries in Southeast Asia more and more sustainably and lasting.

Keywords: epic, soft power, Indian culture, Southeast Asia.

1. Introduction

India is a country with a long tradition of culture, one of the cradles of human civilization. In the constant development and development of world literature, Indian literature has a special place. It is one of the literature with a several-thousand-year-old tradition of history with remarkable achievements, becoming the common spiritual heritage of humanity. From a very early stage, Indian culture and literature had a pervasive influence on many countries' literature around the world. In particular, the Indian epic is considered as the source of soft power, the link between the world and Indian culture, helping Indian culture to expand its influence to other countries and Southeast Asia is the region most deeply and obviously affected.

In epic Indian research, most of the scientists focus on *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Regardless of the research from any angle, the researchers focus on affirming the value of these works with long-lasting vitality and far-reaching influence

Received July 1, 2020. Revised July 14, 2020. Accepted September 5, 2020.

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on many countries in the world with ethical aesthetic concepts, ideal qualities and the aspirations of heroes in work through unique art tactics. *The Heroic Age of India* by Sidhanta, the author studied the similarities and differences between Indian epic and Western epics. The author reconstructed an honest picture of the heroic age of India and believed that “*the purpose of the teaching has dimmed the inspiration of heroic acts*” [16]. Alphonso, John B., Karkala in *An Anthology of Indian literature* introduced some typical excerpts from the great epics of India. The author also compared the similarities and differences in the heroic representation between the Indian epic and the world epic. In assessing the teaching function of epic characters, the author asserted that, “it is the teaching that has a cosmic significance.” [1; 77] *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* upheld the value of Indian epic, “it’s completely comparable to the epic of other nations” [9; 722-723]. *A literary history of India* introduced the basic characteristics of the Indian epic and the influence of the Indian epic [11]. Kate Milner Rabb in *National Epics* asserted that the moral values imbued with Hindu doctrine in the Indian epic created true values for the work and had a profound and lasting influence in the minds of the Indian people [10]. Author Le Xuan Khoa in the *Introduction to Indian Philosophy* has put into his philosophical research work the ideas of Indian philosophy through two great epics that are highly generalized, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. When studying these two epics, the author noticed in them the deep and profound Indian philosophical ideas. The two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* both praise ideal ethics built on the basis of duty and honor. The good deeds of the main characters are all performed on the absolute level [6; 155-156].

In studying the influence of the Indian epic in the cultural, literary and artistic life in India and other countries around the world, Y.Ramesh affirmed the Indian epic, “It transcends the limitations of time, place and circumstances and presents a universal appeal to people speaking different languages, dwelling different countries and having different religious persuasions. The Vedas and the Puranas along with two great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* constitute the solid and enduring foundation of age-long and magnificent edifice of Indian culture and civilization” [12; 2453-2459] and “The excellence of this unique story enchants the hearts of the rich and poor, of the advanced and underprivileged, of the intellectuals and illiterates as well as of the urban and rural people” [12; 2453-2459]. In studying the influence of the Indian epic in Southeast Asian countries, Suryanarayan emphasized, “*Ramayana* is not only the epic of India; it is also the national epic of Indonesia. It had been a perennial source of inspiration in the past and continues to exercise its charm and fascination even today” [16]. A number of research works confirmed the influence of the Indian epic on the culture and literature of Southeast Asian countries in a very powerful way. Vo Quang Nhon in *Through epic, exploring the literary and artistic relationship between Southeast Asia and India* mentioned the influence of the Indian epic, *Ramayana* on the culture and literature of Southeast Asian countries [18.] Author Nguyen Nam in the Introduction of the Anthology of Lao Literature affirmed that many long songs of Southeast Asian countries are written based on the topic of the Indian epic, *Ramayana* [17; 25-26]. In *the process of localization of the Indian Epic, Ramayana in Some Southeast Asian Countries*, the author Do Thu Ha presented elaborately and in detail the reception and creation of the India epic into a literary work with national identity in Southeast Asian

countries. In particular, the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* had a special place in the traditional literature of the nations of this region [4; 54]. In the article *The Wayang Kulit Theater - from ancestor worship to the wayang kulit performance art in Indonesia*, Duc Ninh also affirmed that the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* were exploited by theatrical performers as a performance content of Wayang kulit performance art in Indonesia “from the time of Hindu influence to the present day, as if the puppet performance art is identical with the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*” [3; 258]. Vu Tuyet Loan when referring to the situation of the *Riemker* of Cambodia affirmed the great moral values of the Indian epic, *Ramayana* and its influence on other countries in the world: “*Ramayana* became the epic of many other nations. Each nation expresses it in the voice of its people that is consistent with its religious moral concept [17; 49-50].

2. Content

2.1. Epic - the root of Indian culture

India is one of the earliest cradles of human civilization, the birthplace of major religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, etc. Indian culture is mysterious, massive, and deeply humane. That culture is made up of three intimately and organically interrelated elements: religion - philosophy - art. The religions in India contain philosophical ideas and govern the “read” culture, art, and religion for the written literature. Traditional Indian literature is the exposition of all Hindu doctrinal ideas in the art of words.

In traditional Indian literature, the Mythological period is followed by the epic period. “Few places in the world have such rich and diverse epic treasures as in India” [8; 3]. As a vivid picture, the Indian epic reflects a clear and profound way of the ideological life of the people through the armed conflicts of the kingdoms and between races living in India. At the same time, there are also songs of praise for the heroic victories and ideals of the heroes that Indian people expect and adore. Dharma teachings of Hinduism became the moral and social norm and standard for the majority of Indian people, represented by two great epics of India: *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Both epics are holy to the Indian people. The epic *Mahabharata* has a length of 220,000 verses, and *Ramayana* has a length of nearly 50,000 verses. *Mahabharata* is also called the authentic epic (Itihasa) and *Ramayana* is called the literary epic (Kavya). According to researcher Phan Thu Hien in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata* specifically divided the time of formation and completion of some typical epics of India as follows: “The most important epics are two epics written in Sanskrit: *Mahabharata* (period of formation - completion, from 900 BC to 500 BC according to J.B.Alphonso – Karkala, from 200 BC to 200 BC according to Hopkin, while the majority of the researchers agreed that it was from 500 BC to 500 BC or 400 BC to 400 AD). *Ramayana* (time of formation – completion is from 200 BC to 200 according to DR Kinsley and some researchers, and from 600 BC to 300 BC according to JBAphonso - Karkala and some other researchers) ... two epics written in Tamil: Shilappadikaram (time of formation – completion is from 200 BC to 100 AD); Manimekhalai (time of formation – completion is from 100 BC to 200)” [8; 9] and “if *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* are classical works of Hinduism, Manimekhalai represents the Buddhist ideas and Shilappadikaram help us

understand more about Jainism, which is still strange to us. All four epics give us a better picture of the rich and diverse collection of Indian epics” [8; 11].

For Indian people, the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* written in Sanskrit are sacred pride and the works imbued with the spirit of Dharma teachings, consistent with the mind, aspiration, psychology, and personality of Indian people. The former Prime Minister Jawaharla Nehru remarked, “I don’t know any book anywhere that has such a continuous and pervasive influence on popular thought as these two epics” [5; 156]. Unlike the four volumes of the Veda Sutta, which are popularized only in a few of the Brahmin caste, the two epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* in many different forms have been widely spread in people's lives for decades and are considered as the fifth volume in the Veda Sutta of the Indian nation. These two epics have opened a golden age in the history of Indian literature. Learning about Indian culture and literature, it is impossible not to start from these two epics because it is not only unique literary works of India but also a vibrant culture, showing a unique feature of thought, soul, idea and characteristic of the “Indian spirit”.

India is a large country which has many ethnic groups and legends with the habit of constant thinking and rich imagination, storytellers often collect stories spread in folklore and string to make content richer and longer. In the world, there are few epics with a huge size such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* of India. In particular, the epic *Mahabharata* consists of 110,000 slokas (sloka), 220,000 verses. The epic *Ramayana* is not as voluminous as *Mahabharata* but no less huge with 24,000 slokas. With its vast generalization and monumental context, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* embraced all the ancient Indian culture that was very diverse and profound. Indian people see *Mahabharata* as an “encyclopedia” and often say: Everything in India is contained in *Mahabharata*, anything not included in *Mahabharata* is not found in India.

India is a nation of many religions with a devout spirit, the doctrines of religions are reflected quite deeply in the epics. This makes the Indian epic imbued with teachings and books of Rites and is considered by the Indian people to be the “textbook” of the ethics and morals of the nation. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* both directed people towards acts to do good against evil, to live and act according to the principles of fairness, a charity of Dharma, to uphold the moral ideals and duties of Ksatria. It is in every aspect of the art of organizing works, such as the content knowledge contained in it is lifestyle, morality, the behavioral relations between different classes and caste in Indian society, the duty, responsibility, duty of human according to Dharma teachings, the rules in the relationship of king - mandarins, father-son, wife - husband, elder brother – younger brother, the philosophy of life – death and the world view of the Indian religion. The heroes in the Indian epic are praised for the strength of morality, charity, a sense of honor, loyalty to duty, a willingness to sacrifice personal rights and happiness to ensure order in the kingdom. Those are ideal kings according to the concept of Hinduism.

The ancient Indian people considered these two epics as Bibles saving soul and admonishing people to recite them daily to nourish their souls, much as Christians who must read the Savior's Mirror or the Life of Saints with a sacred belief that: As long as the river is not dry, the stone is not worn, *Ramayana* still fascinates people's hearts and

saves them from their sins. According to the author of the epic *Mahabharata* – Vyasa, “For those who have heard this epic, all their sins committed in their actions, thoughts and words are cleared.”

Although the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* describe the war and the heroes’ victories on the battlefield, it is not the central issue that the epic wants to address. These two epics focus on portraying the conflict between the good and the evil, morality and immorality. When conflict occurs, it must first be reconciled, only if it cannot be reconciled, a war will be waged. The law of war is to ensure fairness and humanity. The ultimate purpose of war must be harmony and peace. That is the “Indian spirit” and the “Indian soul”.

Over thousands of years, not only in India but in all the countries to which the two epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* were introduced into, they aroused profound emotions and purified the soul, “becoming the basis of morality, the national spirit, and gradually spreading throughout the Asian countries influenced by Indian culture and left a strong impression everywhere on many aspects: literature, art, religion, rituals, morality and daily language,...” [8; 23].

In India, the two epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* have a lasting vitality in the hearts and minds of the people. The values of the epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* become the source of never-ending materials and inspirations for literary, artistic, religious, philosophical and ethical works, etc. These are not only unique literary works but also the vibrant culture of the Indian people, “sustaining and guiding the human heart and mind over the past two thousand years and perhaps paralleling with humanity thousands of years in the future” [8; 23].

2.2. Epic - the source of the “soft power” of Indian culture in Southeast Asia

Soft power is the convergent power of each nation and the power for others to voluntarily do what they want deriving from the attraction of culture and the form of consciousness. The soft power of each nation is its own attraction, not coercion. The capacity of each nation is through its own attraction, which is widely accepted not based on military and political power but on the concept of cultural values to deploy the level of influence. It is the ability to make others voluntarily do what you want them to do, “think what you think” and do what you think through the attraction of culture, political thought and policies of a country without the use of measurable powers. Culture is the most important resource and cultural competitiveness is the core content of “soft power”. Therefore, soft power is the “ability to attract, capture and convert other subjects by the attraction of values on culture, institution and policy that are effectively implemented in your country, through which you country may receive sympathy, respect and sustainable cooperation from other countries” [14] in which culture is the core content of “soft power”.

Since ancient times, Southeast Asian literature has embraced two great human cultures, Indian culture and Chinese culture. Due to the conditions of living in the same continent, favorable for road and waterway, the cultural exchange between Southeast Asian countries and India was developed quite early. The peoples of Southeast Asia have creatively received the themes and the Indian art style which combine with the indigenous culture created monumental sculpture and architecture works and rich folk literature with

stories from great Indian literary works of India, “Indian literary works entering Southeast Asia met an extremely lively folk life in Southeast Asia so they are folklore, “reborn” among the folk, enriching the folklore treasures of this region” [2; 33-34].

India is a country with long-standing and close relationships with countries in Southeast Asia. Ancient Indian culture has contributed significantly to the development of culture and literature in Southeast Asia. From the early centuries of AD, with the increasing presence of Indian people in Southeast Asia, Indian culture has spread very widely throughout the countries of Southeast Asia by different routes such as propagating religion and cultural arts without resorting to violence and hegemony. “One of the reasons leading Indian people to Southeast Asia that researchers have given is the growth of population and war among Indian tribes, the spread of Buddhism, commerce..., and the commerce has been considered the most important cause ... the economic motive has given Indian people a desire to venture into the lands of Southeast Asia” [4; 47]. Because the geography and society of the countries in Southeast Asia are not the same, the process of influence of Indian culture - literature on these countries are in different degrees and at different periods.

- *In the literary field of Southeast Asian countries*

Through the spread of scriptures, the teachings of Brahmanism and Buddhism written in Pali and Sanskrit were spread widely and influenced deeply the formation of writing in Southeast Asian countries (except Vietnam) such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos. Many folks and classical works of India also by many ways have been imported and widely disseminated in Southeast Asia.

The Southeast Asian countries fully and creatively acquired themes and artistic styles of India, but through the process of modification and creation, they have made literary works and artistic works with national identity and become the property of their nation. Researcher Duc Ninh commented: “Indian works by word of mouth have been popularized according to ethnic characteristics appropriate to the circumstances of each country. It is because of popularization that the Indian literature works deformed and was different, leaving only the “root” of India. Works created in Southeast Asian countries with Indian origin become deeply nationalistic products and those products naturally become the private property of each nation” [2; 34].

The process of Indian literature localization takes place in Southeast Asia in a lively way, the works of Indian literature are warmly received by Southeast Asian residents. In the massive cultural heritage absorbed from India, the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* coming to Southeast Asian countries occupy a special place. From the Indian epics, residents of Southeast Asia have adapted to the circumstances of their people, becoming the epics of many nations.

In Vietnam, Cham literature still maintains the *Ramayana* long song written in the Cham language. The story *Ho Ton Tinh* in *Linh Nam chich quai* compiled by Tran The Phap was also drawn from the epic *Ramayana*. In which, the character of Prince Rama is Chung Tu, Princess Sita is Bach Tinh, King Daxaratha is Thap Xa, Demon Lord Ravana is the Thap Dau.

In Indonesia, the two epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* had far-reaching influence during the flourishing period of the Srivitgiai dynasty (VII-XIII centuries). In literature

in this period in Indonesia, the literature lines of India, Malaysia, Giavapha mixed, influenced each other and interacted with each other. Based on the Indian epic plot, Indonesian authors wrote works in the form of prose mixed with poetry, added a few more details, rebuilt character personality to suit Indonesian people, to suitable for the art forms of their people. The famous epics have simulated and based on the storyline of the *Mahabharata* epic such as the *Great Battle of Bharatta's descendants* (in ancient Giava), *Arjuna's Wedding*, *Story of Pandava and Bhagavagitta*, etc. The prevalent epic in Giava is *Arjuna's wedding*. The plot of this epic tells the hero Arjuna in the epic *Mahabharata* and became the subject of carvings in temples, especially it was used for the Wayang kulit stage. *Bhagavagitta* works tell about the conversation between Krishna and the brave Arjuna of the Panda family. Besides, the epic *Sri Rama* of Indonesia is composed based on the plot of the epic *Ramayana*.

In Cambodia, the Indian epic was present very early. Taking the plot from the epic *Ramayana*, in Cambodia there is *Reamker*. From the beginning of the tenth century, *Reamker* was known to the carvers. Because before the appearance of images on the rock, *Reamker* was imbued with the thought and artistic acumen of the people of this region.

In Laos, an adaptation of the epic *Ramayana* is the story *Pha Lac Pha Lam*. This is a story based on the plot, taking the name of the characters in *Ramayana* and the place name has been replaced by the place name of Laos.

In Thailand, there is *Ramakien* which is a story simulated from the epic *Ramayana*. The work was composed by King Taksin of the Thonburi Dynasty (adapted into Iakhon - a form of ballet) in the late eighteenth century. King Rama I collected variant versions of *Ramakien*, grouped them into a unified work with 117 volumes and allow to paint pictures of this work on the wall of the Phat Ngoc Pagoda. Up to the time of Rama III, he rewrote this work in 36 episodes with many new details, poetic language, and set up the new *Ramakien* play.

Ramayana's influence in the Philippines is the Alim long song. In 1782, as the new Yagan style of poetry in Myanmar developed, the Utô poet (1751-1796) relied on the epic *Ramayana* to write Yagan about Rama imbued with national identity.

Thus, the literary works in this area also take the motif of the epic *Ramayana* with the theme of the conflict between the Good and the Evil with the trio of characters: Hero - beauty - devil to build works in accordance with their national cultural identity.

- In the art field of Southeast Asian countries

The path of localization of Indian literature is also through many other art forms such as folk performances and theatrical forms of the peoples of Southeast Asia.

In Cambodia, the Epitaph at Veal pagoda (the sixth century AD) showed *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* along with reading the bible. In the Angkor period, *Ramayana* was also often mentioned in epitaphs under Yaxôvarman (899-909) AD and under Rajendravarman (944 - 968); Singing long songs is a type of cultural activity that is popular and attracts the attention and participation of many people. The epic *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been sung by Cambodian artisans in the tone of the simple and lovely Sauyet. In the 11th century, the Cambodian kings enjoyed listening to stories in the epic *Mahabharata*. The king invited artisans to the palace to take care of *Mahabharata* singing work for the king. The *Reamker* is presented in sculpture and

embossment in the form of a mural. In the reliefs of Angkor - a unique art form in the world, there are also traces of the Ramek. The mural work about the *Ramek* is also available at the Silver Pagoda, the Royal Castle, etc. The *Ramek* is also made into a play to both perform and sing to give Cambodian stage a great topic and the main content of the kulit stage.

In Laos, the epic *Ramayana* is also the subject of decorative mural painting art. In order to add respect to the pagodas, the people created the continuous painting system of epic *Pha Lac Pha Lam* at *Up Mung Pagoda* in Vientiane. In addition, it has also become the subject of the classic drama theater of Laos.

In Myanmar, the exploits of the hero Rama in the epic *Ramayana* are performed at puppet shows. In which, the king is considered to be the reincarnation of the hero Rama and the dynasties are also called after the hero Rama.

In Thailand, Indian epics have also become a rich source of themes for the Lakhon "Singing while speaking" theater of Thai.

Vietnamese sculpture influenced by Indian culture is evident in the My Son sanctuary in Ninh Thuan province and the temples scattered throughout South Central and Southern Vietnam. The ancient Vietnamese artisans took inspiration from many Indian religious themes in the two epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* for creation.

- *In the social life of Southeast Asian countries*

Cambodian people consider the ethical manifestations from the figures of the ancient Indian epic, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, as a golden rule to assess the reality of life. When King Ragiendravarman (944 - 968) of the Angkor empire had the merit of building temples of Brahmin architecture, the Khmer people warmly praised with respectful comparisons: "Just like Cuxa (the son of Rama and Sita) who had worked in Ayuthia capital, the king Ragiendravarman restored the Yaxôtharapuri holy city which has been abandoned for a long time, made it beautiful and joyful by constructing magnificent castles with an iridescent gold temple, like the Mahendra palace on the Celestial Palace" [4; 65]. And to profess the admiration to the great poet Vamiki, the author of the epic *Ramayana*, King Vikrantavacman I (653 - 686) built a temple with a separate stele in Tra Kieu - ancient Champa to commemorate Vamiki.

In Thailand, the people named the royal dynasties of the ancient kingdom of Thailand after the hero Rama in *Ramayana* such as "King Rama Khamheng - the famous king of the ancient Ayuthia kingdom in the middle of the 13th century; King Rama Thipadi - the founder of Sukhothai kingdom in 1350; Rama I and Rama II dynasties belonged to the modern Bangkok dynasty; the capital can be called Ayudhya, one of the ancient cities known as Lavapuri in Thailand; Hanuman is mentioned in books in Tibet and in the sculptures in Angkor and Prambanan" [4; 64].

3. Conclusion

From the early centuries of AD, Indian culture, especially the epics, followed its owners to Southeast Asia. Along with religions and rituals, the Indian epic - the source of Indian cultural "soft power" has spread widely and substantively in the cultural life of ancient Southeast Asian nations such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar. Indian culture, including epics, has contributed significantly to the process of

creating ancient nations in Southeast Asia, thanks to the process of cultural acculturation. India's residents of Southeast Asia. The countries of Southeast Asia have based on two Indian epics to create new writings that fit the national nature of each nation. Most ancient Southeast Asian countries consider *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as infinite sources of creative exploitation for literary and artistic works of their nation. Traces of the influence of the Indian epic are still imprinted on the literary and artistic works of Southeast Asian nations, which are still preserved today.

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