

Ramayana as India's Soft Power

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ABSTRACT

Nation is not only the geographical entity but it is a vibrant and evolving sum of its living beings, culture, values, deep rooted beliefs which leads to culminating into the wellbeing of all. The cultural values assimilated over centuries by human beings of a nation state entity has undeniable role in shaping the outlook and approach towards the human society at large. India with its rich heritage has left a permanent mark on many other civilizations across the world and more so in immediate South East Asian region. The soft power of India's rich traditional yet contemporary cultural and religious values has deeply influenced a vast majority of human civilization, far and wide across the globe. A very basic attempt is being made through this paper to understand the influence epic Ramayana as one of India's soft power tools in shaping the thinking and practice by societies in neighboring South East Asian countries since ages till date.

Keywords : Soft Power, Indian culture, Ramayana, Angkor Temple, Khmer Rulers, Hikayet Seri Rama, Phra Lak Phra Lam, Linguistic weed.

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INTRODUCTION

The Indian epic Ramayana or the Rama folklore has been an essential part of day today life of Indian society since ages. Apart from influencing the value system of Indian population, this has civilizational influence upon India's Southeast Asia since the early centuries of the Christian era. Countries in Southeast Asia region have adopted different narratives, techniques and dramatizations of Lord Rama as an ideal figure of humanity, although the moral remains the same. As per Indian mythological perspective, the name of Rama has exceptional power. The three

syllables (Rama) stand for fire, light and tranquility. It is believed that by chanting the name of Rama, person gets rid of sins, darkness negatively affecting thought process vanishes and emotional turbulence of the one chanting Rama is replaced by peace and calm. This essence of the Rama story is reflective in various manifestations of Ramayana across the globe, particularly Southeast Asia, and is largely influenced by the Indian culture which has shaped the destiny of people of India since time immemorial.

In India, the story of Rama has been constantly written, narrated and retold in poetic and dramatic versions by many of India's greatest Sanskrit writers such as Bhasa, Kalidasa, Bhavabhuti and other writers, who have moved to emulate Valmiki. But for the ordinary people who are ignorant of Sanskrit language, Ramayana was composed in other Indian vernacular languages also. The main regional Indian languages have their own classic versions, the most famous being the ones written by Tulsidas in Hindi and by Kampan in Tamil.

The Ramayana is also one of the staples of later dramatic traditions, as in the Bh and the Kathakali dance dramas of South India, in puppet or shadow-puppet theatres (mostly in parts of Karnataka, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Odisha) in the annual Ramlila's or plays enacting Rama's deeds of North India. It forms an integral part of every Indian's lives, belief's, religion and language.

Scholars believe that Hinduism came to Southeast Asia in around 200 BC through the traders from the eastern part of India. Initially, the influence of Hinduism was mainly concentrated around Java and Sumatra (Indonesia and Malaysia). It was around the same period that the Khmer rulers of Cambodia started adopting Hindu practices. By the eighth century, they became completely Indianized, adopting Sanskrit names, Hinduism, adopting Ramayana and building Hindu temples.

The Southeast Asian Ramayana is greatly influenced by versions of Ramayana in Sanskrit, Tamil, and Pali languages. The Thai Kings are called Rama (Kings of Thailand) - from the Hindu god Rama and their old kingdom was called Ayutthya drawing the name from the Rama's city (Ayodhya). The official symbol of Indonesia is Garuda Pancasila (the carrier of Rama).

Furthermore, the festivals and culture of Laos, Malaysia, Indonesia are influenced to a large extent by Ramayana elements. Similarly, the Angkor temples of Cambodia have a large number of Ramayana sculptures. The Malay version – "Hikayat Seri Rama" used to be pretty popular there until the arrival of

Islam. The national epic of Laos is Phra Lak Phra Lam (meaning the story of Rama). Balinese, native of Indonesian island of Bali, have elaborated in great details, the Hindu festivals centered around life of Lord Rama.

Between India and Thailand, there are cultural vernacular pieces of evidence of friendship. The literary works such as the folklore (Mukha Patha), the Yonok chronicle in Northern Thailand (Bhongsavodarn Yonok), the painting of Mahabharata and Ramayana which are engraved on the stone ruins are found in many historical places including the Pimay castle of Thailand.

The name Indonesia comes from the same source as India - Indus River as the Indians began to have a big influence there 1500 years ago. Singapore is a Sanskrit word meaning the city of the lion. Sumatra comes from the Sanskrit word Samudra (meaning sea). Java comes from the Sanskrit word Yava (meaning barley). Siam (the official name of Thailand until 1939) comes from the Sanskrit word - Shyama (meaning brown).

This paper argues that it is the cultural influence which is constitutive of India's soft power in the region and should be encouraged and exploited strategically for good. From the happenings in history since many centuries in the past, India and South East Asia can be best described as 'civilizational neighbors. The paper argues for cultural tourism wherein Ramayana circuit can also serve as a framework for our relations with the outside world. As we know, there is a lot of emphasis today on cultural tourism, which is defined as the events and relations formed by the special interest travels for the purpose of knowing about historical places and events. It involves visiting of cultural and natural resources, historically important preserved places, iconic structures, museums full of priceless treasures, ancient cities or such other historical values that are unique from the point of science and culture. It also gives opportunity for attending to theaters, cinemas, art galleries or festivals. The cultural tourism, which increases the interaction between different cultures,

makes shared values meet on the same platform, develops positive images and relations of the societies. Cultural tourism prevents decay and ceasing of local - cultural values against globalization, which also includes tourism and culture sectors. A case of cultural tourism, particularly that of pilgrimage and Ramayana and the Buddhist tourism is an opportunity to connect India to the region of Southeast Asia.

Soft Power - In the discipline of international relations, soft power is primarily studied and interpreted with reference to politico-diplomatic, economic and commercial as also security-oriented realities that consistently shape them. Traditional International relations have been engrossed into what we call power politics and have undermined the socio-cultural factors in its analysis and interpretation. However, today there is an expanding literature on the international aspects of identity politics which focuses on transnational ties. More direct work on the relationship between culture and international politics is also emerging, often examining the role of culture in international negotiations.

The importance of culture as a soft power was highlighted in 1990s by Joseph Nye, who contended that culture can be a source of power. He incorporated culture and other factors in his concept popularly known as 'soft power', which he espoused in his book "Bound to Lead". Nye's presumption is that off late, hard power i.e., by using force as the only effective means for getting what one wants in world politics has been eroding. In contemporary mainstream scholarship and foreign-policy circles, it is Nye's account that has captured imaginations. Perhaps this is because Nye does more than just call attention to soft power; he also treats it as a platform for action, arguing that actors have, can and should continue to find ways to effectively develop and use this power resource.

In crux, soft power focuses more on attraction coupled with mutual respect rather than coercion. Soft power has become a very popular concept in international affairs. Ever since Joseph Nye coined it

in 1990 the term has frequently appeared in government policy studies, academic discussions, and the popular media. According to Nye, soft power is "the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments". This ability to affect what other countries want tends to be associated with intangible power resources such as culture, ideology, and institutions. He further contends that the soft power of a country has three primary sources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority). Nye mentions that soft power also includes the ability to shape international institutions and agendas, which actually can be seen as part of his reference to legitimate foreign policies. In this definition, the traditional components of power i.e., military, economic, and technological strength would be sources of hard power. Nye makes a clear-cut distinction between how soft and hard powers are used. Hard power is evident in the practices of threat, coercion, sanction, payment, and inducement, whereas soft power is demonstrated in attraction, persuasion, appeal and co-option. In Nye's words, "when you can get others to admire your ideals and to want what you want, you do not have to spend as much on sticks and carrots to move them in your direction."

The Ramayana Story - The Ramayana, or tales of Rama, is an ancient Indian epic that spread from India to various parts of Southeast Asia. Of immense significance to Hindus, its protagonist Rama is considered to be an avatar (incarnation) of the Lord Vishnu (one of Hinduism's Holy Trinity of gods who descended to earth in ten avatars), and the epic relates the major events in Rama's life, from his birth to his death.

The representation of the Ramayana in the visual arts gained popularity not only for its lively narrative possibilities, but also because performance of the epic is considered a holy and auspicious act of devotion.

Illustrations of the Ramayana can be found in a variety of media and contexts, ranging from temple carvings and manuscript illustrations to masks, puppets, textiles, and, most recently, in film and television. Ramayana's popularity continues unhindered and in present day it is very aptly exhibited at Herbert F. Johnson Museum, Cornell University, New York and in private collections of people. It is so due to inspiration by this favorite narrative of Rama in the arts of India, Indonesia, and Southeast Asia. The flexibility of the narrative lends itself well to adaptation into diverse cultures and regions, as seen in the Mughal, Rajput and Paithan paintings of India, temple arts of Thailand, shadow puppets from India and Indonesia, and story cloths from Bali exhibited here.

The original text of the Ramayana was written in Sanskrit; however, the epic has undergone transformation all along its travels within India and throughout Southeast Asia, where different versions exist in local languages. Though the broad narrative remains consistent, regional variations are to be found, with some episodes being omitted while others are elaborated upon or made relevant to local contexts. That the epic has been a rich source of inspiration for over a millennium, and continues to be so, is telling of its consistent appeal, rooted in the universality of its themes that address love, loyalty, valor, morality, strife, victory, and human frailty.

Colonization and Trading - The Indo-Chinese peninsula was known as Suvarnabhumi or Suvarnadvipa, the land or island of gold. Indians traveled to the Far East through the land or sea routes. The land route was through Bengal, Manipur, Assam, and Burma. Regarding the sea-routes, one could start from Tamluk in Midnapore, Bengal and proceed along the coasts of Bengal, Burma, Malay Peninsula, Java etc. or start from Gopalpur (Odisha), Masulipatnam and sail across the Bay of Bengal to the Far East. Trades induced by the mineral, metals wealth were the primary reasons for this intercourse between India and the Far East. Over time trade led to political and

cultural relations. Trade relations may have begun around 200-300 BC. Local traditions refer to the establishment of political authority by Indians over most of South-East Asia. According to Burmese chronicles, a prince of the Kapilavastu (in Nepal) marched into upper Burma and set himself as King. The founder of Ligor in the Malay Peninsula was supposed to be a descendant of Asoka. According to Cambodian annals an exiled prince of Indraprastha founded the kingdom of Cambodia. In 132 the King of Java, Devawarman sent an ambassador to China. Around the first century CE, Kaudinya founded a kingdom in Cambodia. Around 200, the kingdom passed on to his general Fan Che Man who conquered Thailand, parts of Malaysia. Sri-mara, ruler of Champa or Annam was first king about the second century CE. The Hindu kings are known from Chinese sources, to have their names begin with Fan (Varman). Fan Huong, king of Champa around 270 CE continued the policy of extending his kingdom at the cost of the Chinese.

The transmission of Indian culture to distant parts of Central Asia, China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and especially Southeast Asia is certainly one of the greatest achievements of Indian history or even of the history of mankind. None of the other great civilizations - not even the Hellenic - had been able to achieve a similar success without military conquest. In this brief survey of India's history, there is no room for an adequate discussion of the development of the 'Indianized' states of Southeast Asia which can boast of such magnificent temple cities as the Borobudur (Java, early ninth century CE), Angkor (Cambodia; constructed from 889 to c. 1300 CE), and Pagan (Burma; constructed from 1044 to 1287 CE). Though they were influenced by Indian culture, they are nevertheless part of the history of those respective countries.

Ramayana's role in carving out an Asian identity - The Ramayana, an ancient Sanskrit epic from India, is generally believed to surpass other works of world literature in its popularity, influence and longevity.

For more than 2,000 years, Ramayana - the tale of Prince Rama's life and exploits - has spread across the world and inspired retelling by saints, poets, scholars and performers for generations. In South East Asia and East Asia, the story was creatively adapted to reflect local cultures, beliefs and practices, and with globalization, the growing interest in the epic has spread all over the world. Ramayana the ancient epic remains relevant and meaningful even in the modern times. The epic is a powerful metaphor, but its message is simple, the triumph, in the face of overwhelming odds of Dharma over Adharma or of Good over Evil.

Cultural Life:- Ramayana pervades the cultural life of South Asia and South East Asia in one form or another at all times. It appears in literature, in music, dance and drama, in painting and sculpture in classical and folk traditions and in all Asian languages. Ramayana's appeal is broad and widespread. The Ramayana remains one of the most popular and influential narratives in South Asia, South East Asia and beyond, with mounting interest in its academic study around the world.

Originating in a very distant past as a corpus of tales, it received its earliest coherent form as a literary epic in Sanskrit under the genius of the sage Valmiki, the Adi Kavi or 'First Poet' and his Ramayana came to be known as the Adi Kavya, the first poem. Since then, innumerable versions have been composed, long and short, faithful to Valmiki or with alterations, in Sanskrit and in other languages, within India and outside. Ramayana is successfully adapted in the art forms and traditions of Thai, Khmer, Malay, Balinese and Javanese (Indonesian) centuries ago. Ramayana has broken the geographical and linguistic barriers. Different characters of the epic resonate differently in different cultures.

Conclusion :- Academicians of repute all over world have their own understanding and explanation of soft power strength which has emerged over a period of

time in the progress of human civilization. It has influenced life of societies in nation states to a large extent. This has led to relations and respect between nations with shared cultural values. In this paper an attempt has been made to understand some details of rich Indian culture and its soft power strength and influence. It can be said without any hesitation that India's soft power through ages due to personality of Lord Rama as depicted in Ramayana verses has molded the day today life of living human beings not only in India but also in neighboring South East Asian countries. There cannot be any ambiguity if it is said that influence of Ramayana from time immemorial has shaped value based healthy International Relationship of Southeast Asian countries with India.

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