From Epic Narratives to Political Theory: The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as Texts of Statecraft

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ABSTRACT

The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, though largely regarded as epic materials, also reflect some of the most important early Indian thoughts about political philosophy. Together with prescriptive texts like the Dharmasūtras and Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya's, these epics offer inbuilt discourses on kingship, justice, war and the ethical principles of governance. This article discusses the manner in which the epics express concepts of rājadharma (the righteousness of rulers), the legitimacy of power and authority, ethical challenges in leadership and the relationship between power and morality. The analysis of episodes of political thought includes Vibhīṣaṇa's advice to Rāvaṇa in the Rāmāyaṇa and that of Bhīṣma's in the Śānti Parva of the Mahābhārata which show how narrative and dialogue can be used as tools of political thought. The comparative approach emphasises similarities and differences between the treatment of statecraft in the two epics and places them in a larger context of ancient Indian political thought. Although both are not systematic treatises, their ethical questions of governance, justice and war ethics provide timeless lessons that are still applicable to modern ethical leadership and responsible state-crafting discussions. Thus, this paper asserts that the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are not just cultural or religious books but are also important intellectual tools that aid in the history of political thought in India.

Keywords: Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, political philosophy, *rājadharma*, statecraft, governance.

Introduction

The literature, philosophical, and religious works of ancient India are very rooted in its traditions of political thought. In contrast to the modern study of political science, which tend to divorce politics and morality or religion, the ancient Indian considerations of statecraft could not be considered independent of broader dharma and justice inquiries. The ethical and political issues in the Indian philosophical tradition, as it has been noted by B.K. Matilal (1991), can never be discussed outside the story and normative context in which they are framed. The two great epics, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, stand in a singular and permanent place among the variety of materials to which we have access--the Dharmasūtras and the Arthaśāstra, and the Nītiśāstras, and the whole mass of Purāṇic literature--give rise to one another. Although they may be mainly read as a story of devotion and cultural identity, these are also deep reservoirs of political thinking. (Olivelle, 2004; Thapar, 1984).

Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are not systematic texts in the sense of texts such as the Arthaśāstra by Kauṭilya (Shamasastry, 1915). They instead express political concepts as story's, conversation and ethical dilemmas. Kingship, justice, legitimacy, ethics of war and the duties of those who rule are not discussed as abstract teachings but rather as experiences and decisions made by characters who exemplify or violate the teachings of dharma. According to Alf Hiltebeitel (2001), the epics are not only works of literature, but also "encyclopedias of dharma"; political and ethical reflection is inseparable with story.

The Rāmāyaṇa presents us with the ideal aspect of righteous kingship in the figure of Rāma, who is sanctified as maryādā puruṣottama (the incarnation of ethical order). Such steadfastness in his dharma even at his own expense has been elevated as a standard of ethical leadership (Goldman, 2005). Some episodes like the one of Vibhīṣaṇa advising Rāvaṇa are used to show that issues of power revolve around legitimacy and moral responsibility. In comparison, the Mahābhārata gives a more in depth and, sometimes, tragic examination of political life. Its story, its ethical confusion and dilemmas, are a mirror of the terrible truths of rule and the disastrous outcomes of unbridled ambition. The Śānti Parva and Anuśāsana Parva, which sees Bhīṣma elaborating on the rājadharma to Yudhiṣṭhira, were traditionally known as systematic discussions on the topic of justice, kingship, and the responsibilities of kings (Chakrabarti, 2018).

Collectively, the two epics reflect opposing sides: the Rāmāyaṇa is the image of virtuous kingship, and the Mahābhārata is the reflection of questions and

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contradictions attached to the politics. A comparison between them helps to see the diversity of ancient Indian political philosophy, which is not promoting one single doctrine, but the continuum of conclusions about the essence of power, authority, and moral.

This paper will discuss the role of the Rāmāyaṇa as a text of statecraft and political philosophy, and how the Mahābhārata serves as a text of statecraft and political philosophy. The study situates the reflections of Vibhīṣaana in the Rāmāyaṇa and Bhīṣma in the Mahābhārata by assessing the political philosophies in a wider context of the Indic tradition. By doing this it asserts that the epics are not just cultural writings but persistent intellectual gifts that make them still relevant in shaping concepts of governance, moral ethics and political duty.

Literature Review

The academic approach to the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata has long swivelled between literary, religious and ethical readings, although with less frequency it has preempted the epics as texts of state. The focus of earlier Indological literature like Hopkins (1901) and Winternitz (1927/1985) characterised their narrative and mythological aspects and thus the epics were seen not as political treatises but rather as cultural-religious repositories. These foundational studies are still worth having, but they did not yet explore the more substantive institutional and philosophical contemplation of governance that was present throughout the texts.

Subsequent criticism has turned to the identification of the ethical and political interests of the epics. Matilal (1989) discussed the dharmic dilemma in Mahābhārata, and revealed how figures such as Yudhiṣṭhira represent contradictions between individual righteousness and the exigency of political need. Hiltebeitel (2001) and Fitzgerald (2004) also emphasised upon dialogical and tragic aspects of epic statecraft, especially in Śānti Parva. Pollock (1986) placed the Rāmāyaṇa in context of issues of kingship, sovereignty and civic responsibility, and emphasised the pedagogical contributions of the text in the construction of ideals of governance.

There has been a development of further sophisticated analyses of these foundations by contemporary scholars. In their article, Doniger and Smith (1991) explored the meeting of dharmic values and governance according to the old Indian literature. Recent comparative literature by Olivelle (2011, 2013) has given parallels between epic literature and systematic political treatizes where narrative and prescriptive literature are shown to have complementary roles in the expression of political ideation. Davis (2015) has examined the history of reception of the epic political concepts in the mediaeval and modern India, and Dhand (2008) has researched the

gender and power relations within the epic texts as the image of the larger political entities.

Indian historians have also made their contribution to this discourse. Thapar (1989, 2000) focused on the epics to argue that social and political norms were negotiated and argued over and not taught through the epics. This view assists in going beyond a moral or allegorical interpretation to a historically entrenched interpretation of political thought. Cross-cultural analysis has also compared and contrasted the epic traditions with the Arthaśāstra and Dharmashāstra (Kane, 1962; Olivelle, 2013), explaining why the epics tend to balance between normative and pragmatic ethics in politics.

This field has also been enriched by international scholarship. Biardeau's (1997) has provided an anthropological approach to the Mahābhārata with an emphasis on its role as a reflection on the human condition and political duty. This has been extensively utilised in the analysis of argumentative traditions of Indian thought by Sen (2009) who has used epic literature to show trend of argumentative reasoning and debate in the Indian context among the population. Brodbeck and Black (2007) have more recently explored the impact of epic political concepts globally, and Austin (2019) has explored epic narratives in the context of modern politics.

Although this scholarship is beginning to accrue, a key gap exists: although the Arthaśāstra has been explored widely as an Indian canon text of political theory, the epics are most commonly studied in terms of their ethical or religious significance. They have few works that treat them systematically as dialogical texts of statecraft struggling with the eternal conflicts of power, morality and legitimacy. This work will attempt to fill that gap by examining the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as not only cultural texts but also as refined works of the Indian tradition of political thought.

Methodology

This paper uses the methodology of comparative textual analysis which is based on the hermeneutical tradition of Sanskrit literary criticism and modern methods of political thought. The study itself is based on close analysis of primary literature, namely, on major episodes and discourses in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata that explicitly address the issues of governance, kingship, and political morality. The choice of passages of a text is based upon standard academic tradition of discerning passages of text that are politically relevant: the counselling of Vibhīṣaṇa in the Rāmāyaṇa (Sundarakāṇḍa) and the long rājadharma books in the Mahābhārata (Śānti Parva and Anuśāsana Parva). These choices are the most enduring philosophical content of politics in their respective texts and have long been accepted by scholars as the key to comprehending the

epic stance on statecraft. The methodology of analysis integrates the conventional Indian hermeneutical approaches and modern political theory. This method acknowledges that in many cases ancient Indian text may contain philosophical material that is entrenched within the narrative form and that it may take interpretive strategies to bring out conceptual arguments in literary presentation. The work further makes use of contextual analysis, whereby epic political thought is placed in the context of the wider Indian intellectual traditions of the time, such as the Dharmaśāstras and Arthaśāstra literature. The comparative aspect of the given study explores the differences and similarities in how the two epics treat the questions of politics, recognising common themes and understanding the differences in priorities. This approach permits a subtle knowledge of the ways in which various narrative practises can express compatible political visions within a shared cultural tradition.

Rājadharma and Statecraft in the Rāmāyaṇa

The Rāmāyaṇa though mostly regarded as a literature of devotion and moral responsibility, is also a great book of state craftsmanship. Its approach to rājadharma the duties and responsibilities of ruler is produced not by prescriptive maxims but by examples of literatures, by moral dilemmas and the practical effects of political action. In contrast to Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra, who predicts realpolitik and strategic expediency, the Rāmāyaṇa indicates a vision of sovereignty, dharma, legitimacy and responsibility.

The key element of this vision is the character of Rāma, who is worshipped as the maryādā puruṣottama. His decision to accept exile, so as to keep to the promise of his father, is not simply an expression of filial piety but of politics: the power of a ruler should be based on the practise of dharma, even when it involves a great deal of personal sacrifice. According to Pollack (1986), this moment is symbolic of a sovereignty based on moral order, as opposed to brute force, and in so doing, indicates that legitimacy is based on consent and recognition, as opposed to coercion. This fact is further supported by the episode when the people of Ayodhyā willingly accompany Rāma into the woods, emphasising popular recognition as an essential element of kingship.

Meanwhile, the kingship is not shown as problemless in the epic. The strain between the personal commitment and the social responsibility is depicted in the subsequent choice of Rāma who decides to exile Sītā. Although this episode is sometimes considered unfair by modern readers, it emphasises the idea that leaders should be subjected to the judgement of the people. According to Thapar (2000), this is the moment when the political accountability is already perceived, which bodes the legitimacy depending not merely on dharma only but also on the understanding of the people. This

foreshadows in its primitive way the proto-democratic notion that the sovereignty is susceptible to the voice of the ruled.

The advice of Vibhīṣaṇa, the brother of Rāvaṇa, only intensifies the interest of the epic of statecraft. In encouraging Rāvaṇa to release Sītā and practise righteousness, Vibhīṣaṇa defines the doctrine that the sovereignty should be able to be in accordance with justice to be real. His subsequent defection to Rāma after Rāvaṇa's obstinacy highlights the ethical dimensions of political loyalty. Shulman (2001) points out that this episode changes the centre of faithfulness not to kinship and blood to dharma itself, and justice assumes the role of the final standard of legitimate authority.

There are also advanced insights into the politics of alliances and strategic management which are also evident in the Rāmāyaṇa. The organization of alliances with Sugrīva and the marshaling of the vānara army demonstrate that being a good king involves not merely having the power of morality but also has the ability to build coalitions in practical ways. The passage demonstrates the use of legitimate authority to mobilise different constituencies to serve just causes, and it is possible that there is an early awareness of political pluralism in dharmic models.

Unlike in the Kauṭilya's model where spying, deceit and force are established as a standard element of rule, the Rāmāyaṇa integrates these techniques into the system of dharma. Although Rāma uses alliances and force, this has always been limited to what is ethical. This becomes what Matilal (1991) refers to as the moralised pragmatism of the epic: political action is only allowed when it is consistent with justice.

But kingship as idealised in the Rāmāyaṇa is not limitless. Its paradigm assumes an ethically perfect sovereign and does not provide the room of cheques and balances in its institutions. A polity that relies totally on the virtue of its leader, according to Matilal (1991), is structurally weak, and when less exemplary leaders occupy the office, then the system can collapse. The text, therefore, reveals the idealistic hopes of just governance and weaknesses of a polity that is dependent on virtues.

In the final analysis, the Rāmāyaṇa promotes the theory of politics not by prescriptive views but by dilemmas of the story. It defines kingship as an ethical profession and makes questions of legitimacy, justice, and responsibility a part of the lived experiences of its characters. Comparing it with the Arthaśāstra, we may see in it a dialectical relationship of ancient Indian political thought: on the one hand, expediency; on the other, a belief in the moral order. The Rāmāyaṇa is an essential text of statecraft in this synthesis, a thing to rekindle the thought that sovereignty in the Indian tradition was never otherwise a business than a morality.

The Mahābhārata and the Ethics of Kingship

The Mahābhārata is not only the longest epic in the world literature, but also one of the richest depositories of political and ethical thought in the Indian tradition. Although the literature is set against the dynastic war of Kauravas and Pāṇḍavas, the thematic context is much broader than just the battlefield. It investigates questions of kingship, justice, and moral responsibility both in the development of events, and the philosophical discussions within its subsequent books, specifically the Śānti Parva and Anuśāsana Parva. The text, according to Hiltebeitel (2001), is a pedagogy of dharma, with narrative and instruction coming together to train the readers in the dilemmas of moral and political life. Unlike the Rāmāyaṇa, which projects an idealized vision of sovereignty through Rāma, the Mahābhārata predicts the tragic ambiguity of the concept of statecraft, indicated that rulers frequently involve compromise, expediency and even the lapse of integrity.

The central figure of this questioning is Yudhiṣṭhira who is the archetypal "dharma king." Yudhiṣṭhira is repeatedly described as devoted to truth, justice and nonviolence, but his rule is full of concessions that undermine even the values that he represents. His participation in the dice game, his acceptance of deceit in the killing of Droṇa and Karṇa, and his ultimate decision to wage war reveal the difficulty of reconciling personal virtue with the demands of kingship. As interpreted by Biardeau (1997), the predicaments of Yudhiṣṭhira are seen as the predicaments of the human state in general: it is impossible to live morally pure in the world of politics, where the survival and the power are the chief motivating factors. This strain brings out the insistence in the epic that proper governance cannot be based on ethical absolutism but must be pragmatist.

One of the most debatable subjects of the Mahābhārata is the ethics of war (dharma-yuddha). On the one hand, the text establishes norms of fair conduct in war: the warriors cannot fight at night, attack the unarmed or strike the surrendered. Conversely, it is these same rules that are formalistically broken in the course of the war. Bhim beats Duryodhana below the waist contrary to the rules of fighting; Karṇa is killed while his chariot is immobilized. Abhimanyu is also killed against the rules of fair fighting. Hopkins (1993) notes that these transgressions are not incidental but rather, intended literary effects playfully revealing the tragic conflict between an idealised warfare and the ugly demands of victory. By recognising the existence of these contradictions, the epic highlights the fact that the process of dharma in politics sometimes itself becomes subverted.

The Śānti Parva and Anuśāsana Parva extend this contemplation with expositions of rājadharma which are systematic. Bhīṣma, lying on his bed of arrows, counsels Yudhiṣṭhira on the duties of a ruler: protection of subjects, fair taxation, impartial justice, and moderation in punishment. According to Fitzgerald (2002), such passages make the epic not just a narrative about war, but about governance, and the king is just a servant of the people whose right to rule is based on his capacities to guarantee welfare. Similarly, Olivelle (2011) emphasises the shift of these discourses to institutional interests, where the principles are described, and at times counter, with the more practical Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya.

The political counsel offered by the Mahābhārata is especially advanced in the understanding of contextual ethics. The teachings of Bhīṣma recognise that various circumstances might demand various interpretations of dharmic doctrine, and add an element of flexibility that is usually lacking in more rigid legal texts. This contextual method of government implies the early awareness of political prudence, the skill of generalising principles to particular situations without losing the overall ethical direction.

However, the Mahābhārata does not outline these precepts without any context with the facts of power. Even Bhīṣma himself admits that, sometimes leaders are forced to use deception, coercion, or even cruelty to maintain the state. This instrumental shift implies that this epic is willing to embrace politics as a vaguely ambiguous realm where dharma is not always able to be achieved in absolute terms. According to Matilal (1989), the epic is concerned with exploring the issues of moral dilemmas, as he claims that this is a sign of an early understanding of the constitution of ethical life by the presence of equally binding obligations. In politics, this is rendered into a tragic consciousness of the realisation that sovereignty may necessitate a decision to go with the lesser evil.

Another amazing revelation in the epic is the understanding of the psychology behind the leadership and the corruptive nature of power. Figures such as Duryodhana are a symbol of the threats of unbridled ambition, while figures like Karṇa illustrate how personal loyalty can conflict with broader ethical obligations. According to these psychological portraits, the Mahābhārata appears to understand governance as being not an issue of institutional design only, but also the formation of character and moral education.

What makes the Mahābhārata unlike the Rāmāyaṇa, however, is not merely its scope, but its tragic compromise. Where in the Rāmāyaṇa the potential of moralising sovereignty exists in the figure of an ideal ruler, in the Mahabharata, the political life is inevitably involved in the conflict, violence and expediency. Sen (2009) has proposed that the text is an illustration of a tradition of public reasoning, where the debate on dharma, justice and kingship is never finalised but it remains open-ended.

It is this dialogical nature, which enables the epic to serve not as a prescriptive guide, but as the zone of contemplation concerning the irreducible tensions of government.

Overall, the Mahābhārata also has a role in the Indian political philosophy as it puts kingship within a continuous negotiation between dharma and necessity. Its narratives and arguments show how weak a moral order is against the reality of political life, which emphasises the impossibility to cleanse sovereignty of compromise. Thus, it supplements the idealised kingship of the Rāmāyaṇa, as one wing of a dialectic in the classical Indian tradition: one wing ideal, the other tragic.

Comparative Analysis: The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata as Texts of Statecraft

Although both are monumental narratives, the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata explain different but interrelated conceptions of kingship and statecraft. Comparative reading shows that these texts are in a dialogue with each other: the Rāmāyaṇa is a model of an idealized vision of moral sovereignty, whereas the Mahābhārata is a prognosis of the issues and the trade-offs that are inherent in political existence. Collectively, they reflect the variety and diversification of the ancient Indian thoughts on governance.

Sovereignty in the Rāmāyaṇa has been shown as a continuation of dharma and this can be seen in the character of Rāma. The fact that he chose to take exile (Ayodhyākāṇḍa, II.20) despite his own interest is an example of how the power of kings should be superseded by moral obligations and civic trust. In the same way, the later action of Rāma to exile Sītā, even though it was his own suffering, supports the concept that the king is not only responsible to his conscience, but also to the vision of his subjects (Pollock, 1986). More than moral virtue, but the text also casts its gaze over political alliances and mobilization. The call of the coalition and alliances with Sugrīva and Vibhīṣaṇa, the the mobilization of vānaras as war-lords, all indicate that kingship is not only maintained through virtue, but it is also maintained through practical war-making tactics (Thapar, 2000). The Rāmāyaṇa then provides a complex view of kingship that is not only impregnated with moral values but also with the operations of state.

In comparison, the Mahābhārata offers a political world that is filled with conflict, negotiation and tragic decisions. The moral anguish of the war that Yudhiṣṭhira had after it (Śānti Parva, XII.15) as well as the substantial advice given by Bhīṣma on taxation, justice and administration prove that they understood governance as a compromise area (Hiltebeitel, 2001). The recognition of deception in military activities even in the killing of Droṇa and Karṇa by deception is a factor that makes the text clear that sometimes protection of dharma necessitates its violation (Hopkins, 1993). In contrast to the Rāmāyaṇa, where the morality of the king is exemplary enough, the Mahabharata focuses much on the institutionalized nature of direction: the king is advised by elders, and moulded by systematic norms, which are expressed in the Parvas of Śānti and Anuśāsana (Fitzgerald, 2002).

The pedagogy in the two epics also varies widely. The Rāmāyaṇa does not focus on negative role models as the Rāma does but emphasizes good role models who should be followed in their actions as they were a great example. Mahābhārata, in contrast, does not provide explicitly right or wrong but educates using negative examples and moral ambiguity to demonstrate the outcomes of many different decisions. This disparity is based on the contrasting theories of political education: the Rāmāyaṇa is based on the assumption that virtue is achievable through the motivational examples, and the Mahābhārata on the assumption that wisdom is developed when one struggles with such challenging moral issues.

The contrast between the two epics resonates with the broader tradition of Indian political thought. Kingship according to the model as presented in the Rāmāyaṇa foresees the dharmic orientation of such texts as the Manusmṛti in which legitimacy is based upon moral authority. The Mahābhārata itself prefigures the practical realism of Kauṭilya in his Arthaśāstra which acknowledges that rulership is frequently compelled to use force, imposture and calculations (Olivelle, 2011). This comparison highlights the fact that the epics are not isolated texts but fall under a larger spectrum of discourse of normativity and practicality.

The two epics also exhibit high levels of knowledge on the relationship between individual character and institutional structures. Even though the Rāmāyaṇa focuses on how exemplary character can change institutions, the Mahābhārata demonstrates how institutional pressures can corrupt even those with good intentions. According to this dialectic, a more subtle conception of the mutual dependency between individual virtue and structural limitation of political life is proposed.

In spite of these distinctions, the two epics find common ground in placing sovereignty in the context of morality. Even in those cases when compromise is the only option, political authority is still accountable to dharma. Shulman (2001), observes that the defection of Vibhīṣaṇa in the Rāmāyaṇa and the anguish of Yudhiṣṭhira in the Mahābhārata are both statements that power is rightful only when it is in correspondence to justice. Thus, the epics collectively deny an amoral view of politics, providing instead a range of options between moral idealism and tragic realism.

It is also worth considering the temporal aspects of the epics. The emphasis of the Rāmāyaṇa on the ideal king implies a political vision of establishing an ideal order and the focus of the Mahābhārata on process and deliberation implies a political vision of politics as negotiation and accommodation. These various time orientations mirror various ways of thinking about political change and stability.

This comparative prism exposes the fact that Indian political thought is monolithic and utopian. The Rāmāyaṇa gives an idealized image in which the virtue of the ruler protects the order whereas the Mahābhārata accepts the pragmatic forces of politics. According to Sen (2009), the Indian intellectual tradition flourishes on plurality and debate; the epics represent that pluralism in their complementary but contrasting styles. The negation between the two still serves to underpin any modern interpretation of leadership, with the conflict between what is morally right and what is pragmatically good being still, as in antiquity, as significant.

Contemporary Relevance and Applications

The political wisdom inherent in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata has a striking relevance today in the political discourse of governance, leadership ethics and politics. Their relevance to this day is not only their historical context but also their advanced approach to eternal political issues that do not depend on a particular time and culture.

Contemporary democratic thought struggles with issues of legitimacy that the epics explored in terms of dharmic kingship. The focus on popular recognition and accountability in the Rāmāyaṇa echoes the modern-day issue of democratic legitimacy and responsive government. The character of Rāma giving up his own interests to stick to his promises provides lessons in contemporary debates on the subject of political integrity and the conflict between individual interests and the general will.

Likewise, the theme of moral compromise in politics in the Mahābhārata has direct responsiveness to the current debate of pragmatism in politics and moral leadership. The acknowledgment in the epic that the governance frequently involves making trade-offs between conflicting moral claims offers an approach to the explanation of challenging policy choices in the complicated democratic states. Its handling of coalition politics and institutional devices provide insights used to consider modern debates of political realism and moral agency in institutional frameworks.

The ethics of war as described by the epics is especially still pertinent in modern debates on just war theory and international relations. Their discussion of the conflict between ethical values and the strategic requirements still guides the discourse on humanitarian intervention, morality of war, and the boundaries of the legitimate actions of the state.

Conclusion

The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata are not just cultural and religious epics but dialogical works of political theory, in which some understanding of the nature of governance, of legitimacy and of the morality of power can be found. According to the trials of Rāma in the Rāmāyaṇa, we are able to observe how kingship has been constructed on a firm foundation of dharma where political power is rightful only when it is accompanied by moral responsibility and social responsibility (Pollock, 1986). Meanwhile, scenes like the exiling of Sītā indicate the pressures and expenses of maintaining the dharma of the state and the weakness of the ethical stand of the sovereign (Thapar, 2000).

The Mahābhārata, in contrast, foreshadows the tragic issues of statecraft in which the plight of Yudhiṣṭhira stands as a personification of the challenge of establishing personal virtue as necessarily coinciding with political need (Matilal, 1989). It is possibly the most philosophically saturated of the many ancient Indian texts due to its extended discourses in the Śānti and Anuśāsana Parvas that provide lengthy considerations on justice, sovereignty, and the duties of kingship (Hiltebeitel, 2001). In this case, politics is moderated by the dharmic principles, but without being completely solved, leaving a long-standing tension that reflects the situation of the complexity of governance.

In comparison the two epics form a spectrum of political thought: the Rāmāyaṇa as an aspirational model of just kingship and the Mahābhārata as a pessimistic reflection of the uncertainties of authority. Read in conjunction with the Arthaśāstra and Dharmashāstra, these texts help to prove the multidimensionality of the Indian political tradition, in which pragmatic manuals were not the only tool to address issues of statecraft but also through narrative, ethics and philosophical discourse (Olivelle, 2013; Kane, 1962).

This study has a methodological contribution of showing how narrative texts may serve as vehicles of political theory of a sophisticated kind. Instead of considering literary and philosophical discourse as two distinct entities, the analysis demonstrates how the epics use the strategies of narrative to address political ideas in a more in-depth and nuanced way than what it is commonly found in systematic treatises. This line of thinking creates wider connotations about the way other cultures express political wisdom in dissimilar forms of texts.

What is good about the work is that it places the epics in a new context as a part of the Indian political

philosophy. Instead of their being peripheral or simply moralistic, they can be identified as the main texts, which challenge the classic dilemmas of leadership, legitimacy and justice. The epics provide tools on how to reconsider political responsibility both idealistically and in practice in governance, where there is always tension between ethics and realpolitik. Thus, far from being archaic cultural relics, the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata remain vital interlocutors in the global history of political thought.

Further research could discuss the impact of such epic traditions on subsequent Indian political thought, or how they were received in other parts of the world, or how they may still be relevant to modern Indian political language. These studies would also shed more light on the continuing relevance of these ancient writings as political reflection and analysis tools.

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