

THE EMERGENCE OF THE ANCIENT SOUTH ASIAN EPICS AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDONESIAN FOLKLORE

NASIBAKHON AZIZOVNA ABDUGANIEVA¹, NILUFAR
BEKMURADOVNA KHODJAYEVA², UMIDA
ISMATOVNA ZAKIROVA³, MOKHIRA UMAROVA⁴

¹TASHKENT STATE UNIVERSITY OF ORIENTAL STUDIES, TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

²TASHKENT STATE UNIVERSITY OF ORIENTAL STUDIES, TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

³TASHKENT STATE UNIVERSITY OF ORIENTAL STUDIES, TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

⁴TASHKENT STATE UNIVERSITY OF ORIENTAL STUDIES, TASHKENT, UZBEKISTAN

Abstract

This article delves into the remarkable emergence of ancient Indian epics, particularly the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and their significant influence on the development of Indonesian folklore. It examines how these epic narratives traveled through cultural exchanges, particularly via trade routes and maritime interactions, leading to the assimilation of Indian literary traditions into Southeast Asian storytelling. The study highlights the narrative structures, character archetypes, and moral allegories that align Indian epics with Indonesian folklore. It discusses the adaptation of central themes such as duty, honor, and the cosmic struggle between good and evil, which resonate deeply within Indonesian cultural contexts. Furthermore, the article analyzes various forms of folklore in Indonesia, such as wayang kulit (shadow puppetry) and oral storytelling traditions, illustrating how they reflect the influence of Indian epics while also showcasing local adaptations and innovations. This interaction resulted in a rich tapestry of narratives that blend indigenous beliefs with Indian mythology. By investigating this cross-cultural exchange, the article enhances our understanding of how ancient texts can shape and enrich local traditions, fostering a diverse yet interconnected cultural landscape. Ultimately, it posits that the legacy of these ancient Indian epics continues to resonate in contemporary Indonesian storytelling, highlighting the enduring power of literature to transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

Keywords: Ramayana and Mahabharata, Seri Rama, wayang kulit, Indonesian folklore, Southeast Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Beginning from the first centuries of our era, India had a tremendous impact on the political, social, and cultural development of the peoples of Southeast Asia. Under its influence, early states took shape, writing systems emerged. The origin and value of the Mahabharata in India and the world.

The Mahabharata is one of the most significant epics in Indian mythology and literature. Its origins can be traced back to ancient India.

The Mahabharata is believed to have been composed by the sage Vyasa, and it is one of the longest epic poems in the world, consisting of over 100,000 verses.

The Mahabharata is not only a tale of war and conflict but also a compendium of moral and ethical teachings, philosophical discourses.

The value of the Mahabharata extends beyond its cultural and historical significance in India.

The Mahabharata, on the other hand, is the longest epic poem in the world and is a complex tale of family rivalry and conflict. The epic is filled with philosophical and moral dilemmas and has been a source of inspiration for countless works of literature and art. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text within the Mahabharata, has had a profound impact on the world's literature and philosophy, addressing themes such as duty, righteousness, and the nature of reality.

The epic poem, Ramayana, holds a significant place in Indian literature and culture. It is considered one of the greatest epics of ancient India and has been treasured for centuries. The origins of Ramayana can be traced back to the ancient Indian tradition of storytelling and song, with its first written record believed to date back to around 500 BCE. The story has been orally passed down through generations before being written down.

Ramayana is attributed to the sage Valmiki, who is believed to have composed the epic in Sanskrit. The poem narrates the story of Prince Rama, his wife Sita, The narrative also introduces Ravana, the antagonist, and the ten-headed demon king who abducts Sita, leading to a grand battle between good and evil.

Moreover, the epic has played a crucial role in shaping the cultural and social fabric of India. Its influence is evident in various art forms, including dance, music, and theater. The influence of Ramayana extends beyond the borders of

India, reaching other parts of Southeast Asia, where the epic has also been adapted and revered in various forms. Both of these epics have had a lasting influence on literature around the world. Their universal themes and enduring moral lessons continue to resonate with readers across different cultures and time periods. The stories of love, loyalty, and heroism found in these epics have inspired countless authors and playwrights to create their own works based on the themes and characters of the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

In addition to inspiring individual works of literature, the Indian epics have also played a significant role in shaping literary traditions in different parts of the world. For example, the influence of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata can be seen in the works of classical Greek and Roman writers, as well as in the literature of Southeast Asia, Japan, and the Middle East. The enduring popularity of these epics is a testament to their universal appeal and the profound impact they have had on global literary traditions.

Southeast Asia is one of the oldest cultural regions in the East. The influence of Hindu culture came to Indonesia and Malaysia in the first millennium BCE through trade routes between India and China, which mainly passed through Sumatra and Java, partially reaching Bali in Indonesia. Eastern Sumatra, the island of Java, and the island of Bali embraced and adapted both Buddhist and Hindu cultures/ The island of Java, in particular, experienced the greatest influence of Hindu religion and philosophy on art and architecture.

The ancient Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, have had a profound influence on literature across the world. Their universal themes and enduring moral lessons have inspired countless authors and playwrights to create their own works based on the stories and characters found in these epics. The influence of these epics can be seen in literary traditions across different cultures and time periods, making them an integral part of the global literary canon. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, two great epics from ancient Indian texts, have had a profound influence on the folklore of Southeast Asia. These epics were not just literary masterpieces, but also became a source of wisdom, morality, identity, and cultural values for the peoples of the region.

Literary adaptations: Various versions of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been adapted into local languages and retold taking into consideration the traditions and characteristics of each culture in the region. This has allowed these epics to remain alive and relevant for centuries.

"Hikayat Seri Rama" is the Malay Indonesian adaptation of the Hindu Epic Ramayan, a story of Sri Ram and the victory of good over evil. "Hikayat Seri Rama" is Malaysia's unofficial National Epic. In the literature, they have converted the story of Hindu Ramayan as per Malay's context. In the story, Lakshmana plays an important role. Sri Ram is portrayed as a righteous and virtuous prince, but he was rather perceived to be weaker and his character is often moved to the background while the younger Laksman is admired for his courage and willingness to react in a decisive manner».

2. Art and theater: Various forms of art, such as singing, dancing, mask-making, and theater, have been inspired by the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Theatrical productions and festive performances based on the plots of these epics have become an integral part of the region's cultural heritage.

3. Music and dance: Many folk songs and dances in Southeast Asia have roots in the narratives of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These traditional arts serve not only for entertainment but also for the preservation of cultural heritage and values propagated in the epics.

4. Folklore motifs and images: Many characters and motifs from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have become part of the folk history and everyday life in Southeast Asia. These symbols serve as objects of pride and admiration, as well as lessons in morality and ethics for local communities.

Indian literature has had a significant influence on the formation and development of Indonesian folklore. This is because India, due to its cultural and trade activity, had contact with the islands of Indonesia for many centuries. During these contacts, Indian epics, myths, and legends penetrated the local culture, influencing the traditions and beliefs of the local inhabitants.

However, it is important to consider that Indonesian culture and literature were also influenced by many other cultures, including Arabic, European, and local austronesian traditions. As a result, modern Indonesian culture and literature are a unique synthesis, in which Indian influence is just one component.

Indonesian folklore existed in many languages and dialects, such as Javanese, Malay, Sundanese, and Madurese. Nevertheless, it was mostly written in Malay, which spread among all the peoples of Indonesia, being understood without translation and becoming the "common" language of Indonesia during that period. Islam, Buddhism, and animism also influenced the formation of Indonesian fairy tales, which is reflected in the richness of themes and characters in these stories. It is also worth noting that Indonesian fairy tales play an important role in preserving and transmitting traditional values and norms of behavior between generations.

The ancient Indian epics, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, have left an indelible mark on the folklore of Southeast Asia. Their themes, characters, and narrative techniques have been woven into the fabric of storytelling traditions across the region. The influential power of these epics lies in their timeless and universal messages, transcending borders and fostering a sense of cultural unity among diverse communities. The enduring legacy of the Indian epics in Southeast Asian folklore serves as a testament to the transformative nature of literature and its ability to shape and unite societies.

CONCLUSIONS

Literature is another historical proof that Indonesian or Indian peoples, as we see from the example of oral tradition, are a leading instrument in the relations between nations at the global level.

The ancient Indian epic has integrated so deeply into Indonesian culture that the ancient Indian epic "Mahabharata" has been translated into Indonesian language and has its own version (slightly different from the Indian one), adapted

for the Indonesian people. Separate scenes from the "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" have served as a play for shadow puppet shows called "wayang kulit". Thanks to wayang, the ancient Indian epics "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata" have spawned numerous variations in the Malay Archipelago. In areas populated by Malays, the "Ramayana" transformed into the "Tale of Seri Rama", and the "Mahabharata" into the "Story of the Victorious Pandavas". In addition to this, there is the ancient Javanese version of the "Ramayana" and various narratives that trace back to the ancient Indian "Mahabharata".

Thanks to the influence of the ancient Indian epics "Ramayana" and "Mahabharata," countless variations have emerged in the islands of the Malay Archipelago. In territories inhabited by Malays, "Ramayana" has transformed into "The Tale of Seri Rama," and "Mahabharata" has become "The Story of the Victorious Pandavas." Additionally, there is a known ancient Javanese version of the "Ramayana" and various narratives originating from the ancient Indian "Mahabharata."

It is currently difficult to confirm the exact factor or event that led to the fame and popularity of the Ramayana and Mahabharata among the Indonesian people.

Perhaps, that is why the epic "Mahabharata" has been translated into Javanese, which is considered the oldest language in Indonesia. The special emphasis on the Javanese language is due to the fact that later, under its influence, literature also appeared in Sundanese and Madurese languages. Literature of the peoples of Sumatra and Sulawesi was also strongly influenced by Malay and Arabic literary arts.

The growing popularity of the Indian epic among the Indonesian people did not go unnoticed in Indonesian folklore. By the 13th century, during the Majapahit kingdom, the epic of their national hero's adventures was widely spread among the Indonesian people. And this first national epic was called "King Randjy". Randjy proves his heroism and achieves his goal through his long adventure.

The Indian epic was initially popular in Bali, where the works were presented as drama through dance. In essence, the hero of the epic won on the battlefield and conquered the hearts of women.

When it comes to local literature, it should be noted that although the epics "Mahabharata" and "Ramayana" were borrowed from the Indians, they are undoubtedly perceived by the Indonesian people as their own artistic values. For example, 2774 lines of the Ramayana epic were translated from Sanskrit to ancient Javanese language. Scripts based on this text were performed in shadow and puppet theaters (Wayang kulit), and dances were created based on them.

Borobudur, the greatest of the Buddhist temples in Indonesia, rises in central Java and has a height of 114 feet. The stones used in the construction of this massive religious space were carefully given the necessary form, and ancient Javanese carvings decorate them. On the frontal walls of Borobudur, there are depictions of Buddha, and inscriptions dedicated to the lives and activities of famous rulers testify that this monument represents not only a national but also a human value. These ten stages also took place in Mahayana Buddhism and the history of ruling dynasties. Moreover, Hindu and Buddhist sanctuaries on larger islands such as Prambanan, Mendut, Dieng, and Pateu Bisakin were architecturally logical extensions of Borobudur.

In Indonesian culture, shadow theater (wayang kulit) holds a very important place, and in this theatrical performance, the heroic battles of Rama in Sri Lanka and the salvation of his beloved Sita from the REIGN of evil are depicted convincingly. Shadow theater also interprets the life and works of Lord Rama with some changes in the spirit of Malay and Indonesian traditions. Some of these changes in epic themes were made before Malays embraced Islam.

Regarding the Indonesian versions of "Ramayana," it should be noted that neither the text of the epic nor its staged scripts contain such religious and philosophical concepts as Dharma, Karma, or Moksha in Hinduism and Buddhism.

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