



Political Values in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa: A Comparative Study in Sanskrit Political Thought and Their Contemporary Relevance

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Abstract: *The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, the two foundational itihāsa-kāvya of Sanskrit literature, embed a sophisticated and remarkably durable body of political thought under the rubric of rājadharmā (the duty of the king) and nīti (the science of governance). This study undertakes a comparative textual analysis of the political values articulated in the two epics, situating them within their compositional milieu and evaluating their relevance to contemporary political discourse. Drawing principally upon the Kacchit-sarga of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa, the Śāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata, and select verses of the Bhagavad-gītā, the study argues that the Rāmāyaṇa articulates an idealist, exemplar-centred model of kingship built on personal righteousness, welfare (prajā-hita), and unwavering truthfulness, while the Mahābhārata develops a more systematic and realist framework of daṇḍanīti — the ethics of coercion — that reckons openly with moral ambiguity, emergency governance (āpad-dharma), and the ever-present danger of mātṣyanyāya, the law of the fishes, in which the strong devour the weak in the absence of ordered authority. Employing the comparative method and a chronologically arranged review of recent scholarship drawn from both Indian and international sources, the paper identifies convergences (the seven limbs of the state or saptaṅga, the primacy of dharma over daṇḍa, and the doctrine of the king as trustee rather than proprietor of the realm) as well as divergences rooted in genre and historical layering. The paper further traces the reinterpretation of these values in the modern period, most notably in Mahatma Gandhi's reading of Rāma-rājya as a metaphor for ethical self-governance rather than theocracy. The study concludes that the epics function as living nītiśāstra whose vocabulary of accountable, welfare-oriented, and self-restrained authority continues to offer indigenous conceptual resources for evaluating leadership, the limits of state power, and the moral foundations of governance in the present day.*

Keywords: *Rājadharmā, Daṇḍanīti, Rāma-rājya, Mātṣyanyāya, Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata Śāntiparvan, Bhagavad-gītā, Sanskrit Political Thought.*

1. Introduction: Sanskrit literary tradition has never regarded the epics purely as kāvya, poetry composed for aesthetic delight; the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata have always carried a simultaneous identity as śāstra— as repositories of practical instruction in dharma, artha, and nīti. The Mahābhārata famously declares itself a pañcama-veda, a fifth Veda, whose narrative frame is inseparable from its didactic burden; the Rāmāyaṇa, styled the ādi-kāvya or first poem, nonetheless devotes an entire sarga of its Ayodhyākāṇḍa to a catechism on statecraft. Political values in these texts are therefore never presented as an abstract political science divorced from ethics; they are woven into dharma itself, such that the legitimacy of a ruler is judged not by the extent of his dominion but by the righteousness of his exercise of power and his fidelity to the welfare of his subjects (prajā-hita).

This paper examines how each epic constructs its vision of political authority, compares the resulting models, and considers what these ancient formulations still offer to modern reflection on governance, leadership, and the limits of state coercion.

1.1 The Conceptual Framework: The conceptual vocabulary of this study rests on four interlocking Sanskrit categories. Rājadharmā denotes the specific dharma incumbent upon a king by virtue of his office, a duty higher and more exacting than the dharma of ordinary persons because its violation injures an entire polity rather than a single household. Daṇḍanīti is the science of the daṇḍa, the rod or sceptre of coercive authority, and encompasses both the legitimate use of punishment and the broader statecraft — diplomacy, taxation, military organisation — through which order is maintained. Mātsyanyāya, literally ‘the logic of the fish’, names the Mahābhārata’s foundational political anxiety: in the absence of an accepted sovereign authority, the strong will, as large fish do to small ones, consume the weak; kingship is instituted precisely to forestall this condition. Rāma-rājya, finally, is the Rāmāyaṇa’s positive ideal — the reign of Rāma as a state of justice, prosperity, and impartial welfare that later tradition, and modern political actors such as Gandhi, invoke as shorthand for good governance as such. These four terms together frame the analytical apparatus of the present study, which reads the epics neither as history nor as mere devotional literature but as texts of political theory expressed through narrative.

1.2 The Statement of the Problem: Much existing scholarship on ancient Indian political thought treats the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata either in isolation from one another or subordinates both to the more systematically theorised Arthaśāstra of Kauṭilya, with the result that the distinctive political architecture of each epic — the Rāmāyaṇa’s ideal of exemplary personal kingship and the Mahābhārata’s realist theory of the origin and necessity of coercive authority — is insufficiently disaggregated. Few studies undertake a sustained comparative reading anchored directly in the Sanskrit text of the Kacchit-sarga and the Śāntiparvan together with the Bhagavad-gītā, nor do they systematically test the contemporary applicability of these values against the recent (2021–2026) body of scholarship on rājadharmā. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is twofold: first, to identify with textual precision the distinct and shared political values of the two epics; and second, to assess, in light of current scholarly debate, what enduring relevance these values retain for the ethics of governance today.

1.3 The Significance of the Study: The significance of this study is threefold. Academically, it contributes a textually grounded comparative reading that privileges the primary Sanskrit sources — the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata’s Śāntiparvan, and the Bhagavad-gītā — over secondary paraphrase, thereby anchoring its conclusions in direct textual evidence rather than received generalisation. Culturally, it recovers a vocabulary of accountable and welfare-centred authority (prajā-hita, daṇḍanīti, saptāṅga) that remains embedded in Indian political discourse, from Gandhi’s Rāma-rājya to contemporary invocations of good governance. Practically, it offers a framework — self-restraint of the ruler, protection of productive classes, impartial and proportionate coercion, and preference for conciliation over force — that speaks to present debates on ethical leadership, the welfare state, and the limits of executive power. The study is therefore of interest to scholars of Sanskrit literature and Indology, students of comparative political theory, and practitioners concerned with the ethical foundations of public authority.

1.4 Research Objectives

O1: To identify the fundamental political values embodied in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa.

O2: To examine the role of Dharma as the foundation of political leadership in both epics.

O3: To examine the contemporary relevance of the political values presented in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa.

1.5 The Delimitations of the Study: This study confines itself to the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa (with primary emphasis on the Ayodhyākāṇḍa), the Śāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata, and the Bhagavad-gītā as the core primary sources, and does not undertake a full comparative treatment of regional retellings (such as the Rāmacaritamānasa or the Kamba-Rāmāyaṇam) or of the Arthaśāstra as an independent nīti text, though the latter is referenced comparatively. The study is textual and interpretive rather than archaeological or epigraphic, and does not attempt to settle the unresolved historical questions of authorship, dating, or the layered composition of either epic beyond the scholarly consensus required to contextualise the political material. Contemporary relevance is assessed with reference to Indian political discourse and does not extend to a systematic survey of comparative world epics.

2. Review of Related Literature

International Studies

Chatterji, R. (2024) revisited the living reception of the Rāmāyaṇa in contemporary popular culture, arguing in *Society and Culture in South Asia* that modern retellings of the epic through the idioms of superhero narrative and science fiction repurpose Rāma's exemplary conduct as a template for legitimate authority even in wholly secular genres, indicating that the epic's political-ethical grammar continues to migrate into new discursive spaces well beyond devotional or academic contexts.

Tabashir, M., & Shakoory, A. (2024), writing in the *Journal of Subcontinent Researches* (Iran), proposed a five-stage model of the development of ancient Indian political thought — crisis analysis, causation, utopian implication, normative implication, and critical implication — and argued that political theory in the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavad-gītā, and the Rāmāyaṇa reaches its most integrated form only after the narrative has passed through and moved beyond the extreme of sage-rulership, arriving at a normative equilibrium between coercive necessity and ethical restraint.

Jurayev, I. (2026), in the *International Multidisciplinary Journal for Research & Development*, examined Rāma's characterisation as ideal crown prince, contending that the epic transforms political succession into an ethical and near-metaphysical process in which moral self-sacrifice, rather than the pursuit or seizure of power, becomes the true marker of legitimate kingship — a reading that reframes succession politics itself as an exercise in dharma rather than dynastic contest.

National Studies

Nain, A. (2021), in a chapter contextualising rājadharmā within the Indian tradition of political thinking, surveyed the treatment of good governance across the Vedas, the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Bhagavad-gītā, the Śāntiparvan, the Nītisāra, the Arthaśāstra, and Buddhist sources such as the Dīgha Nikāya, concluding that rājadharmā consistently integrates the three puruṣārthas of dharma, artha, and kāma into a single normative framework for statecraft, with the seven limbs of the state (saptāṅga) serving as its structural backbone.

Subha, K. K. (2023), writing in the *RESEARCH HUB International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, analysed rājadharmā as it appears across ancient Indian political texts and argued that the concept simultaneously prescribes the personal duties of the king and establishes institutional norms of good governance, situating the Mahābhārata's treatment of kingship alongside Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra as complementary rather than competing sources of Indian statecraft.

2.1 The Research Gap

While the reviewed literature richly documents rājadharmā as a governing concept and traces its afterlife in modern political rhetoric, it tends either to survey both epics together at a high level of generality or to

isolate a single epic, character, or motif (Rāma's succession, the reception of the Rāmāyaṇa in popular culture) without a sustained, verse-anchored comparison of the Rāmāyaṇa's idealist model against the Mahābhārata's realist model of daṇḍanīti. Few of these studies bring the Kacchit-sarga and the Śāntiparvan into direct textual dialogue, and fewer still test the resulting comparative framework against the specific contemporary reference point of Gandhian Rāma-rājya. The present study addresses this gap by conducting a close, citation-anchored comparative reading of the two epics' primary political passages and by explicitly connecting that comparison to present-day discourse on ethical governance.

3. The Methodology of the Study

Research Method: This study adopts the comparative method of textual analysis, a method long established in Sanskrit and Indological scholarship for reading parallel or contrasting passages from related texts against one another to surface both shared conceptual structures and points of genuine divergence. Primary textual evidence is drawn from the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa (principally the Ayodhyākāṇḍa), the Śāntiparvan of the Mahābhārata, and the Bhagavad-gītā, supplemented by standard scholarly translations and critical editions. Each research objective is examined through relevant Sanskrit ślokas presented in the original alongside transliteration and interpretive commentary, and the findings are then read against the secondary scholarship reviewed in Section 2 to assess convergence, divergence, and contemporary resonance. This method is appropriate to the study's aim because it treats the epics as primary theoretical sources in their own right rather than as objects to be explained solely through external political-science categories.

4. Analysis and Interpretation of Objectives: This section presents the textual analysis organised around the three research objectives, drawing on Sanskrit ślokas from the Rāmāyaṇa, the Śāntiparvan, and the Bhagavad-gītā, with logical interpretation and supporting evidence.

O1: The Fundamental Political Values Embodied in the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa: The Rāmāyaṇa's most concentrated statement of political values occurs in the Kacchit-sarga of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa (canonically numbered around sarga 100), where Rāma, ostensibly inquiring after the welfare of Ayodhyā, in fact instructs his brother Bharata on the entire discipline of kingship. The sarga proceeds by a series of rhetorical questions, each beginning with kacchit ('I hope that...'), through which Rāma enumerates the tests of good governance: the appointment of learned, incorruptible ministers; secrecy and deliberation in counsel; protection of the agrarian and pastoral classes; timeliness of payment to soldiers and servants; the accessibility of the king to the humblest petitioner; and avoidance of a catalogue of royal vices including atheism, falsehood, anger, sloth, procrastination, and contempt for wise counsel.

कच्चित् ते दयिताः सर्वे कृषिगोरक्षजीविनः । वार्तायां संश्रितस्तात लोको ह्येष सुखं वहेत् ॥

kacchit te dayitāḥ sarve kṛṣi-go-rakṣa-jīvinah | vārtāyāṃ saṁśritas tāta loko hy eṣa sukhaṃ vahet ||

'I hope that all those who live by agriculture and by tending cattle are dear and well cared for by you, dear one, for the world sustained by vārtā (economic livelihood) truly prospers in happiness.' This verse establishes agrarian and pastoral welfare as the material foundation of political legitimacy: a polity's prosperity is measured by the condition of its producing classes rather than by the splendor of its court.

राजा तु धर्मेण हि पालयित्वा महामतिर्दण्डधरः प्रजानाम् । अवाप्य कृत्स्नां वसुधां यथावदितश्च्युतः स्वर्गमुपैति विद्वान् ॥

rājā tu dharmeṇa hi pālayitvā mahāmātirdaṇḍadharaḥ prajānām | Avāpya kṛtsnāṃ vasudhāṃ yathāvaditāśchyutaḥ svargamupaiti vidvān ||

'A wise king of great intellect who, wielding the rod of authority for the sake of his subjects, protects them righteously and rightly gains the entire earth, attains heaven when he departs from this world.' Here daṇḍa

(coercive authority) is not rejected but is explicitly subordinated to dharma: force is legitimate only as an instrument of protection, never as an end in itself.

Taken together, these verses articulate the Rāmāyaṇa's core political values: economic welfare as the measure of good rule, transparency and consultation in decision-making, personal incorruptibility of the sovereign, and the subordination of coercive power to righteous protection. The narrative reinforces this textually established programme through action — Rāma's willingness to honor his father's word at the cost of his own kingdom, his continued accessibility to petitioners, and the tradition's later idealisation of his reign as Rāma-rājya, a state characterised by justice, prosperity, and the absence of arbitrary discrimination.

The Mahābhārata's Śāntiparvan approaches the same terrain from the opposite direction: rather than depicting an ideal ruler in action, it offers a systematic theoretical account, delivered by the dying Bhīṣma to the newly enthroned Yudhiṣṭhira, of why kingship and coercive authority must exist at all. The foundational myth is that of mātṣyanyāya.

यदा हि नाभिपश्येत्तु प्रजा राजानमग्रतः । पीड्यमाना बलवद्भिरार्ता मत्स्या इवोदके ॥

Yadā hi nābhipaśyettu prajā rājānamagrataḥ | Pīḍyamānā balavadbhirārtā matsyā ivodake ||

‘For when subjects, oppressed by the stronger, do not see a king before them, they suffer as afflicted fish do in the water.’ This is the Mahābhārata's foundational political anxiety: absent a recognised and empowered sovereign authority, society collapses into unrestrained predation of the strong upon the weak — the condition the tradition names mātṣyanyāya. Kingship is thus instituted, in this account, as a corrective and protective institution rather than as a natural or purely hereditary entitlement, its authority justified functionally by the disorder it prevents.

From this foundation the Śāntiparvan builds a comprehensive daṇḍanīti: enumeration of royal virtues (truthfulness, forbearance, purity, protection of dependents), the doctrine of the four upāyas or means of statecraft — sāma (conciliation), dāna (gift or concession), bheda (division of the adversary), and daṇḍa (force) — applied strictly in that order of preference, and the insistence that dharma-vijaya, righteous conquest, is superior to conquest by deceit or terror. The Mahābhārata's political values are thus more explicitly institutional and procedural than the Rāmāyaṇa's, articulating not only what a good king should be but why kingship as an institution is necessary and how its coercive power should be structured, checked, and applied.

O2: Dharma as the Foundation of Political Leadership in Both Epics: Both epics converge in making dharma, rather than lineage, wealth, or martial capacity alone, the ultimate ground of political legitimacy, though they arrive at this convergence by different routes. The Bhagavad-gītā, embedded within the Mahābhārata's narrative at the threshold of the Kurukṣetra war, provides the philosophical keystone for this claim in Kṛṣṇa's counsel to the hesitating Arjuna.

यद्यदाचरति श्रेष्ठस्तत्तदेवेतरो जनः । स यत्प्रमाणं कुरुते लोकस्तदनुवर्तते ॥

Yadyadācarati śreṣṭhastattdevetaro janah | Sa yatpramāṇam kurūte lokstadanubartate ||

‘Whatever the best person does, others follow; whatever standard he sets, the world pursues.’ (Bhagavad-gītā 3.21). This verse grounds political leadership in exemplarity: the leader's own conduct, not merely edict or coercion, establishes the norm by which the wider community orders itself — a principle that directly underlies the Rāmāyaṇa's exemplar-centred model of kingship and Rāma's insistence on his own scrupulous conduct as the precondition of legitimate rule.

श्रेयान्स्वधर्मो विगुणः परधर्मात्स्वनुष्ठितात् । स्वधर्मे निधनं श्रेयः परधर्मो भयावहः ॥

‘Better one’s own dharma, though imperfectly performed, than the dharma of another well performed; death in the discharge of one’s own dharma is preferable, for another’s dharma brings danger.’ (Bhagavad-gītā 18.47). Applied to political leadership, this verse establishes that legitimate authority flows from the faithful discharge of one’s own specific station — the kṣatriya’s duty to protect and to wield daṇḍa when necessary — rather than from the abdication of that duty in favour of an ostensibly higher but improperly assumed role.

In the Rāmāyaṇa, dharma functions as an unconditional and largely uncontested absolute: Rāma’s exile, his refusal to contest his father’s word even when the succession itself is at stake, and his later, painful decision regarding Sītā are all presented as instances in which personal dharma is upheld even at devastating personal cost, because the king’s dharma is inseparable from public trust in the truthfulness of the royal word. In the Mahābhārata, by contrast, dharma is repeatedly shown to be difficult to discern in practice — dharma-saṃkṛta, the moral dilemma, recurs throughout the epic, from Arjuna’s hesitation on the battlefield to Yudhiṣṭhira’s anguished choices regarding truth-telling and warfare. Bhīṣma’s teaching in the Śāntiparvan explicitly allows for āpad-dharma, the modified ethical obligations appropriate to emergency or extremity, acknowledging that the ordinary rules of conduct may bend, though never wholly dissolve, under conditions of existential threat to the polity.

The comparative picture that emerges is this: the Rāmāyaṇa presents dharma as the fixed, non-negotiable centre of political leadership, exemplified rather than merely enforced by the ruler’s personal conduct; the Mahābhārata treats dharma as the necessary but genuinely contested foundation of leadership, one that must be actively interpreted, weighed, and sometimes painfully adjudicated by the ruler amid conflicting obligations. Both, however, agree that any political authority divorced from dharma degenerates either into tyranny or into the mātṣyanyāya condition that kingship exists to prevent.

O3: The Contemporary Relevance of the Political Values Presented in the Epics: The clearest instance of the epics’ political values migrating directly into modern political discourse is Mahatma Gandhi’s repeated invocation of Rāma-rājya as a description of his own ideal of self-governance. Gandhi was insistent that the term did not denote a theocratic or majoritarian religious order.

Gandhi wrote that “by Rāmarājya I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by Rāmarājya, Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God”, explicitly equating Rāma and Rahīm as names for a single moral authority, and describing the ideal as a condition in which even the meanest citizen could be assured of swift, inexpensive justice, freedom of conscience, and equal security regardless of creed or status (as recorded in Prabhu, 2021).

This Gandhian reading draws directly on the Rāmāyaṇa’s own values — accessibility of the ruler to the humblest subject, protection of agrarian livelihood, incorruptibility, and truthful governance — and transposes them from the register of monarchy into that of a self-governing, ethically accountable republic. Contemporary scholarship confirms that this transposition remains a live resource in Indian political rhetoric across the ideological spectrum, even as commentators dispute how faithfully any particular modern invocation of Rāma-rājya honours Gandhi’s explicitly pluralist and welfare-centred understanding of the term.

The Mahābhārata’s contribution to contemporary relevance operates somewhat differently, through its analytical vocabulary rather than through a single evocative ideal. Mātṣyanyāya remains a serviceable diagnostic term for conditions of state failure or regulatory vacuum in which unchecked economic or political power preys upon the vulnerable; the doctrine of the four upāyas, with its explicit preference for conciliation and negotiated settlement over force, continues to inform discussions of diplomacy and conflict resolution; and the concept of daṇḍanīti — that coercive state power is legitimate only when proportionate,

impartial, and oriented toward protection rather than domination — offers a still-relevant corrective against both authoritarian excess and an unrealistic disavowal of the state’s coercive function altogether. Recent scholarship situates both epics as living *nītiśāstra*, continually reinterpreted rather than merely preserved, precisely because their vocabulary of accountable, welfare-oriented, and self-restrained authority remains adaptable to institutional forms — constitutional democracy, administrative law, international diplomacy — that the epics themselves never envisioned.

Read together, the *Rāmāyaṇa* supplies the aspirational register of contemporary governance debates — the demand that leaders be personally exemplary, accessible, and incorruptible — while the *Mahābhārata* supplies the realist register, insisting that power must be theorised, checked, and applied with calibrated restraint precisely because it is indispensable. The persistence of both registers in modern Indian political vocabulary, from Gandhian *Rāma-rājya* to ongoing debates over good governance and the rule of law, constitutes the clearest evidence of the epics’ enduring contemporary relevance.

4.1 Comparative Summary

Table 4.1: Summarization of the Principal Points of Convergence and Divergence

Dimension	Rāmāyaṇa	Mahābhārata
Model of kingship	Idealist — personal exemplarity (Rāma as <i>maryādā-puruṣottama</i>)	Realist — institutional theory of kingship’s origin and necessity
Basis of legitimacy	Righteous personal conduct and truthfulness of the royal word	Protection from <i>mātsyanyāya</i> ; performance of protective duty
Treatment of coercion (daṇḍa)	Subordinated to dharma; instrument of protection, not domination	Systematised as <i>daṇḍanīti</i> ; graded through the four <i>upāyas</i>
Treatment of moral ambiguity	Minimal; dharma presented as largely unconditional	Central; dharma- <i>saṃkṛta</i> and <i>āpad-dharma</i> explicitly addressed
Key textual locus	Kacchit-sarga, Ayodhyākāṇḍa 100	Śāntiparvan (Rājadharmā-, Āpaddharma-, Mokṣadharmā-parvans)
Modern reinterpretation	Gandhian <i>Rāma-rājya</i> as ethical self-governance	<i>Mātsyanyāya</i> and <i>daṇḍanīti</i> as diagnostic categories in governance debate

5. The Findings of the Study

1. The *Rāmāyaṇa* articulates its political values primarily through the personal exemplarity of the ruler, most systematically in the Kacchit-sarga, where economic welfare (*vārtā*), transparent counsel, and accessibility to the humblest subject function as the operative tests of legitimate kingship.

2. The Mahābhārata's Śāntiparvan supplies a more systematic and institutional political theory, grounding the necessity of kingship in the prevention of mātṣyanyāya and elaborating daṇḍanīti through the graded doctrine of the four upāyas.
3. Dharma functions in both epics as the ultimate ground of political legitimacy, but the Rāmāyaṇa treats it as a largely unconditional absolute while the Mahābhārata treats it as a value that must be actively interpreted amid genuine moral difficulty (dharma-saṃkṛta) and emergency conditions (āpad-dharma).
4. The Bhagavad-gītā's teaching on exemplary conduct (Bhagavad-gītā 3.21) and on the primacy of one's own duty (Bhagavad-gītā 18.47) provides the philosophical bridge connecting the Rāmāyaṇa's exemplar-centred kingship with the Mahābhārata's duty-centred theory of coercive authority.
5. Both epics converge on a set of shared institutional values — the seven limbs of the state (saptāṅga), the subordination of daṇḍa to dharma, and the conception of the king as protector-trustee rather than proprietor of the realm.
6. The contemporary relevance of these values is most visibly demonstrated in Gandhi's reinterpretation of Rāma-rājya as an ethically pluralist ideal of self-governance rather than as theocratic or majoritarian rule, and in the continued diagnostic use of mātṣyanyāya and daṇḍanīti in present-day discussions of governance failure and the proportionate use of state power.
7. Recent scholarship (2021–2026), both Indian and international, consistently affirms that the epics function as living nītiśāstra whose vocabulary continues to be reinterpreted rather than treated as historically closed doctrine.

6. Recommendations

1. Future comparative studies should extend the present textual analysis to Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra as an independent third pole of ancient Indian political theory, systematically comparing its explicitly amoral realism against the Rāmāyaṇa's idealism and the Mahābhārata's ethically constrained realism.
2. Curricula in political theory and Indology would benefit from teaching the Kacchit-sarga and the Rājadharmā-parvan of the Śāntiparvan side by side, using the comparative method demonstrated here, so that students encounter Indian political thought as an internally differentiated tradition rather than a single undifferentiated body of 'ancient wisdom.'
3. Public invocations of Rāma-rājya in contemporary political discourse should be evaluated against Gandhi's own explicit gloss on the term — as an ethically pluralist ideal of accountable governance — to guard against its reduction to a purely majoritarian or sectarian slogan.
4. Further research should examine how the Mahābhārata's doctrine of āpad-dharma might inform contemporary jurisprudence on emergency powers, given the doctrine's insistence that even exceptional measures remain answerable to dharma rather than becoming a licence for unconstrained executive action.
5. Comparative Sanskrit scholarship should continue to be cross-read against international and interdisciplinary literature, as undertaken in Section 2 of this study, to ensure that indigenous political concepts are placed in productive dialogue with global political theory rather than treated as a closed, purely regional discourse.

7. Conclusion: The Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata articulate complementary rather than competing visions of political value. The former offers an inspiring, exemplar-centred ideal of Rāma-rājya rooted in personal dharma, economic welfare, and the ruler's accessibility and truthfulness; the latter offers a sophisticated institutional treatise on the necessity and perils of coercive power, grounded in the prevention of mātṣyanyāya and systematised through daṇḍanīti and the doctrine of the four upāyas. The Bhagavad-gītā, embedded within the Mahābhārata, supplies the philosophical hinge between the two — its teaching that the exemplary conduct of the leader sets the norm for the community, and that one's own duty faithfully discharged is preferable to the abdication of that duty, links the Rāmāyaṇa's ideal of personal righteousness to the Mahābhārata's realist theory of protective authority.

Textual analysis of the Kacchit-sarga and the Śāntiparvan, situated against the recent comparative scholarship reviewed in this study, confirms that both epics ground political legitimacy in dharma rather than in mere possession of power, and that both regard the coercive authority of the state as instrumentally justified by the protection and welfare it secures for subjects rather than as an end in itself. Their contemporary relevance is demonstrated concretely by the continued invocation of Rāma-rājya in Indian political discourse and by the persistent analytical utility of mātṣyanyāya and daṇḍanīti as categories for evaluating governance failure and the proportionate use of state power. Further comparative work bringing Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra into direct dialogue with the two epics, and examining how āpad-dharma might inform modern jurisprudence on emergency powers, would further enrich this line of inquiry. In sum, the epics remain living nītiśāstra — continually reinterpreted resources for thinking about justice, leadership, and the moral limits of the state that retain genuine purchase on contemporary political and ethical discourse.

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