

# Ramayana: The Indian Epic and Its Relevance to Global IR

Written by Ravi Dutt Bajpai

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# Ramayana: The Indian Epic and Its Relevance to Global IR

<https://www.e-ir.info/2023/08/17/ramayana-the-indian-epic-and-its-relevance-to-global-ir/>

RAVI DUTT BAJPAI, AUG 17 2023

**This article is part of the Indian IR Meets Global IR series, edited by Deepshikha Shahi and Raghav Dua**

The academic discipline of International Relations (IR) originated in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The Western-centric discourses soon emerged as the only source of authentic knowledge and as the benchmark for judging non-European intellectual traditions. Over the last few years, the Global IR push has enabled a variety of non-Western perspectives to (re-)emerge. And the rise of Asian powers in the world order, such as China and India, has prompted a greater engagement with the Chinese and Indian textual-historical accounts of statecraft, diplomacy, war, and peace. In the Indian context, the *Mahabharata* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* are the most cited texts on indigenous approaches to international relations (Parashar 2013, Narlikar and Narlikar 2014, Shahi 2018, Bisht 2019). However, the Indian narrative tradition of *Ramayana* offers an equally insightful yet far more succinct viewpoint to understand various aspects of the 'international'. *Ramayana* achieved a more profound and much wider influence on Southeast Asian societies than the *Mahabharata*, transmitting Indian thoughts on the code of conduct for individuals, society, states, and the international. This article examines some of the pertinent themes from Valmiki's epic *Ramayana*, which remain relevant and even prescient to international relations in the contemporary era.

Valmiki's narrative is neither the first nor the only rendition of the *Ramayana* story, yet the narrator is considered the *Adi Kavi* or the primal/primordial poet of Sanskrit and his text is considered the primal *Ramayana*, which inspired other versions. Valmiki was the first to create "a special pattern of prosody for the literary genre of the epic" and the first to forge "the grand form *Itihasa* or the epic in Sanskrit language" (Manavalan 2022, 16).

During the initial phases the prevalence of scientific methods to study social sciences obliged IR to embrace positivist approaches. Positivism claims context-transcendence by removing the researcher's values and is considered the most empirical, objective, and rational approach. The alternative approaches which sought to investigate the underlying premises and the politico-normative goals of positivism were termed post-positivism. Inspired by the works of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Gramsci, and the Frankfurt School, the post-positivists sought to harness the emancipatory potential of knowledge production. The *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, despite their imposing textual-historical narratives, were seen either as theological-metaphysical texts under positivism or as grand mythologies concocted to sustain oppressive social structures in the post-positivist perspectives. However, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is one of the first representative works of Indian textual-historical writing or *Itihasa*, regardless of the prevalence of Eurocentric epistemology based on the post-positivist or its antecedent perspectives. Before turning to *Ramayana*'s understanding of statecraft, intelligence gathering, diplomacy and the ethics of war, it is pertinent to acquaint oneself with its basic narrative.

## The Narrative

Rama, the protagonist of this narrative, the eldest son of Dasharatha (the king of Ayodhya) was the designated crown prince. Just a day before Ram's coronation as the regent, Queen Kaikeyi, the youngest consort of Dasharatha, asked the king to honour the two boons (which he had granted her for saving his life). She asked for the coronation of her

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son Bharata and fourteen years of exile for Rama. To honour his father's pledge, Rama left the kingdom with his wife, Sita, and younger brother Lakshmana. Distracted with his mother's selfishness, Bharata pursued Rama to the forest and pleaded him to return to Ayodhya, an appeal that went unheeded. Even as a renunciate, to help the seers Rama and Lakshmana killed several *rakshasas* (demons) in the forest, thus, inviting the wrath of Ravana (the king of demons). In the absence of Rama and Lakshmana, Ravana abducted Sita through deceit. Rama sought the help of Sugriva, the head of the renegade group of *vanaras* (variously depicted as apes, monkeys, or forest-dwelling people in different versions of the epic), to find Sita. Sugriva hides from his elder brother Bali, the mighty king of the *vanaras*. Rama kills Bali to win Sugriva's loyalty and then slays Ravana with the army of *vanaras*. Eventually, Rama returns with Sita and Lakshmana to rule over Ayodhya; his reign is called *Rama Rajya* – the epitome of good governance.

Given that the story centres on Ayodhya's royal family and their lives, the text offers detailed accounts of statecraft, *rajadharma* (duties of a ruler), diplomacy, and the ethics of war in several places. As Bharata pleaded with his elder brother to give up the hermit's life and return to the throne, the ensuing 'Rama-Bharata dialogue' is one of the most profound discourse on statecraft. Amidst the war with Rama, fearing the complete annihilation of the entire demon clan, Ravana forcefully awakens his brother Kumbhakarna to fight. The 'Kumbhakarna-Ravana dialogue' gives a brilliant exposition on statecraft and *rajadharma*.

After Sita's abduction, as Rama and Lakshmana search for her, they meet Hanuman, and the interaction among them is one of the finest examples of diplomatic protocol and ambassadorial etiquette. Just before the commencement of the combat, Rama sends Angad, the *vanara* crown prince, as an emissary to deliver his message to Ravana, another example that highlights the roles and responsibilities of an envoy.

Hiding behind a tree, Rama shoots an arrow that felled Bali; as the *vanara* king lies dying the 'Rama-Bali exchange' offers a detailed explanation about the idea of 'Just War'. The killing of Bali is also an example of the duties of a ruler and a conscientious citizen in upholding the *rajadharma*. Rama had to find a passage through the ocean to reach Lanka; he spent three days requesting the ocean for a meeting. On the fourth day, Rama decided to punish the ocean and explained the types of characters in human and non-human forms that can be subdued only through coercive measures.

## Statecraft and Intelligence Gathering

Rama offers one of the most astute discourses on statecraft upon seeing his younger brother, Bharat, not as a prince or designated regent but as a renunciate. This is one of the most consummate expositions of realpolitik that could easily rival Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and even Machiavelli's *The Prince* on statecraft.

At the beginning of his discourse, Rama inquires if Bharata offers due reverence to gods, ancestors, elderly dependents, teachers, doctors, and priests. He pointedly refers to one specific minister: Rama asks Bharat to show utmost respect to *Sudhanva*, an expert designer of weapons and an accomplished preceptor of *Arthashastra* or polity (Dutt 1893, 453). Rama's next major concern for Bharata is his choice of ministers and stipulates picking only the noble, brave, learned, patient, ethical ones who have transcended avarice (Shastri 1952, 370). Rama recognises the need for capable ministers and asserts that a king derives his excellence from proficient advisors "who are accomplished in the sacred texts and can maintain secrets" (Debroy 2017, 340). Rama identifies high moral conduct and absolute honesty as essential qualities in ministers. He asks Bharat if his ministers possess integrity, are incorruptible, and are also above prejudice in dispensing justice on any dispute between a rich and a poor person.

Rama also pronounces the essential qualities befitting a king and the code of conduct to discharge royal duties. He lists the fourteen failings a king must eschew – "non-belief, falsehood, anger, distraction, procrastination, disregard for the learned, laziness, pursuit of the five senses, single-minded devotion to artha, seeking counsel of those who don't know the objectives, failure to start projects that have been decided, failure to protect secrets, failure to observe auspicious signs and a readiness to rise from one's seat for everyone" (Debroy 2017, 343).

Rama insists that as a king, Bharata must command absolute loyalty from a battle-ready army and should ensure

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timely and adequate remuneration for the soldiers. He argues that Bharat, as a king hailing from the Kshatriya (warrior or ruling) clan, must command absolute loyalty from fellow warriors from the same clan. Rama stipulates that the army chief should be a person who is cheerful, wise, courageous, valiant, efficient, well-behaved, noble in birth, loved by his subordinates and should be the king's own appointment (Shastri 1952, 371). For battle preparedness during peacetime Rama advises to check that "all the forts are stocked with riches, grain, weapons and water and full of machines, artisans and archers" (Debroy 2017, 342). He claims that for the salaried employees of the state, adequate and regular payment is quintessential because irregular, inadequate remuneration may turn the most devoted servants against their masters, often leading to great calamity.

The other significant discussion on statecraft happens amidst the war between Rama and Ravana. Fearing the destruction of the entire demon clan, Ravana forced his mighty brother, Kumbhakarna, awake from his slumber. On hearing all the details about Sita's abduction, brother Vibhishana's defection, and the ongoing war with Rama, Kumbhakarna admonished Ravana for not following the *rajadharma* or the ruler's duty and for not selecting competent and upright ministers. Kumbhakarna reprimands Ravana for not observing the fundamental duty of diligence as a ruler, and for not assessing the consequences of his actions out of hubris and insolence. Kumbhakarna claims that Ravana's perverse acts without regard to the time and space were like tainted oblations that haven't been appropriately prepared (Debroy 2017, 130). Ravana only trusted his own power and did not follow the stipulated succession of actions and, out of arrogance, could not "distinguish between what is wise and what is foolish" (Shastri 1952, 166).

Kumbhakarna defines the art of statecraft and asserts that upon reaching an agreement with his counsellors, a king should engage in one of the three types of acts – "seeking peace through an alliance, surrendering and swearing allegiance, and fighting" (Debroy 2017, 129). As a fundamental rule of statecraft, Kumbhakarna posits that a king should not indulge in fickleness because once the outsiders detect such weaknesses, they quickly exploit this situation. Apart from fickle deeds, Kumbhakarna claims that Ravana made a cardinal mistake by ignoring the enemy and not taking his protection seriously; such a folly would bring ultimate defeat, and the king would be dislodged from his position.

Kumbhakarna also censured Ravana for not appointing erudite and sincere men as ministers. As mentioned earlier, Rama insists on outstanding, eminent, honest individuals as ministers. Kumbhakarna warns Ravana for having lackeys as advisors. Not only do such ministers lack intellect, courage and foresight, it is quite possible that some of them are in connivance with the enemy and sabotage the king from within. Kumbhakarna admonishes Ravana for not having the acumen to judge such ministers and for engaging them in some of the most critical tasks.

The above selection represents a small sample from the discussion about statecraft in Valmiki's *Ramayana*. One can find several instructive references to statecraft across the text, and there is no major incident/event in the narrative which does not refer to the ideas of statecraft and the ruler's duties. In fact, Valmiki's text mentions the idea of effective intelligence gathering frequently and emphatically; it warns how the rulers should be well-versed in the art of surveillance of their own people and espionage on the other states and in their meeting in the forest, Rama advises Bharata on the *modus-operandi*.

Rama explains that Bharat should employ three different spies, each unacquainted with the other to gather intelligence about eighteen functionaries of the enemy side and the fifteen officials from his own side (Shastri 1952, 371). The list of eighteen high-ranking "officers of the enemy are the prime minister, the royal priest, the crown prince, the commander in chief, the chief warder, the treasurer of the palace, the superintendent of jails, the treasurer of the kingdom, the herald, the public prosecutor, the judge, the assessor of taxes, the one who disburses salaries to soldiers, the one who disburses salaries to workers, the superintendent of public works, the protector of the borders, the magistrate and the supervisor of forests and water bodies. On one's own side, the prime minister, the royal priest and the crown prince are exempted from scrutiny" (Debroy 2017, 341).

The significance of spies and surveillance is referred to in several places lauding it as a very expedient strategic tool. At the beginning of the text, where Valmiki applauds the admirable characteristics of Ayodhya, running an efficient espionage network is mentioned as one of the critical elements of efficient administration. Valmiki claims that there

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was nothing unknown to Dasharatha's ministers through their vast and meticulous spy network as they had detailed knowledge about the ongoing schemes "whether it was already accomplished, actually taking place, or even merely contemplated" (Goldman 1984, 138). Remarkably, while Ayodhya was not at war, surveillance and espionage were critical administrative tasks even during peace and in a period of abundance.

Undoubtedly, the scope of intelligence gathering would see a major escalation around the period of open hostility. As the war looked imminent, the demon king Ravana sent multiple sets of spies to embed themselves within Ram's army and collect all possible intelligence. Ravana picks some of the most elite of his spies and gives them precise instructions to take the form of *vanaras* and entrench themselves within the close circle of advisors of Rama. Ravana commands his spies to observe every minute detail of Rama and his lieutenants, including their daily routine. Highlighting the importance of effective espionage operations, Ravana states that by gathering sufficient intelligence about the enemies through spies, a wise king can overwhelm the adversaries with little effort in conflict (Dutt 1893, 1186).

It was not that only Ravana was sending spies to collect intelligence; spies were also sent from Rama's side to gather intelligence on Ravana's army and military strategy. However, Rama never sought this reconnaissance; Ravana's brother Vibhishana supervised this operation. During a discussion among Rama's advisors on military strategy, Vibhishana said that he had sent some of his ministers in the disguise of birds to observe every minute detail of Ravana's war preparedness, fortifications and the plans of military deployment. According to the *Ramayana*, espionage and surveillance are effective tools for smooth administration. They help enforce compliance among the citizens and enable the rulers to adapt to changing situations and course correction to ward off potential internal unrest and external aggression.

## Diplomacy and Just War

There are several references to diplomacy and some of the quintessential characteristics of a successful envoy in the *Ramayana*. The idea of deploying the ambassador or the envoy for intelligence gathering is mentioned in several instances. Rama defines the necessary criterion for diplomatic or ambassadorial appointment in his discourse on statecraft to Bharat. Rama claims that an ambassador should be a person who is wise, accomplished, endowed with the presence of mind and one who only speaks to the point. One of the most perceptive accounts of diplomacy is described in the first meeting between Rama-Lakshmana and Hanuman. On seeing Rama and Lakshmana approach his hiding place, Sugriva was petrified and sent Hanuman in disguise to gauge the true intention of the two heroic warriors bearing arms.

Hanuman took the form of a mendicant and offered fulsome praise of Rama and Lakshmana before revealing his identity as the envoy of Sugriva. Hanuman was so adept in the art of diplomacy that he spoke precisely, as much as expected of him and that too in discreet and courteous terms. Rama asked Lakshmana to converse with Hanuman in gentle and affectionate words. Remarkably, Rama asked Lakshmana to speak with Hanuman since, under the diplomatic protocol the king did not speak directly to the ambassadors. Rama then praises Hanuman's finesse, eloquence and etiquette as an ideal envoy, stating that Hanuman must be an expert in the *Vedas* and Grammar because while he spoke at length, his entire talk was free of errors. Moreover, his body language, voice modulation, facial expressions, and sincerity of speech would charm even the fiercest foes. Concluding his assessment of Hanuman, Rama claims that any king "who employs messengers gifted with such talent is certain to succeed in all his undertakings, since they are enhanced at the very outset, by such eloquence" (Shastri 1952, 175).

The brevity, clarity and authenticity of speech are some of the most critical characteristics of an envoy, a point further reiterated in Rama's decision to send Angad as an envoy to Ravana just before the commencement of the war. Angada went to Ravana's palace and approached Ravana, the demon king, without fear or bravado. Angada wore the ornaments and dresses that enhanced the aura around him and, after introducing himself, delivered every word of Rama's stern message to Ravana "without adding or taking anything away" (Debroy 2017, 70). While diplomacy and building coalitions through envoys are referred to quite frequently in the entire text, the art of diplomacy and the essential characteristics of an efficient envoy are described in minute details at several places.

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Indeed, the entire narrative of the *Ramayana* is about 'Just War'. In fact, Rama is considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu (the preserver), who descended to the earth to save the world from the evil demons (Balkaran and Dorn 2012, 664). While several instances fulfil the Just War criteria, for the sake of brevity, this essay picks up two. One is Rama's killing of the *vanara*-king Bali, while the other refers to Rama's ultimatum of punitive actions against the recalcitrant ocean. The discussion on Just War is akin to *presentism* or transposing the present-day perspective of justified war on an ancient text with vastly different socio-cultural contexts. Nevertheless, the aim is to underline the continuity of some ancient modes of thought and conduct in the contemporary era.

Rama shot an arrow at the *vanara* king Bali from behind a tree, and a dying Bali accused Rama of *adharma* or non-righteousness. Rama's explanation to justify his act defines the idea of *dharma* or righteousness from different perspectives as a Kshatriya (from the Warrior clan), a ruler, and a conscientious citizen. Rama asserted that the land where he felled Bali belonged to his own Ikshvaku clan and that inheritance endowed him with the right to punish and reward anyone. Moreover, Rama claims that all the people living under the sovereignty of King Bharata were bound to follow *dharma* or norms of righteousness established by the king. Rama argues that "placing Bharata's instructions at the forefront, as is proper, we chastise those who deviate from the path" (Debroy 2017, 196).

Rama explains that he was duty-bound to kill Bali since the *vanara* king abandoned *dharma* and forced himself on his younger brother's wife. Rama proclaims that lusting for or having a sexual relationship with the younger brother's wife is a grave sin which must be punished. He acknowledged that as the upholders of *dharma* and enforcers of the code of conduct according to *dharma*, he could not condone Bali's transgression. Explaining Bali's killing as *rajadharma*, Rama argued that should a king fail to mete out adequate punishment to the guilty, the king himself had to bear the consequences (Debroy 2017, 197).

In another instance, Rama humbly requests the great ocean to allow him passage through it so that his large army could reach Lanka. Rama followed the requisite piety and protocol, and lay down at the seashore for three nights to persuade the ocean to appear in a personified form. Having failed to convince the ocean through his humble supplication Rama was enraged and then decided to teach the ocean a lesson. He declared that arrogant and ignoble ones should not be shown respect or courtesy because virtuous qualities like calmness, forbearance, uprightness and pleasant speech are futile with those without virtues. Rama declares that the world only honours a man who is pompous, wicked, shameless, and commits every kind of excess. Rama affirms that "Meekness will never bring victory on this earth, O Lakshmana, any more than in the forefront of battle!", so he decides to show his martial prowess to the ocean (Shastri 1952, 49). Rama did not have to wage war against a recalcitrant ocean; even the threat of potential punitive war can be interpreted as Just War. From Rama's perspective, his decision for coercive action fulfils the norms of a legitimate war.

Overall, the themes from the *Ramayana*, covered in this article, offer insights into *rajadharma*, statecraft, intelligence gathering, diplomacy and the ethics of war with considerations of good governance, ethical behaviour, and the vision of maintaining a sustainable order. The Rama-Bharata dialogue emphasizes the importance of just, righteous, and responsible rule with a vision of maintaining the harmony and stability of the state, and the well-being and survival of the people. The same dialogue also emphasizes effective intelligence gathering which helps rulers/decision-makers make informed decisions that align with their necessities and goals. Competent diplomacy, another recurring theme, can have far-reaching impacts on the security and stability of a state as it contributes to peaceful coexistence and shared efforts toward sustainable futures. Finally, *Ramayana*'s ethical considerations of warfare underscore the importance of judicious and careful exercise of violence, promoting stability even in times of crisis. Incorporating these themes and considerations, *Ramayana* provides significant lessons for international relations.

Aside from the Eurocentric discourses, the non-Western traditions have several insightful and comprehensive accounts of international relations, even though they are largely ignored or considered unauthentic. Lack of history writing and absence of political thought have also been assigned to Global South/non-Western societies. Georg Hegel, for example, attributed lack of Indian history writing to the absence of political awareness among its people, despite the ancient texts such as *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* of the *Itihasa* genre. More recently, however, the *Mahabharata* (especially the *Bhagavad Gītā*) and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* have been incorporated as part of the non-Western/Indian canonical works in IR. This essay has argued that Valmiki's *Ramayana* also offers an equally

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compelling and discerning account of international relations. In fact, other tellings of the *Ramayana* are equally profound in offering lessons on international relations, including the most popular version of Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas* from the medieval period. Given the scope and depth of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, it is virtually impossible to include all possible events, discussions, and explanations in one short article. Further explorations and commentaries are needed given the popularity of the *Ramayana* story in contemporary India, in the widespread Indian diaspora across the world, in societies with Indian indentured labour histories, and in South East Asia where many stories of the *Ramayana* still resonate with those societies.

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## About the author:

**Ravi Dutt Bajpai** holds a PhD from Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia and is a Visiting Researcher at the School of Global Studies, Gothenburg University, Sweden. He is also an adjunct lecturer at St. Xavier's College, Ranchi. He is the co-author (with Harivansh) of *Chandra Shekhar: The Last Icon of Ideological Politics* (2019) and has published several journal articles, book chapters and popular media pieces in both Hindi and English. His research interests include civilizational perspectives in international relations; non-western/postcolonial international relations; China and India in global politics; China-India relations, religion and cultural exchanges. He can be reached at [ravi.dutt.bajpai@gu.se](mailto:ravi.dutt.bajpai@gu.se).