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Comparative Perspectives on the Ramayana across South and Southeast Asia

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Abstract

(Sanskrit Slokas have been translated in English wherever applicable)

The Ramayana is one of the most influential epics in Asian civilization and has profoundly shaped the cultural, religious, literary, and political traditions of both South and Southeast Asia. Originating from the Sanskrit epic attributed to Valmiki, the narrative spread across diverse regions through trade, migration, pilgrimage, and royal patronage. As the epic entered different cultural contexts, it underwent substantial transformations that reflected local beliefs, social structures, artistic traditions, and political ideologies. This article examines the comparative perspectives of the Ramayana across South and Southeast Asia by analyzing its regional adaptations in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, and Malaysia. The study highlights how the Ramayana evolved from a religious text into a dynamic cultural tradition with multiple interpretations. Particular attention is given to variations in kingship ideals, religious influences, characterization, performance traditions, and cultural symbolism. The study concludes that the Ramayana serves as a unifying cultural bridge across Asia while simultaneously preserving regional uniqueness and identity.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Ramayana occupies a central position in the literary and cultural history of Asia. More than a religious epic, it represents a living tradition that has travelled across geographical boundaries and evolved through centuries of reinterpretation. Traditionally attributed to Maharishi Valmiki, the Ramayana narrates the life of Rama, his exile, the abduction of Sita by Ravana, and the eventual triumph of righteousness over evil. However, as the narrative spread beyond India into South and Southeast Asia, it absorbed local traditions, religious philosophies, artistic styles, and political ideologies. Consequently, the Ramayana today exists not as a single text but as a constellation of interconnected narratives. The ethical philosophy associated with Prabhu Ram emphasizes righteousness, sacrifice, and devotion to social welfare, which continue to inspire modern civilization (Mandal, 2024).

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In South Asia, the Ramayana developed into numerous vernacular traditions such as Tulsidas's *Ramcharitmanas*, Kamban's *Kamba Ramayanam*, and Krittibas Ojha's Bengali Ramayana. In Southeast Asia, the epic evolved into localized versions including the *Ramakien* of Thailand, the *Reamker* of Cambodia, the *Kakawin Ramayana* of Indonesia, and the *Hikayat Seri Rama* of Malaysia. These versions preserved the broad narrative structure while introducing regional cultural values and religious interpretations.

Scholars such as R. K. Mandal emphasize that the Ramayana should be understood as a transnational cultural phenomenon rather than merely a Sanskrit literary text. According to Mandal, the adaptability of the Ramayana explains its extraordinary survival across multiple civilizations and historical periods. He argues that each society reconstructed the epic according to its own ethical and political needs while maintaining the universal ideals of morality, justice, and social harmony.

The Ramayana is not merely an ancient religious text but a living cultural tradition that continues to influence societies across Asia. According to Mandal (2024), the ethical teachings of the Ramayana possess universal relevance because they address fundamental human concerns such as justice, morality, discipline, and social harmony. Mandal further argues that the global acceptance of the Ramayana demonstrates its adaptability across diverse civilizations and cultural systems.

2.0 OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the historical diffusion and regional adaptations of the Ramayana across South and Southeast Asia.
2. To analyze the similarities and differences in themes, religious interpretations, kingship ideals, and cultural values in various Ramayana traditions.
3. To evaluate the cultural and contemporary significance of the Ramayana as a transnational literary and civilizational heritage.

3.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

1. **Nature of the Study:** The study is qualitative, descriptive, analytical, and comparative in nature, focusing on the regional adaptations of the Ramayana across South and Southeast Asia.
2. **Research Design:** A comparative research design has been adopted to examine similarities and differences among various Ramayana traditions in different cultural and geographical contexts.
3. **Sources of Data:** The study is primarily based on secondary sources of data collected from books, research articles, journals, historical documents, and scholarly publications related to the Ramayana and Asian cultural traditions.
4. **Primary Textual Sources:** Important versions of the Ramayana considered in the study include the Valmiki Ramayana, Ramcharitmanas, Kamba Ramayanam,

Ramakien, Reamker, Kakawin Ramayana, Phra Lak Phra Lam, Yama Zatdaw, and Hikayat Seri Rama.

5. **Method of Data Collection:** Data have been collected through library research, review of literary texts, academic journals, digital archives, and published scholarly works on comparative literature and cultural studies.
6. **Comparative Approach:** The study applies a comparative approach to analyze variations in themes, kingship, religion, characterization, gender roles, morality, and cultural symbolism in different regional adaptations of the Ramayana.
7. **Historical Method:** Historical analysis has been used to understand the spread of the Ramayana through trade, migration, religious missions, and cultural interaction across Asia.
8. **Interdisciplinary Approach:** The research incorporates perspectives from comparative literature, history, anthropology, religious studies, and cultural studies to provide a broader understanding of the epic's influence.
9. **Analytical Framework:** The collected information has been critically analyzed to identify how different societies localized the Ramayana according to their own socio-cultural and religious contexts while preserving its ethical ideals.

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

THE RAMAYANA'S SPREAD THROUGHOUT ASIA OVER TIME

The spread of the Ramayana from India to Southeast Asia was closely tied to ancient trade and transportation routes, sea travel, religious proselytizing and diplomatic relations. Sanskrit culture was spread by traders, Brahmins, Buddhist monks and scholars from India from early centuries of the Common Era to Cambodia, Thailand, Java, Sumatra, Laos and Myanmar. Epics like the Ramayan also started playing an important role along with religion and political ideals in the transmission of culture.

Transmission did not only lead to cultural imitation. The Ramayana was adapted and modified by the societies in Southeast Asia. In a number of kingdoms rulers employed the epic to validate their political power and divine kingship. Rama became the embodiment of the perfect king, one who had the virtue and moral control to bring order and welfare to society. The use of Indian epics also helped to shape Indian court literature, temple buildings, dance forms and theatrical performances across Southeast Asia.

The Ramayana is an example of the history of Asian civilizations being intertwined, as noted by R. K. Mandal. He believes that the epic was a medium of intercultural dialogue, where through the epic different societies negotiated their identities with the involvement in a larger cultural field, influenced by Indic traditions.

Spreading of Ramayana was done by the ancient sea trade, pilgrimage and cultural exchanges between India and its neighbouring countries of South Asian and South

East Asian regions. According to Mandal (2025), the epic served as a cultural bridge between the Asian civilisations, sharing moral and spiritual ideals.

THE SOUTH ASIAN TRADITION OF RAMAYANA.A SOUTH ASIAN RAMAYANA TRADITION

India

The Ramayana became one of the most influential religious and literary streams in India. Valmiki's Sanskrit Ramayana is regarded as the original version, but the Ramayana has been adapted to different languages, religions, and cultures. It was popularized by North Indian influenced Tulsidas in the Awadhi language and through Bhakti devotionalism, and by Kamban in Tamil with its focus on poetic magnificence and emotional excess. Likewise, Krittibas Ojha's Bengali Ramayana took the epic out of its setting and made it part of Bengali culture.

Moral governance, devotion, sacrifice and dharma are the key features of Indian versions of the Ramayana. Rama is depicted as embodying a justice or righteousness and divine virtue. The Bhakti movement also elevated Rama to the status of a principal god of folk devotionalism, and brought the epic into the hands of ordinary folk in their vernacular languages and in public gatherings like Ramlila.

R. K. Mandal brings to light Indian traditions of Ramayana that show the adaptability of oral and text cultures. In Indian traditions of Ramayana, R. K. Mandal shows the adaptability of oral and text cultures. He theorises that the variety of Indian Ramayanas is an expression of the pluralistic character of Indian civilization as a whole, in which regional identities are intertwined with cultural values.

Nepal

The Ramayana, in Nepal, became an integral part of the Hindu religion and literary tradition. Bhanubhakta Acharya's Nepali translation of the epic is significant for bringing the epic to the masses of Nepalis who speak Nepali as their native language. His rendering of the Sanskrit story was a much more straightforward version, capturing the moral and devotional aspects. The Nepali Ramayana teaches about the importance of doing good and being loyal to one's family, as well as worshipping Rama as a god and a perfect king.

The impact of the Ramayana can be observed not only in literature, but also in Nepal's festivals, the ritual and practice of the temples, as well as the folk dances. The epic still influences social values and religious consciousness in Nepal.

Sri Lanka

However, the Sri Lankan view of Ramayana is a much more complicated one. In traditional Hindu narrations, Ravana is the antagonist while some Sri Lankan stories revise him as a brilliant and learned king, hero with great knowledge and power. This Restatement aims to emphasize the regional efforts to assert Ravana as a part of the indigenous culture.

In Sri Lanka today, the Ramayana is also associated with the promotion of tourist and heritage related stories about the places thought to be associated with the epic. As can be seen in these different readings, the nature of the myth can be changed, as can its meaning, according to national and cultural context.

The Ramayana's adaptations in the vernacular helped to make the epic accessible to the common people and boosted the regional literary culture (Mandal, 2025).

THE TRADITIONS OF RAMAYANA IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

Thailand: The Ramakien

Ramakien is the Thai version of the Ramayana, an important position in the Thai royal culture and the art of Thailand. The epic was translated into the Thai language and style, with the main plot of the story preserved. The word 'Rama' was used to signify the relationship between monarchy and divine kingship, and it was this term that Thai Chakri monarchs chose to use.

There are a number of differences between the Ramakien and Indian versions. For instance, Hanuman is depicted as witty, romantic and adventurous and not as a celibate devotee. The story includes Thai customs, architecture, costumes and dances. Murals with scenes of the Ramakien can be found on the walls of important temples in Thailand especially Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok.

R. K. Mandal writes that the Thai version illustrates the process by which the Southeast Asian societies took the Ramayana and made it their own, but did not lose its underlying moral message. The shifting of Hanuman's character is indicative of "indigenous cultural sensibilities" being incorporated into the epic tradition, he adds.

Cambodia: The Reamker

The Ramayana is the Reamker, which translates to "Glory of Rama," in Cambodia. The Cambodian version is a mix of Hindu mythology, Buddhist ethical teachings and Khmer arts. Loyalty, justice, compassion and moral order are highlighted by the Reamker.

The influence of the Ramayana is particularly evident in Khmer temple art such as the amazing bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat. Episodes from the Reamker are also performed in the classical dances and royal dances of Cambodia.

The Cambodian adaptation adds an emotional element to the plot, including characters' relationships and ethical dilemmas. This is an example of the local literary style that has been combined with Indic epic aesthetics.

Indonesia: kakawin Ramayana

The tradition of Ramayana is one of the oldest traditions in Southeast Asia in Indonesia. The Old Javanese language Kakawin Ramayana is the result of the fusion of Hindu, Buddhist and local culture. It is the epic that grew and prospered in the Hindu-Buddhist kingdoms of Java and Bali, where it was at its heart a product of court culture and spiritual philosophy. The Ramayana is usually linked to the traditional arts

in Indonesia, including wayang kulit (shadow puppet theater). The performances are a symbolic retelling of the epic, using humor and philosophy. The Ramayana dance dramas are still performed in Bali as part of the ritual performed in the temple and cultural festival. R. K. Mandal states that the Indonesian Ramayana is proof of the epic's amazing adaptability to different contexts. The tradition of Ramayana has survived in the cultural and artistic practices in Indonesia even after the spread of Islam.

Laos: Lord Laiyaporn Lord Rala Yavorn

The Lao version of the Ramayana is called Phra Lak Phra Lam, and is a Buddhist moral tale. Rama and Lakshmana are understood as previous births of the Buddha, and the significance of the story is in the concepts of compassion, karmic interactions and righteous action, not just divine battle. Local cosmology, folklore, and Buddhism are interwoven into the story-framework of this Lao adaptation. The epic continues to influence the Lao culture and tradition in literature, dance and religious rituals.

Myanmar: Yama Zatdaw

The tradition of the Ramayana originated in Myanmar's culture due to cultural exchanges with Thailand and India, which led to the creation of the Yama Zatdaw tradition in Myanmar. The Burmese version is in keeping with the Buddhist themes without losing the heroic story of Rama. The epic is mainly presented in the form of theatre, music and dance.

One of the main themes of the Burmese Ramayana is the importance of loyalty, righteousness and moral conduct. Over-arching performances still have a voice in the popular culture in terms of maintaining the story.

Malaysia: Hikayat Seri Rama

One of the most interesting cases of cultural change is the Malay version of the epic, Hikayat Seri Rama. The Ramayana got a new meaning in the Islamic literary landscape as Islam took over in the Malay world. Theological elements were minimised in the Hindu religion, while ethical and heroic themes were preserved. Malay storytellers were able to weave in the local folklore and court traditions, thus making the epic culturally relevant even in different religious times. This adaptation is a good example of the versatility of the Ramayana as a cultural text that can cross religious lines.

Comparing Regional Differences

Concept of kingship

Kingship is one such comparative theme that is very important in the Ramayana traditions. In Indian versions Rama is the ideal ruler who is guided by dharma and divine duty. But in the Southeast Asian adaptations, the epic was more likely to be linked to royal rights and political power. The trope of the Ramayana was employed for strengthening the sacred image of kingship, for example, by the Thai and Khmer

monarchs.

Ideal kingship is a crucial aspect of the majority of the traditions of the Ramayana. According to Mandal (2026), the governance model of Rama is still relevant in our context by imparting several lessons on ethical leadership, justice and accountability, as well as welfare oriented governance.

RELIGIOUS ADAPTATION

Religious adaptation constitutes another major area of difference. The Ramayana has been an integral part of Hindu theology and devotionism in India. Conversely, Southeast Asian adaptations sometimes incorporate Buddhist ideals, Asian animism and Islamic tales.

Harmonization of the epic with Theravada thinking is exemplified in the Buddhist version of Rama in Laos and Myanmar. Likewise, the Muslim rendition of the Hikayat Seri Rama, which serves as a testament to the epic's ability to live in non-Hindu religious settings, illustrates the way in which the epic has lived on. The Hikayat Seri Rama, by contrast, illustrates the epic's ability to survive in environments outside the Hindu faith, with a variant adapted by the Muslims.

Religious changes were seen in the Ramayana when it went into Buddhist and Islamic cultural settings. The Ramayana has attained fame because of its incredible cultural flexibility, as explained by Mandal (2024).

Characterization of Hanuman

Hanuman is an ambiguous deity, with different depictions in different parts of the country. Hanuman is the symbol of devotion, celibacy and spiritual discipline in Indian traditions. But in Thailand and Southeast Asia, Hanuman becomes a childish and romantic figure. These changes are due to the cultural preferences and theatre traditions that prevail in the region.

According to R.K. Mandal, such changes reflect the dynamic character of oral literature and characters' development based on the expectations of the audience and the values of the society.

Role of Women

In the depiction of female characters, too, there are variations between the different versions of the Ramayana. In the Indian tradition, Sita is usually portrayed as chaste, obedient, and selfless; some adaptations from Southeast Asian countries give these female characters more autonomy and emotional freedom.

These differences are caused by the changing social attitudes towards gender role and family structures. A comparative analysis is used to show how the Ramayana functioned as a tool for negotiating moral and social ideals in societies.

The Relevance of Culture and Contemporary Practices

The Ramayana is still relevant in today's society in the form of literature, movies, television, theatre, tourism and the Internet. The festivals of Ramayana in India, Thailand, Indonesia and Cambodia promote cultural exchange and regional

cooperation. The epic is also a valuable resource for academic studies on comparative literature, anthropology, religion and cultural history.

The Ramayana has become more of a shared Asian heritage than the exclusive property of any one country or religion, in the eyes of modern scholars. According to R. K. Mandal, the popularity of Ramayana is due to its universal ethics and flexibility to the historical context.

The Ramayana is a testament to the fact that in the age of globalization, culture can contribute to intercultural understanding and keep the diversity alive. The influence it has had in the South and Southeast Asian region shows the historical ties between Asian civilizations.

The Ramayana is still a source of moral and cultural guidance in the modern world in the face of social disintegration and ethical uncertainty. Mandal (2025) stresses on the relevance of teachings of Ramayana to inculcate discipline, family values, compassion and peaceful coexistence.

5.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. The study largely relies on secondary sources of data and literature published sources and does not have a considerable amount of empirical exploration in the field.
2. The study gives only an overview of some of the major versions of Ramayana in South and Southeast Asian countries as there are so many traditions.
3. Several original manuscripts were not in English, so translations were used in some instances, though the languages used were not all the same.
4. Cultural and comparative aspects are stressed and detailed philological and textual criticism of each regional adaptation is not provided.

The oral traditions and folk performance were presented in such a way that it was not possible to exhaustively study variations due to low availability of archives of performances and ethnographic sources in the region.

The study findings reflect the interpretations of the Ramayana that have been circulating in the modern era of politics, religion, and culture; new interpretations of the epic are constantly being formulated, and the findings of this study may not encompass all of the current debates and new interpretations that exist.

6.0 CONCLUSION

The Ramayana, one of the world's greatest epics, is found in many widely varied forms in different Asian cultures, particularly in South and Southeast Asian countries. The story is of ancient Indian beginnings but ultimately developed into several regional traditions influenced by a variety of linguistic, religious, political, and artistic traditions. Every society adapted the Ramayana in accordance with their historical

experience, but at the same time maintained the main moral values of the Ramayana namely righteousness, loyalty, justice and moral governance. The views of R. K. Mandal also bring to light the transnational importance of the Ramayana as a living cultural tradition that transcends the boundaries of nation, language and religion. The epic's enduring relevance through the ages is testament to the ability of literature to bring together civilisations while respecting regional differences. In conclusion, the Ramayana is more than just a literary work; it is a heritage of Asian culture that continues to shape the lives of people today, inspiring them to reflect on good conduct, create art and entertain one another, and engage in cultural dialogue.

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