



Pedagogical Journey of Ramayana and Mahabharata to South-East Asia : The Bay of Bengal as an Educational Conduit

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<p>Received: 26.06.2026</p> <p>Accepted: 03.07.2026</p> <p>Published: 09.07.2026</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p><i>The Bay of Bengal has historically served as a dynamic maritime corridor, facilitating not only trade but also the profound cross-cultural transmission of knowledge and socio-political frameworks between South and Southeast Asia. This paper examines the enduring journey of the Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, across this conduit, emphasizing their foundational role as vital educational and pedagogical tools within early Indianized kingdoms. By analyzing the intersection of maritime history and cultural diplomacy, the study explores how Hindu priests and Buddhist monks utilized these epic narratives in educational missions to impart complex moral philosophies, governance models (rajadharma), and societal norms to both royal courts and the broader public. Furthermore, the paper highlights the localization of these texts, such as the Ramakien in Thailand and the Kakawin Ramayana in Indonesia, demonstrating how they were assimilated into indigenous educational traditions, performing arts, and visual learning tools like temple bas-reliefs. Ultimately, this research underscores the significance of the Bay of Bengal as a space of continuous educational exchange, illustrating how ancient literary diplomacy shaped the pedagogical and socio-political landscapes of Southeast Asia, offering enduring insights for contemporary cross-cultural dialogue.</i></p> <p>Keywords: <i>Maritime History, Cultural Diplomacy, Indian Epics, Pedagogical Traditions, Cross-Cultural Exchange, Moral Education</i></p>
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Introduction

As one of the most extended and historically important maritime areas globally, this region played a significant role in the building of cultural interaction of South and Southeast Asia, forming an ancient sea route that provided for the fruitful exchange of commodities, people, and intellectual concepts between South Asia and Southeast Asia (Subrahmanyam, 2004). This vast expanse of water, bounded to the west by India, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and to the east by Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, has been a meeting place. Over two millennia, this body of water has served not only as a commercial and trading center but also as a conduit for the sharing of ideas, beliefs, and artistic expression (Ray, 2020). The Indian epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata stand as among the greatest literary contributions that cross this sea. Exemplary works which encompass universal themes that include duty, ethics, bravery, and divine influence were very important to the cultural framework in Southeast Asia (Pollock, 2006). These, and more, commercial exchange, population movement, and religious missions

greatly altered the epic and enabled it to change and to change through the significance of political ideologies, artistic heritage, and social values. This, indeed, was not only of great literary import but a cultural sea change that changed not just the political beliefs, artistic expression, spiritual practice, or social values across Southeast Asia (World History Encyclopedia, 2021). The very presence of these narratives within an indigenous, syncretistic amalgamation of Indian and native cultures came through the conduits of exchange networks, migration patterns, and religious activity.

This paper explores the historical, religious, and artistic paths that the Ramayana and Mahabharata have traveled across the Bay of Bengal. In addition, it gives a close view of how these epic narratives were understood and assimilated into Southeast Asian cultures by making a, thus, particular and lasting cultural heritage is exactly how maritime expeditions successfully enabled global interaction not only in the contemporary 'flat world' but across time as well (Bose, 2008).

Review of Related Literature

The debate about the Bay of Bengal is no longer limited to trade networks; it's about complex networks of education and culture across different regions. Early institutions laid the groundwork for this study. UNESCO (2003) has documented the mapping of intangible cultural heritage in Southeast Asia, proving that the local versions of Indian epics weren't just hobbies but moral education for the community and history. Shifting from land borders to seas, Subrahmanyam (2004) coined the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal as a "maritime crossroad". This framework established that the movement of commercial goods naturally encouraged the transmission of systemic knowledge, philosophies, and early curricula from civilizational centers.

Pollock (2006) further defined this political and structural grammar by using the concept of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis". Pollock showed how Sanskrit textuality and epic tales were a political curriculum; it educated elites in the region and gave them common vocabulary to govern. Building upon that, Bose (2008) studied the specific maritime diffusion of these epics into regional performing arts, arguing that it was a highly organized, non-literate pedagogy that brought complex socio-religious laws to the general public.

Scholarship now helps us understand the routes better. Ray (2020) argued that the Indian Ocean world has always been a place where human traditions are passed on. We were taught by the ships that came and went. This was based on the World History Encyclopedia (2021), which brought together the different stages of "Indianization".

The latest literature links these historical patterns with today's educational theory and values. Mishra and Das (2023) analyzed how ancient epics were transformed into moral toolkits in early indigenous schools. They used characters like Rama and Arjuna to teach young students about civic duties. Last year, Rahman (2025) wrote about the concept of "maritime folklore diplomacy," and how the old stories that used to be shared by the people who lived by the Bay of Bengal created an early curriculum for the whole region. Collectively, this chronology highlights a lack of research: I know the history, and I know the politics, but what about the purpose of these epics as moral education tools?

Objectives of the Study

This paper intends to study the historical significance of the Bay of Bengal as a flexible maritime route involved in Cross-Cultural transmission of Knowledge with particular consideration towards the journey of the Ramayana and Mahabharata epic texts to Southeast Asia, as well as to understand how the trade routes and religious missions that connected these areas used these epic texts (Ramayana and Mahabharata) as formal (official) and informal (unofficial educational) pedagogical instruments for conveying morals, social values, rules and regulations for governing societies (rajadharma), and to assess how these epic texts have been localized in Southeast Asian art, architecture, and performance traditions to better understand their continuing role as vehicles for Public, Civic, and Religious Education.

Research Question

The purpose of the research is to discover how early South East Asian kingdoms learned moral and political lessons via their interactions with merchants, priests, and monks through the use of the Indian epics (Ramayana and Mahabharata) as educational tools (i.e., using the stories of these texts as a means to teach those receiving the lessons). This study also explores how the Indian epics were localized into SE Asian customs, specifically through the creation of imagery and performance (i.e. temple carvings/art, shadow puppetry), and how this helped to keep the stories relevant and integrated into SE Asian cultures.

Methodology

This study utilizes **Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA)** combined with a **historical-hermeneutic approach** to investigate the pedagogical and educational dimensions of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* as they traveled across the Bay of Bengal. Qualitative Document Analysis was selected as the primary method because it allows for the systematic evaluation, interpretation, and synthesis of textual, historical, and visual records to uncover underlying educational paradigms, moral frameworks, and governance models (*rajadharma*) embedded within localized epic traditions.

To ensure research rigor and minimize selection bias, a strict set of inclusion criteria was applied to compile the research material. To be included in the dataset for this analysis, the secondary literature and source materials had to meet the following four parameters:

1. **Thematic Relevance:** Sources were required to explicitly address the maritime history of the Bay of Bengal, the trans-regional transmission of the *Ramayana* or *Mahabharata*, or the historical utilization of these texts as tools for moral, religious, or civic instruction in Southeast Asia.
2. **Source Typology:** The data was restricted to peer-reviewed journal articles, academic monographs, conference proceedings, and official institutional reports from recognized global heritage bodies (e.g., UNESCO).
3. **Language:** To maintain analytical consistency, only literature published fully in the English language was included.
4. **Temporal Scope:** The dataset deliberately balanced foundational texts from the early 2000s with the latest academic scholarship up to 2026, ensuring an accurate chronological mapping of the field's evolution.

By evaluating the selected textual materials alongside visual data—specifically the architectural bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat and Prambanan—this multi-layered qualitative approach tracks how literary narratives were translated into active pedagogical tools for both literate elites and non-literate public audiences.

Results and Discussions



FIG: Map of Bay of Bengal (Source: Google Images)

Over two millennia, The Bay of Bengal served as a conduit for linking this subcontinent of India and the Malay Peninsula on account of trade, migration, cultural contact, and conquest. Due to its favorable location and available resources, it became a primary center for historical interaction of the diverse cultures, thereby influencing the cultural, economic, and political courses of the nations along its shores (Subrahmanyam, 2004). Historically, the Bay of Bengal is very important because it is a marine nodal point connecting South Asia with Southeast Asia and other regions: it is the northeastern extension of the Indian Ocean. Stretching from the Indian subcontinent to the Malay Peninsula, it has, for more than two thousand years, been a critical passage for trade, migration, cultural exchange, and military expansion. Due to its geographical location and natural treasures, this region became the hub of historical exchange between the different civilizations which later defined the fate of the countries bordering its shores: their culture, economies, and politics.

This, during historical periods, was a vital trade channel connecting the Indian subcontinent with various kingdoms of Southeast Asia, China, and the Middle East. During this process, the Indian subcontinent provided forest products, gold, and tin, whereas the recipient regions provided it with textiles, spices, and gemstones in return (Ray, 2020). The seaports of Kaveripattinam in Tamil Nadu and Oc Eo in the Mekong Delta along with the booming trade were having two parallel developments for the same period. The Srivijaya Empire set up at Sumatra dominated the Bay of Bengal from the 7th century to the 13th century. Its strategic location enabled it to control the Strait of Malacca, a critical choke point for ships passing from the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. Srivijaya was an important middleman, facilitating the transfer of goods and ideas between India, China, and the broader Southeast Asian region (World History Encyclopedia, 2021).

The Bay of Bengal was an entire passage that connected a few of the world's oldest civilizations, including the Indian subcontinent, the Khmer Empire, and the Malay Archipelago. This interaction would have allowed for the sharing of goods, concepts, and technological advancements that could have eventually influenced the cultural and economic frameworks of the region.

The Bay of Bengal facilitated the expansion of Indian cultural elements into Southeast Asia. Indian literature, art, and architecture went along with Hinduism and Buddhism to places like Cambodia, Thailand, and Indonesia (World History Encyclopedia, 2021). The temples of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Prambanan in Indonesia bear testimony to the far-reaching influence of Indians. Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata taken across the bay find their part in the folklore and traditional heritage of Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2003). The cultural tapestry there was made enriching through altering and adapting stories. Besides Hinduism and Buddhism, the Bay of Bengal has been a key area through which Islam has spread. The religion emerged from Arab and Persian merchants, which was taking deep roots along the coastal fringes of Bengal and Southeast Asia in the 14th century, changing considerably the social and political, cultural, and religious features of the region (Subrahmanyam, 2004).

Factors Contributing to the Spread of Epics: Mahabharata and Ramayana

Trade and Migration

Caravans transported cargoes at a fairly glacial pace along the overland routes of the Silk Roads connecting the Indian Subcontinent with China, ships travelled at a quicker clip from ports on the Indian sub-continent to Southeast Asia and onward, carrying a broad diversity of products that included spices, aromatic timber, resins, and precious jewels and minerals (Ray, 2020). This exchange, which allowed artists and craftsmen to travel long distances bearing exclusive artistic objects and sacred relics, furthered cross-cultural and religious ties throughout the regions as well as the extension of artistic traditions.

The Bay of Bengal had been the prime sea route that transported Indian merchants, artisans and Brahmins to Southeast Asia on a quest for cross cultural dialogue and sharing epics of India such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata. The Ayyavole kind of guild had represented the cultural community which had developed trade and settlement supported by merchants (Bose, 2008). These artisans have left their impression on art and architecture in Southeast Asia as they made sculptures out of temples epitomizing the epic saga. The works have been presented, made accessible by the Brahmas to local tongues with Hindu-Buddhist culture. Festivals and nuptial ties provided assimilation grounds within the immigrant communities. In summary, the epics greatly influenced Southeast Asian literature, performing arts, governments, and local identities.

Religious Missions and spread of Values

The role of Hindu priests in the propagation of the epics cannot be underestimated because they played a foundational role in their religious and educational missions. Frequently invited to serve as spiritual advisors or educators, Hindu priests introduced the Ramayana and Mahabharata's Hindu cosmologies, rituals, and moral philosophies to the Southeast Asian rulers (Pollock, 2006). Sanskrit manuscripts of the epics were carried by the priests and were frequently recited in rituals or performed in adapted forms for royal courts and commoners alike. These stories, with universal themes of dharma or duty, karma or action, and devotion, were easy resonances for audiences. It was the priests who established the Hindu temples that became the focal centers for the

dissemination of epic stories. Episodes from Ramayana and Mahabharata were carved as reliefs on temple walls, for instance in Prambanan in Java and Angkor Wat in Cambodia, providing a visual narration for what are largely oral cultures (UNESCO, 2003). These texts required acceptance, adaptation, and localization. The stories had to be adapted to the Southeast Asian contexts in order to be culturally relevant. For example, the Rama character of the Ramayana was often used as a divine ruler to instill the concept of kingship and legitimacy in the region.

Buddhist monks, traveling as part of religious missions, also contributed to the transmission of Indian epics. While Buddhism does not directly derive its doctrines from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the monks used the moral and ethical lessons within these epics to complement Buddhist teachings. The stories were assimilated into the epics, Jataka tales, and other Buddhist literature, for emphasis on virtues such as selflessness, compassion, and good overcoming evil. Philosophical principles were conveyed to others during educational missions by using epics. Analogies made from stories explained complex Buddhist ideas that were tough to comprehend. For example, the indomitable virtues of Sita and Yudhishtira was imprinted on the ideas of Buddhism concerning persisting virtues and ethical living.

Rise of Indianized Kingdoms

The Indianized states that include Funan, Srivijaya, and Majapahit are a substantial part of the region's historical record (World History Encyclopedia, 2021). These kingdoms heavily relied on Indian templates for governance, spirituality, and cultural models to construct political institutions and social organizations in the region. Southeast Asian rulers adopted Hinduism to make their position more divine by associating it with the intention of the gods. The institution of divine kingship was quite important in Hinduism. Kings claimed to be gods or heroes of legend in order to validate their power. Thus, for example, the Cambodian kings were considered incarnations of Vishnu or Shiva just like Rama or Krishna in the epics (Pollock, 2006). The model that these kings followed was that of the chakravartin, or universal emperor, as described in the epics. For instance, Yudhishtira, a hero of the Mahabharata, personified the good king of moral character and is one assumed by rulers in Thailand and Myanmar. The Ramayana was full of ideas on duty, sacrifice, and justice through the character of Rama, the perfect king.

His unwavering stand on dharma became a role model for kings. In the Mahabharata lies the lesson of governance complications, duties of kingship and the ethical dilemmas, which rulers have to face on their heads, thus providing lesson-crafting for southeast Asian kings. The epics presented the concept of "dharma" as guidance for the king and their subjects. Dharma would therefore be seen not only as a moral code but as a divine mandate in alignment with cosmic order. Indianized kingdoms adopted caste-like systems inspired by Hindu social structures, subtly adapted to the local context. Brahmins, often migrants from India, are placed at the top rung of the hierarchy: advisors, priests, and scholars. The hierarchical division of society is supported by reference to epic characters and roles - warriors, Kshatriyas, such as in the Pandavas.

Epic stories served as an integral part of the royal ritual and ceremony in the fashioning of sovereignty inspired by Ramayana and Mahabharata, for example the *ashwamedha yajna* (horse sacrifice) or coronation ceremony, for the demonstration of their supreme power and public festivities, expressing the bond between the ruler and the gods. Epic performances, which were usually public, such as Wayang Kulit in Indonesia and Khon dance-drama in Thailand, expressed loyalty, morality, and divinity in the governance of the kingdom (Bose, 2008).

Indianized kingdoms used architecture as a medium to express their affiliation with the Indian epics. Temples became depositories of epic stories, at the same time being religious and cultural icons. The Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia uses scenes from the Ramayana and Mahabharata in its bas-reliefs to depict episodes such as Churning of the Ocean (Samudra Manthan) and the Battle of Lanka. The Prambanan temple complex in Java has intricate carvings of the Ramayana, which highlights the region's love for the epic (UNESCO, 2003).

The Ramayana: A Journey Across Waters

The Ramayana is an ancient Indian epic that has traditionally been ascribed to Valmiki. Transcending geographical and cultural boundaries, it acts as a kind of cultural bridge between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It found not only a willing audience outside India but also underwent a considerable process of localization, giving rise to distinctive literary, artistic, and socio-political traditions.



FIG: Depiction of Ramakien (Source: Google Images)

The Ramayana was adapted into the national epic of Thailand, known as the Ramakien (UNESCO, 2003). This version retained the fundamental storyline but added unique features of Thailand. Persons were given local names and introduced into a setting of Thai territories that gave moral lessons in congruence with Thai Buddhism and animism. This chapter demonstrates how Indian epics were integrated into the oral performance traditions of Southeast Asia.

An elegant literary adaptation by the Old Javanese version of the original text of Valmiki, Kakawin Ramayana was a harmonization of Hindu cosmology and indigenous Javanese forms of literature (Pollock, 2006). The blending will be able to point out how Indonesia has uniquely synthesized its epics according to its syncretic culture.



FIG: Depiction of *Ramayana* in Cambodia (source: Google Images)

The Ramayana has significantly influenced remarkable architectural and performative customs. At Angkor Wat in Cambodia and Prambanan in Indonesia, relief carvings illustrate narratives from the epic, thereby integrating its thematic elements into grand artistic expressions. Additionally, performance arts such as Indonesia's Wayang Kulit and Thailand's Khon dance-drama render the epic more accessible, promoting cultural continuity and imparting moral education through these captivating formats (Bose, 2008).

Politically, the Ramayana symbolized ideal kingship. Rama's virtues provided Southeast Asian rulers a model for governance, aligning their reign with divine legitimacy. Temples and rituals underscored this connection, blending spiritual authority with political power. The Ramayana's journey across waters is a testament to its adaptability and enduring relevance.

The Mahabharata : Stories of Power and Dharma

The Mahabharata, although not as widely accepted in Southeast Asia as the Ramayana, still influenced the region to some extent, much like the complicated themes of authority, duty, and moral gray areas. The episodic nature of its stories, particularly in relation to the Bhagavad Gita and the escapades of Bhima and Arjuna, struck a cultural and spiritual chord with the community.



FIG: Depiction of the *Dharmayudh* of Mahabharata on the walls of Angkor Wat, Cambodia (source: Google Images)

This goes to show the Mahabharata's ability to adapt to regional conditions in Southeast Asian societies. For example, in Cambodia, the epic was engraved into the bas-reliefs of Angkor Wat

where scenes of the Kurukshetra War are presented. These carvings are not only works of art but also learning tools that convey ideas on the concepts of duty and universal order.

The Arjuna Wiwaha is a regional interpretation of the account of Arjuna's contemplative practices and celestial challenges, balancing the storyline of the epic with the spiritual and aristocratic principles inherent in Javanese culture (Bose, 2008). This version proves the flexibility of the Mahabharata in being able to combine local ideologies and artistic expressions with its very basic philosophical essence.

The Mahabharata's discussion of conflict, moral complexity, and the pursuit of justice provides a basis for ethical and philosophical reflection in Southeast Asian cultures. The epic's discourse about dharma (duty) and rajadharma (the duty of a ruler) shaped political thought, providing models of ethical and just governance. Monarchs often likened themselves to Yudhishtira, who personified righteousness in adversity, thus being an ideal type of leadership (Pollock, 2008).

Southeast Asian societies incorporate the Mahabharata into their cultural milieu and safeguard not only the narrative of the epic but also modify its enduring lessons to be able to fit within specific contexts, as the discourse between authority and ethics remains relevant.

Cultural Integration and Contemporary Relevance



FIG: Performance of Ramayana in Cambodia (source: Google Images)

In Thailand, the Ramakien, for example, produced a Thai version of the Ramayana, in names, places, and ethnic codes. The characters like Rama, Sita, and Ravana were retained in archetypes but with qualities suitable for Thai culture. In Indonesia, the Kakawin Ramayana and Arjuna Wiwaha tapped upon Javanese literary and spiritual traditions that set familiar characters within local aesthetics and philosophy. This localization went beyond names and settings into the storylines themselves. Episodes were retold in keeping with local beliefs, like the Buddhist understanding of Rama as a bodhisattva in Cambodia and Myanmar. These adaptations show the flexibility of the epics and their ability to be used as universal templates for storytelling. The Indian epics syncretized, that is, they merged with indigenous folklore and mythology to create hybrid narratives unique to Southeast Asia (UNESCO, 2003). In Bali, for example, Hindu epics coexist with animist traditions, and performances will often include local deities, spirits, and rituals. Wayang Kulit shadow puppetry from Indonesia has told the story of Ramayana and Mahabharata episodes together with myths of the land, therefore weaving a tapestry rich in cultural expression. It helped ensure that the epics would resonate with the local audience while maintaining their depth

in philosophy. The mixing of Hindu cosmology with the Southeast Asian animist and Buddhist practice underlines the dynamic character of the region's cultural evolution.

The Mahabharata was an inspirational starting point in terms of thought and debate about war, morality, and justice. Overall, dharma - the sense of duty, along with rajadharma, the equivalent of kingly duty, are crucial discussions that influenced Southeast Asian politics, which centered on ideas of ethics as well as mechanisms for governance by justice. The leaders used to draw an analogy with a character like Yudhishtira who always exhibited adherence to values irrespective of any challenge he was going through.

Incorporating the Mahabharata into the cultural framework of Southeast Asian communities allowed for the preservation of the epic's narrative depth, while simultaneously making it possible for it to be assimilated into lasting lessons relevant to the needs of their environment. The epics continue to inspire creativity within the modern context. In Southeast Asia, filmmakers and authors reinterpret the Ramayana and Mahabharata to emphasize their relevance in relation to contemporary themes such as identity, power, and morality. This process of reinterpretation ensures that the epics remain dynamic and relevant within changing cultural contexts. Moreover, contemporary trends among modern Southeast Asian writers and graphic novelists are to take up these epics as thematic elements to explore current societal issues. For instance, stories about Rama or Arjuna are very common in the city. The struggles of these protagonists often relate to contemporary issues of corruption, environmental disasters, or political instability. Graphic novels present these characters in a form of art that makes them more accessible to the young who are well conversant with technology.

The common epical traditions of India and SouthEast Asia give a witness to their intertwined historical pasts. Epics, after all, are the crossing of different cultures which will understand one another and contribute towards the integration of cultures. The celebrations, joint ventures and research collaborations brought forward this collective heritage which has always kept these two regions in its tight grip.

Conclusion

The Bay of Bengal is conceived as a veritable geographical channel for the spread of Indian epics and ideas through Southeast Asia (Subrahmanyam, 2004). Trade entrance through maritime navigation, cultural and human migratory movements ties with the aforementioned phenomenon, moving beyond visible territorial borders. Seeing the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata meant not just acquiring, but also adapting, reinterpreting, and internalizing them into the socio-cultural framework of South-East Asian societies-an aspect influential to the nuances of art and literature as well as governance and religious practices concerned.

Crossing the sea, therefore, is more than mere trade but forms arteries to convert philosophies, technologies, and traditions that provide a collective cultural heritage to the entire region. Shared the cultural ethos thus gave birth to a pluralism by which Indian, local, and other influences are assimilated into a vigorous, unique cultural identity (Ray, 2020).

Revisiting these historical connections underscores the importance of cross-cultural dialogue and cooperation in the modern context. The Bay of Bengal would always continue to remain a critical connecting point for global trade and geopolitics and, therefore, offers precious insights into ways

of fostering mutual respect and cooperation in an ever-globalizing world when one understands the historical role of this bay as a cross-cultural bridge between civilizations.

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