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Neither Rāma Nor Rāvaṇa Alone: Contested Masculinities, Dharmic Crisis, and the Plurality of Manhood in the Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata

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ABSTRACT

"*Dharma is subtle*" (*sūkṣmo dharmaḥ*), declares Bhīṣma from his bed of arrows in the *Śānti Parva* of the Mahābhārata (XII.109.10). This article argues that the subtlety of dharma is nowhere more profoundly tested than in the Indian epics' sustained, philosophically rigorous interrogation of what it means to be a man. Rather than prescribing a singular model of ideal manhood, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata stage a contest between radically divergent configurations of masculine identity—each grounded in different relationships to dharma, kāma, krodha, ahiṃsā, and sovereignty—that constitutes one of the world's earliest and most sophisticated philosophical engagements with the construction and crisis of masculinity. Through close textual analysis of six masculine archetypes across the two epics—Rāma's restrained sovereignty, Rāvaṇa's transgressive desire, Yudhiṣṭhira's ethical anguish, Bhīma's embodied fury, Arjuna's battlefield paralysis, and Kṛṣṇa's fluid tactical intelligence—the article demonstrates that the epics operate not as monologic prescriptions of *puruṣārtha* but as dialogic explorations of masculine possibility and failure. Drawing on the critical frameworks of Alf Hiltebeitel, Sheldon Pollock, Robert Goldman, and contemporary Indic masculinity studies, the article argues that the Itihāsas constitute a philosophically generative archive for understanding how masculine identity is constructed, contested, and transformed through dharmic crisis.

Keywords: Rāmāyaṇa; Mahābhārata; masculinity; dharma; Itihāsa; puruṣārtha; gender in Sanskrit literature.

Introduction: The Epic Question of Manhood

What does it mean to be a man? This is not a modern question. It is, arguably, the central animating question of the two great Indian epics—the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata—which devote tens of thousands of verses to exploring, testing, and ultimately refusing to settle the question of what constitutes exemplary masculine conduct. As Alf Hiltebeitel (2001, 14) observes, the Mahābhārata is "not a text that tells you what to do; it is a text that shows you what happens when you try to do what you think you should." This article extends Hiltebeitel's insight into the domain of gender: the epics do not prescribe a singular ideal of manhood; they dramatise the irreconcilable tensions between multiple ideals, and it is precisely this dramatisation—this refusal of resolution—that constitutes their philosophical depth.

The existing scholarship on gender in the Indian epics has predominantly focused on femininity: the dharmic trials of Sītā, Draupadī, and Kuntī have received extensive critical attention from scholars including Madhu Kishwar (2001), Sally Sutherland Goldman (2001), and Alf Hiltebeitel (1999). Masculinity, by contrast, has tended to be treated as self-evident—as the unmarked norm against which feminine deviation is measured. This is a significant analytical gap. As Robert Goldman (2001, 378) argues in his analysis of the Rāmāyaṇa, "the text's construction of masculine identity is no less complex, no less culturally deliberate, and no less philosophically consequential than its construction of femininity."

This article addresses this gap by undertaking a systematic comparative analysis of six masculine archetypes across the two epics, examining how each constructs a distinctive relationship between manhood and dharma. The analysis is organised around three paired juxtapositions—Rāma/Rāvaṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira/Bhīma, and Arjuna/Kṛṣṇa—each of which stages a fundamental tension within the epic discourse of masculinity: between restraint and transgression, between ethical anguish and embodied action, and between paralysis and adaptive intelligence. The article argues that these tensions are not resolved by the epics but held in productive suspension—generating a dialectical understanding of masculinity that resists the reductive binaries (good/evil, righteous/unrighteous, hero/villain) through which the epics are often popularly received.

The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 establishes the theoretical and textual framework, situating the analysis within the scholarship on dharma, puruṣārtha, and gender in Sanskrit literature. Sections 3, 4, and 5 present the three paired analyses. Section 6 examines the philosophical implications of the epics' refusal to prescribe a singular masculine ideal. Section 7 concludes by reflecting on the relevance of the epics'

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discourse of contested masculinity for contemporary scholarship on gender in the Indian tradition.

Theoretical and Textual Framework

a. Dharma, Puruṣārtha, and the Architecture of Masculine Obligation

Any analysis of masculinity in the Indian epics must begin with the concept of dharma—a term whose semantic range encompasses cosmic order, moral law, social duty, and individual ethical obligation. As Patrick Olivelle (2004, 33) demonstrates, dharma in the epic period operates as a "total social fact": it structures every dimension of human conduct, from the political to the intimate, from the ritual to the martial. For men in the epic world, dharma manifests primarily through the four puruṣārthas (aims of human life)—dharma (righteousness), artha (prosperity and power), kāma (desire and pleasure), and mokṣa (liberation)—and through the āśrama system that prescribes different masculine roles at different life stages: student, householder, forest-dweller, renunciant.

The critical insight, as Matilal (2002, 22) argues, is that these frameworks are not harmonious but fundamentally tensional. The pursuit of dharma may require the renunciation of kāma; the duties of artha may demand the violation of ahiṃsā (non-violence); the obligations of kingship may conflict with the obligations of kinship. The epics are not ethical manuals that resolve these tensions; they are philosophical laboratories that dramatise them through the bodies, choices, and failures of masculine protagonists. Each male character in the epics embodies a particular configuration of the puruṣārthas—a particular answer to the question of how a man should balance competing obligations—and the narrative evaluates each configuration through the consequences it produces.

b. Masculinity Studies and the Sanskrit Tradition

Contemporary masculinity studies, as articulated by Connell (2005), understands masculinity not as a biological essence but as a socially constructed configuration of practice—something that is performed, negotiated, and historically variable. While this framework originates in Western sociology, its analytical logic finds resonance in the Sanskrit tradition itself. As Doniger (1999, 4) observes, the Indian epics are acutely aware that masculine identity is constructed rather than given: "The Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata spend thousands of verses asking what a real man is, precisely because the answer is not obvious." The concept of svābhāva (inherent nature) interacts with that of svadharma (one's own duty) to produce a sophisticated understanding of masculine identity as the negotiation between nature and obligation—a negotiation that is never completed and never without cost.

Goldman's (2001) foundational study of masculinity in the Rāmāyaṇa establishes that Vālmīki's text constructs masculine identity through a series of deliberate contrasts—Rāma against Rāvaṇa, Rāma against Lakshmaṇa, Daśaratha against Jaṭāyu—in which the definition of ideal manhood emerges not from any single character but from the relational field between characters. Hiltebeitel's (2001) parallel analysis of the Mahābhārata demonstrates the same structural principle operating at a more complex level: the five Pāṇḍavas, collectively, constitute a composite exploration of masculine possibility that no single brother could embody alone. This article builds on these insights by examining how the two epics, read in dialogue, construct a philosophically comprehensive discourse of contested masculinity.

Restraint and Transgression: Rāma and Rāvaṇa

a. Rāma: Maryadā Puruṣottama and the Costs of Ideal Manhood

Rāma is designated *maryadā puruṣottama*—the supreme person of limits—a title that encodes a specific configuration of masculinity: manhood defined by the capacity for restraint, the subordination of personal desire to public duty, and the willingness to absorb suffering without complaint. In Vālmīki's text, Rāma's masculine identity is constituted through a series of renunciations: the renunciation of the throne (Ayodhyākāṇḍa), the renunciation of emotional expression (his carefully controlled grief after Sītā's abduction), and—most controversially—the renunciation of conjugal loyalty in the agni parīkṣā and the *Uttarakāṇḍa*'s abandonment of Sītā. As Pollock (1991, 15) argues, Rāma's masculinity is "a masculinity of sacrifice"—a model in which the man becomes most fully himself through what he gives up.

Yet the Rāmāyaṇa does not present this restraint uncritically. The text stages the costs of Rāma's ideal manhood with remarkable honesty. His compliance with Daśaratha's command causes the death of his father from grief. His insistence on public dharma over private feeling produces the agni parīkṣā—a scene in which Sītā's body becomes the terrain on which Rāma's public masculinity is performed, at devastating cost to the woman he loves. And the *Uttarakāṇḍa*'s narrative of Sītā's banishment exposes the most troubling implication of maryadā masculinity: that the man who subordinates all personal feeling to public duty may become the agent of profound injustice precisely through his commitment to righteousness. Rāma weeps in private; he never wavers in public. This is the architecture of his manhood—and the text invites the reader to experience both its grandeur and its cruelty.

b. Rāvaṇa: The Sovereignty of Desire

Against Rāma's restraint, Vālmīki positions Rāvaṇa's transgression. Rāvaṇa is not simply a villain; he is a counter-model of masculinity—a figure who represents the radical prioritisation of kāma and artha over dharma, of personal sovereignty over social obligation. As Goldman (2001, 385) observes, Rāvaṇa's masculine identity is constituted not by what he renounces but by what he claims: ten heads that embody multiple knowledges, mastery of the Vedas (he is a Brahmin by

birth), conquest of the three worlds through tapas, and—most consequentially—the claim to possess any woman he desires.

The text's treatment of Rāvaṇa is far more philosophically nuanced than popular reception suggests. Rāvaṇa is a devotee of Śiva, a master of sāma music, a builder of the golden city of Laṅkā, and a king whose subjects—with the exception of his own brother Vibhīṣaṇa—are materially prosperous. His masculinity is not without virtue; it is a masculinity in which virtue is subordinated to desire. The Sundarakāṇḍa's portrayal of Rāvaṇa's women reveals the structure of this model: his conjugal relationships are marked by genuine affection (Mandodarī's lament is one of the text's most emotionally powerful passages), yet his desire for Sītā reduces another man's wife to an object of conquest. The epic's judgement is clear—Rāvaṇa falls—but the philosophical question it raises is not simple: what is the relationship between masculine desire, masculine power, and masculine destruction? Rāvaṇa embodies the proposition that unlimited masculine sovereignty is ultimately self-consuming.

c. The Dialectic

Read together, Rāma and Rāvaṇa constitute a dialectical exploration of the relationship between masculine identity and the management of desire. Rāma's restraint produces justice at the cost of intimacy; Rāvaṇa's transgression produces magnificence at the cost of destruction. Neither model is presented as adequate on its own. The Rāmāyaṇa's philosophical achievement is to hold these two configurations in irresolvable tension, compelling the reader to reckon with the proposition that every model of masculine excellence carries within it the seeds of its own form of violence.

Anguish and Fury: Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma

a. Yudhiṣṭhira: The Dharmarāja's Impossible Masculinity

If Rāma represents masculinity defined by the capacity for restraint, Yudhiṣṭhira represents masculinity defined by the capacity for moral anguish—the ability to feel the weight of ethical contradiction without retreating into either dogmatic certainty or nihilistic despair. As Matilal (2002, 31) argues, Yudhiṣṭhira is "the moral philosopher of the Mahābhārata"—a man who asks questions that the text itself cannot fully answer. His masculinity is not constituted by physical prowess, martial skill, or sexual conquest but by ethical sensitivity: the willingness to suffer doubt.

The text stages Yudhiṣṭhira's masculine crisis with extraordinary philosophical precision. In the Sabhā Parva, he stakes his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and Draupadī in the dice game—a scene in which his commitment to honouring his word (the kṣatriya dharma of the wager) collides catastrophically with his obligation to protect those who depend on him. Draupadī's famous question—"Did he lose himself first, or did he lose me first?" (Sabhā Parva, II.67.28)—strikes at the heart of Yudhiṣṭhira's masculine authority: can a man who has lost sovereignty over himself claim sovereignty over others? The text offers no clear answer. Instead, it presents Yudhiṣṭhira's silence—his refusal or inability to respond to Draupadī's question—as the defining moment of his masculine crisis.

Throughout the subsequent narrative—the exile, the war, the *Śānti Parva*'s post-war philosophical dialogues—Yudhiṣṭhira repeatedly questions whether the Kurukṣetra victory was worth its price. His is a masculinity that cannot forget the dead, cannot celebrate the triumph, cannot reconcile the demands of kṣatriya dharma with the principle of ahiṃsā. The Mahābhārata's extraordinary achievement is to present this moral anguish not as weakness but as a form of masculine courage—the courage to remain ethically awake in a world that rewards ethical numbness.

b. Bhīma: The Body as Dharmic Instrument

Against Yudhiṣṭhira's cerebral anguish stands Bhīma's embodied fury. Bhīma is the Mahābhārata's most physically present masculine figure: his identity is constituted through appetite (his legendary hunger), physical strength (the killing of rākṣasas, the tearing apart of Duryodhana's thigh), and emotional intensity (his vow to drink Duḥśāsana's blood after Draupadī's humiliation). Where Yudhiṣṭhira hesitates, Bhīma acts. Where Yudhiṣṭhira asks whether violence is justified, Bhīma asserts that justice demands violence.

Hiltebeitel (2001, 243) reads Bhīma as the epic's embodiment of *vega*—force, momentum, the irreversible energy of righteous anger. His masculinity is constituted not by reflection but by action, not by moral subtlety but by somatic conviction. The famous scene in which Bhīma fulfils his vow by tearing open Duḥśāsana's chest and drinking his blood (Droṇa Parva, VII.154) is among the most viscerally disturbing in all of world literature—yet the text presents it as the fulfilment of a sacred oath, an act of dharmic restoration that can only be accomplished through the body. Bhīma's masculinity insists that dharma is not merely a philosophical proposition but a physical commitment—something that must be enacted through blood, sinew, and breath.

Yet the text does not idealise Bhīma's fury uncritically. His killing of Duryodhana by striking below the waist—a violation of the rules of mace combat—is publicly condemned by Balarāma as adharmic. Kṛṣṇa defends the act on strategic grounds, but the moral ambiguity is left unresolved. Bhīma's masculinity, like Rāvaṇa's, carries a destructive surplus: the same fury that achieves justice also transgresses the codes that define it. The epic presents this not as a contradiction but as a feature of embodied masculine existence—a recognition that the body that acts for dharma is always also a body capable of violating it.

c. The Dialectic

Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīma constitute the Mahābhārata's most sustained exploration of the mind/body tension in

masculine identity. Yudhiṣṭhira represents the mind that cannot stop questioning; Bhīma represents the body that cannot stop acting. Neither, on his own, constitutes a complete man—and the epic knows this. The five Pāṇḍavas function as a composite masculine subject precisely because no individual brother can embody the full range of dharmic manhood. This structural insight—that ideal masculinity may be a collective rather than individual achievement—is one of the Mahābhārata's most philosophically original contributions to the discourse of gender.

Paralysis and Fluidity: Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa

a. **Arjuna: The Warrior Who Refuses to Fight**

Arjuna's crisis on the battlefield of Kurukṣetra is the most celebrated scene in Indian literature—and, this article argues, the most philosophically consequential meditation on masculine identity in the epic tradition. The Bhagavad Gītā opens with Arjuna's *viṣāda* (despair): confronted with the reality that dharmic warfare requires him to kill his grandsire Bhīṣma, his guru Droṇa, and his kinsmen among the Kauravas, Arjuna lays down his Gāṇḍīva and declares that he will not fight (BG 1.46–1.47). This is a crisis of masculinity: the warrior—the figure whose entire identity is constituted by the capacity for martial action—discovers that he cannot act.

As Malinar (2007, 58) argues, Arjuna's *viṣāda* is not cowardice but a philosophical event: it represents the moment when the subject confronts the inadequacy of his existing framework for action. Arjuna's kṣatriya dharma demands that he fight; his familial dharma demands that he protect his elders; his guru-dharma demands that he honour Droṇa. These obligations are irreconcilable, and Arjuna's paralysis is the honest response of a man who refuses to pretend that they are not. The Gītā's philosophical project—Kṛṣṇa's teaching of niṣkāma karma (action without attachment to results)—is, in this reading, a response specifically to a crisis of masculine identity: how can a man act when every available action violates some dimension of his dharma?

Arjuna's masculine complexity extends beyond the Gītā. His year disguised as Bṛhannalā—a eunuch dance teacher in the court of King Virāṭa during the Virāṭa Parva—is one of the epic's most remarkable explorations of gender. As Hiltebeitel (1980) demonstrates, Arjuna's assumption of a gender-ambiguous identity is not merely a narrative device for concealment; it is a philosophical exploration of the proposition that the greatest warrior may also inhabit a feminine or non-binary subject position without diminishment. The Bṛhannalā episode suggests that the Mahābhārata's understanding of masculine identity is not confined to rigid binary categories but accommodates a fluidity that contemporary gender theory would recognise as deeply progressive.

b. **Kṛṣṇa: The Fluidity of Divine Masculinity**

Kṛṣṇa presents the most radically fluid model of masculinity in either epic. He is simultaneously a cowherd lover (the Ras Līlā tradition), a political strategist (the Udāyoga Parva's peace negotiations), a charioteer (Arjuna's sārathi), a divine teacher (the Gītā), and a warrior who does not himself fight in the Kurukṣetra war. As Hiltebeitel (1976, 312) argues, Kṛṣṇa's masculinity cannot be categorised within a single dharmic framework because he operates simultaneously across all frameworks—yet without the anguish that characterises Yudhiṣṭhira or the paralysis that afflicts Arjuna.

Kṛṣṇa's relationship to deception is central to his masculine construction. He advises Yudhiṣṭhira to lie to Droṇa about Aśvatthāmā's death (Droṇa Parva, VII.190); he engineers the killing of Bhīṣma through the deployment of Śikhaṇḍī; he facilitates Duryodhana's death through Bhīma's prohibited thigh-strike. Each of these acts violates the letter of kṣatriya dharma while arguably serving its spirit. Kṛṣṇa's masculinity is tactical, situational, and adaptive—a model in which the ideal man is not bound by rules but operates through them and beyond them, guided by a higher intelligence (*prajñā*) that transcends the categories available to ordinary human action.

This model of masculine fluidity is theologically grounded: Kṛṣṇa is an avatāra, and his freedom from the constraints that bind mortal men is a function of his divine nature. Yet the text does not confine this fluidity to the divine. Kṛṣṇa's teaching in the Gītā explicitly invites Arjuna—and by extension all men—to cultivate the *sthitaprajña* (the man of stable wisdom) who acts without attachment, desires without grasping, and navigates contradiction without despair (BG 2.54–2.72). The Gītā's ideal masculine subject is, on this reading, one who has internalised Kṛṣṇa's fluidity: a man who can hold multiple dharmic obligations simultaneously without being paralysed by their contradictions.

c. **The Dialectic**

Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa together constitute the Mahābhārata's most philosophically ambitious exploration of masculine possibility. Arjuna embodies the honest confrontation with the impossibility of being a man without causing harm; Kṛṣṇa embodies the proposition that this impossibility can be transcended through a radical reorientation of consciousness. The Gītā's dialogic form—a conversation between a paralysed warrior and a fluid divine teacher—is itself a formal enactment of the epic's understanding that masculinity is not a settled identity but an ongoing negotiation between human limitation and transcendent possibility.

Discussion: The Philosophical Significance of Contested Masculinity

The three paired analyses presented above converge on a central argument: the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata do not prescribe a singular ideal of masculinity but stage a sustained philosophical contest between multiple, irreducible models of manhood. This contest operates at several levels.

First, at the level of the puruṣārthas, each masculine archetype embodies a different prioritisation of

the four aims. Rāma privileges dharma over kāma; Rāvaṇa privileges kāma and artha over dharma; Yudhiṣṭhira privileges ahiṃsā within dharma; Bhīma privileges action within dharma; Arjuna confronts the irreconcilability of dharmic obligations; Kṛṣṇa transcends the puruṣārtha framework entirely through niṣkāma karma. The epics, read as a composite text, demonstrate that no single arrangement of the puruṣārthas produces a masculinity without cost—every configuration generates its own form of suffering, its own ethical blind spot, its own mode of violence.

Second, at the level of the body, the epics construct a spectrum of masculine embodiment ranging from Rāma's controlled sovereignty through Bhīma's visceral force to Arjuna/Bṛhannalā's gender fluidity. This spectrum demonstrates that the epic tradition does not confine masculine identity to a single bodily mode but recognises that the same man may need to occupy radically different embodied positions at different moments—warrior, ascetic, lover, teacher, and even, in Arjuna's case, a figure who crosses the gender boundary entirely. As Doniger (1999, 273) argues, the Indian epics contain a "sexual pluralism" that resists the rigid gender binarism often attributed to them.

Third, at the level of narrative form, the epics' structural multiplicity—the frame narratives within frame narratives, the philosophical dialogues embedded within battle narratives, the multiple retellings and interpolations—formally enacts their philosophical refusal of a single masculine ideal. The Mahābhārata is not a text with one hero; it is a text with five brothers, a divine advisor, a blind king, a vengeful prince, and a grandsire on a bed of arrows, each claiming a different relationship to dharma and manhood. This structural polyphony is not a deficiency of composition but a philosophical achievement: it is the formal expression of the insight that masculinity is essentially contested—that the question of what it means to be a man is one that admits of multiple, simultaneous, and incommensurable answers.

Conclusion: The Epics as a Living Archive of Masculine Possibility

This article has argued that the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata constitute one of the world's earliest and most philosophically sophisticated archives for the study of masculinity as a constructed, contested, and internally plural phenomenon. Through the analysis of six masculine archetypes—Rāma, Rāvaṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, and Kṛṣṇa—the article has demonstrated that the epics stage a sustained dialectical interrogation of what it means to be a man, exploring the tensions between restraint and transgression, anguish and action, paralysis and fluidity, without resolving them into a singular prescription.

This analysis has implications for both Indic studies and contemporary gender scholarship. For Indic studies, it suggests that the epics deserve recognition as foundational texts in the study of gender construction—not merely as objects to which gender theory is applied from outside, but as texts that generate their own sophisticated understanding of how masculine identity is produced through the negotiation of dharmic obligation, bodily experience, and ethical crisis. The Indian tradition has been theorising masculinity for two millennia; contemporary scholarship has much to learn from this tradition if it approaches it with the philosophical seriousness it deserves.

For contemporary gender scholarship, the epics' discourse of contested masculinity offers a resource that is both historically deep and analytically productive. In an era when the question of "toxic masculinity" dominates public discourse, the epics remind us that the question of what constitutes healthy, ethical, and sustainable manhood has been asked before—and that the most honest answer the Indian tradition has produced is not a prescription but a dialogue: an ongoing, never-completed conversation between men who embody different answers to the question of how to live as a man in a world where every action has consequences and no dharmic position is without cost.

As the Mahābhārata itself declares: *yato dharmas tato jayaḥ*—where there is dharma, there is victory (MBh XVIII.5.62). But the epic's deepest wisdom lies in its recognition that dharma is not a fixed position but a living question—and that the men who wrestle most honestly with that question, even when they fail, are the men most worthy of the name.

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