

A Study on Rājadharmā as a Foundation of Ethical Governance in the Perspectives of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa

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Abstract: *This paper undertakes a textual-hermeneutic study of Rājadharmā — the Sanskritic doctrine of righteous kingship — as it is constructed in the two great itihāsa texts of classical India, the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, read alongside the foundational articulations of Dharmaśāstra (Manusmṛiti) and Arthaśāstra (Kauṭilya). Rājadharmā, etymologically the dharma proper to the rājan, is examined not as a narrow code of statecraft but as an integrated ethical ontology in which artha (material welfare) and daṇḍa (coercive power) are subordinated to dharma (righteousness) as the ultimate ground of legitimate sovereignty. Drawing on primary Sanskrit verses — including Manu’s rājadharmā-praṇayana (Manusmṛiti 7.1–3), the Utathya-Gītā of the Śāntiparvan (Mahābhārata 12.90–91), Kauṭilya’s dictum on the identity of royal and public welfare (Arthaśāstra 1.19.34), and the celebrated description of Rāma-rājya in the Yuddhakāṇḍa (Rāmāyaṇa 6.128.99–100) — the study argues that both epics converge in positioning the king as dharmasya goptā, the guardian rather than the author of righteousness, while diverging in narrative method: the Rāmāyaṇa idealises Rājadharmā through the exemplary figure of Rāma as maryādā-puruṣottama, whereas the Mahābhārata, through Bhīṣma’s discourse to Yudhiṣṭhira in the Rājadharmānūsāsanaparvan, interrogates Rājadharmā dialectically amid the moral crises of āpaddharma and the Kali-saṃdhi. The paper further situates this classical vocabulary — prajāpālana, daṇḍanīti, yogakṣema, satya, ahimsā — in relation to contemporary concerns of ethical and constitutional governance, cautioning against anachronistic equivalence while identifying genuine points of resonance. The study concludes that Rājadharmā, in both epics, is not merely political science (rājanīti) but a lived ethical vocation in which the sovereignty of the state and the moral self-discipline of the sovereign are rendered inseparable.*

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 30 March 2026

Received in revised form

10 April 2026

Accepted 15 April 2026

Citation: Jana. S. K., (2026) “A Study on Rājadharmā as a Foundation of Ethical Governance in the Perspectives of the Mahābhārata and the Rāmāyaṇa”, *Pen and Prosperity*, Vol. 3, Issue.

Keywords: Rājadharmā; dharmaśāstra; Mahābhārata; Rāmāyaṇa; daṇḍanīti; prajāpālana; ethical governance; Rāma-rājya; Śāntiparvan; Arthaśāstra.

1. Introduction

1.1 Theoretical Perspective: The compound term Rājadharmā is formed from two of the most semantically dense words in the Sanskrit lexicon: rājan (king, ruler, one who shines — from the root √rāj, “to shine” or “to rule”) and dharma (from √dhr, “to hold, sustain, uphold”), the cosmic and moral order that sustains the universe, society, and the self. In the classical nirukta (etymological) tradition, the rājan is so named because he rājate, “shines,” and this royal splendour is understood to arise not from personal glory but from the

proper protection of the people, so that the very possibility of legitimate kingship is bound to the act of rakṣā, protection.

राजधर्मान् प्रवक्ष्यामि यथावृत्तो भवेन्नृपः । सम्भवश्च यथा तस्य सिद्धिश्च परमा यथा ॥

rājadharmān pravakṣyāmi yathāvṛtto bhavennṛpaḥ | sambhavaśca yathā tasya siddhiśca paramā yathā ||

“I shall now expound the duties of kings — how a sovereign should conduct himself, how kingship came into being, and how the highest success is attained by it.”

Manusmṛti 7.1 (Bühler, 1886, p. 216; Olivelle, 2005, p. 154)

Rājadharmā is thus, from its very first formulation in the Dharmaśāstra corpus, defined not as an autonomous science of statecraft but as a species of dharma — one of the varṇāśrama-specific and office-specific dharmas (svadharma) that together constitute the total moral order (sanātana dharma). The king’s dharma is a dharma of function (adhikāra-dharma) rooted in the kṣatriya’s constitutive duty of daṇḍadhāraṇa, the bearing of the rod of chastisement, but it is not reducible to force: it is force disciplined and legitimated by dharma. As this paper will demonstrate, Rājadharmā in both epics functions as the master category under which artha (wealth, statecraft, the pursuit of worldly prosperity) and kāma (desire, personal and dynastic ambition) are held answerable to a higher righteousness — dharme na kāmakaraṇāya, kingship exists “for dharma, not for the satisfaction of desire” (Mahābhārata 12.91.3).

1.2 Rājadharmā as the Integrative Ethical-Political Ideal: Classical Indian political thought characteristically organises human ends into the trivarga (three pursuits) of dharma, artha, and kāma, to which mokṣa (liberation) is sometimes added as a fourth. Rājadharmā occupies a singular position within this schema: it is the discourse in which artha — elsewhere theorised independently, most systematically in Kauṭilya’s Arthaśāstra — is folded back under the primacy of dharma. Kauṭilya himself, notwithstanding the Arthaśāstra’s reputation for a coldly instrumental realism, articulates the ethical core of Rājadharmā in terms strikingly convergent with the epics and the Dharmaśāstra:

प्रजासुखे सुखं राज्ञः प्रजानां च हिते हितम् । नात्मप्रियं हितं राज्ञः प्रजानां तु प्रियं हितम् ॥

prajāśukhe sukhaṁ rājñāḥ prajānām ca hite hitam | nātmapriyaṁ hitaṁ rājñāḥ prajānām tu priyaṁ hitam ||

“In the happiness of the subjects lies the happiness of the king, and in their welfare his welfare; the king’s good does not lie in what pleases him alone, but in what is pleasing and beneficial to his subjects.”

Arthaśāstra 1.19.34 (Kangle, 1972, p. 47; Olivelle, 2013, p. 108)

This verse, occurring in the very chapter that regulates the king’s daily routine, discloses the ethical grammar that Rājadharmā imposes even upon artha-śāstra: sovereignty is reconceived not as the accumulation of private power but as a fiduciary office whose legitimacy is measured entirely by the welfare (hita) of the governed. It is this reconception — dharma as the sovereign of the sovereign — that the present study traces through the narrative theologies of the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata.

Despite the vast secondary literature on dharma in general, comparatively few studies read the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata together as complementary — rather than competing — articulations of a single doctrine of ethical sovereignty. The central research problem addressed here is therefore: How do the two

great Sanskrit epics construct Rājadharmā as the foundation of ethical governance, and in what ways do their respective narrative strategies — the idealising mode of the Rāmāyaṇa and the dialectical, crisis-driven mode of the Mahābhārata — offer complementary rather than contradictory accounts of righteous kingship?

The objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to explicate the etymological and doctrinal foundations of Rājadharmā in Vedic, Smṛti, and Nītiśāstra literature; (2) to conduct a close textual-hermeneutic reading of key Sanskrit passages on kingship in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, with attention to their classical commentarial reception; and (3) to draw out, comparatively, the shared conceptual vocabulary and complementary emphases of the two epics, before reflecting — with due caution against anachronism — on their relevance to contemporary ethical governance.

Methodologically, the study is a textual-hermeneutic analysis: it works from primary Sanskrit verses (in Devanāgarī and IAST transliteration) drawn from the critical and traditional editions of the Manusmṛti, the Arthaśāstra, the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, and the Mahābhārata (particularly the Śāntiparvan's Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan), interpreted with reference to classical commentators (notably Medhātithi on the Manusmṛti) and to established academic translations and critical scholarship. The approach is qualitative and interpretive rather than statistical, consistent with the hermeneutic traditions of both Indology and comparative political theory.

The modern academic study of Rājadharmā owes its foundational architecture to Pandurang Vaman Kane's monumental History of Dharmaśāstra, whose third volume remains the single most exhaustive treatment of the king's duties, the theory of daṇḍa, and the relationship between Dharmaśāstra and Arthaśāstra in classical India (Kane, 1946). Patrick Olivelle's critical edition and translation of the Manusmṛti (Olivelle, 2005) and his subsequent study of Kauṭilya's Arthaśāstra as a work of political ethics rather than mere realpolitik (Olivelle, 2013) have substantially revised earlier, more reductive readings of Indian statecraft. On the epic side, Alf Hiltebeitel's Rethinking the Mahābhārata reframes the entire epic as the pedagogical unfolding of Yudhiṣṭhira's education as a dharma-king, situating the Śāntiparvan's Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan as its ethical and structural centre (Hiltebeitel, 2001). Sheldon Pollock's introduction and translation of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa (Pollock, 1986) similarly demonstrates how the Rāmāyaṇa's narrative architecture is organised around competing claims of pitṛvākya (paternal command), satya (truthfulness), and rājadharmā. This study builds on these foundations while attempting a sustained comparative reading that previous scholarship has treated largely text-by-text.

2. Foundations of Rājadharmā

2.1 Vedic and Smṛti Roots: The idea that kingship arises from a crisis of lawlessness — rather than from conquest, divine caprice, or hereditary entitlement alone — is one of the oldest strata of the Rājadharmā tradition. Manu narrates the origin of kingship as a direct response to social anarchy (mātsyanyāya, “the law of the fish,” in which the strong devour the weak):

यदा प्रजास्तु धर्मस्य कुर्युर्विप्रतिपत्तिकाम्। तदैनं सृजते राजन्देवैः पूर्वं प्रजापतिः॥ अराजके हि लोकेऽस्मिन् सर्वतो विद्रुतेऽभयात्। रक्षार्थमस्य सर्वस्य राजानमसृजत् प्रभुः॥

arājake hi loke 'smin sarvato vidrute 'bhayāt | rakṣārthamasya sarvasya rājānam asṛjat prabhuḥ ||

“For when this world was without a king and, through fear, dispersed in every direction, the Lord [Prajapati/Brahmā] created the king for the protection of all this [creation].”

Manusmṛti 7.3 (Bühler, 1886, p. 217; Olivelle, 2005, p. 155)

The theological grounding of kingship in this passage — the king as a divinely instituted remedy for anarchy — does not, however, confer unconditional authority. Rather, it establishes protection (rakṣā, parirakṣaṇa) as the very reason for the king's existence, so that a king who fails to protect forfeits the ground of his legitimacy. This conditional, function-derived theory of sovereignty distinguishes the Dharmaśāstra model from theories of divine right untethered to performance, and it is precisely this conditionality that both epics dramatise.

2.2 Core Principles: Dharma as Sovereign, Prajāpālana, and Daṇḍanīti: Three interlocking principles structure the classical theory of Rājadharmā. First, dharma is sovereign over the king rather than the reverse (dharmādhīna-rājatva): the king enforces dharma but does not originate it, a point made with striking clarity in the Utathya-Gītā of the Śāntiparvan:

धर्माय राजा भवति न कामकरणाय तु । एवं जानीहि राजा लोकस्य रक्षिता ॥ धर्मे तिष्ठन्ति भूतानि
धर्मो राजनि तिष्ठति । तं राजा साधु यः शास्ति स राजा पृथिवीपतिः ॥

*dharmāya rājā bhavati na kāmakaraṇāya tu | ... rājā lokasya rakṣitā || dharme tiṣṭhanti
bhūtāni dharmo rājanī tiṣṭhati | taṁ rājā sādhu yaḥ śāsti sa rājā pṛthivīpatiḥ ||*

“A king exists for the sake of dharma, not for the gratification of desire — know thus, [O Māndhātṛ,] the king is the protector of the world. All beings abide in dharma, and dharma abides in the king; that king who rightly upholds it is the true lord of the earth.”

*Mahābhārata, Śāntiparvan (Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan), Utathya-Gītā 12.91.3, 5
(Ganguli, 1891, Vol. 8, p. 199; Fitzgerald, 2004, p. 445)*

Second, prajāpālana — the protection, nurture, and moral guardianship of the prajā (subjects/progeny) — is the operational core of Rājadharmā, encompassing physical security, economic welfare, judicial redress, and the maintenance of varṇāśrama order. Third, daṇḍanīti, the science and ethics of coercive sanction, is theorised not as an end in itself but as the instrumental arm of dharma: daṇḍa is the visible, punitive form that dharma assumes when voluntary compliance fails. The king is called dharmasya goptā, “the guardian of dharma,” precisely because he wields daṇḍa in dharma's service rather than his own.

2.3 The King as Lokapāla and Dharmapravartaka: The king is repeatedly figured in the epics and Śāstra literature as a lokapāla, a “guardian of the world” whose person condenses the moral condition of the entire realm — a homology later systematised in the doctrine of the king as an amalgam of the eight lokapāla-devatās (Indra, Agni, Yama, Sūrya, Varuṇa, Vāyu, Kubera, and the Moon), each contributing a virtue (splendour, energy, justice, illumination, restraint, pervasiveness, prosperity, and gentleness respectively) to the composite office of kingship. As dharmapravartaka, “the one who sets dharma in motion,” the king is also charged with actively propagating righteousness through personal example — a role the Śāntiparvan expresses through the well-known homology of ruler and ruled: as the king behaves, so behave the subjects, for “all created beings follow the conduct which the king himself practises” (yathā rājā tathā prajāḥ), a maxim so pervasive in the dharmaśāstra and nīti tradition that it recurs, in closely paraphrased form, across the Śāntiparvan, the Rāmāyaṇa, and later nīti compilations such as the Hitopadeśa and Pañcatantra.

2.4 Rājadharmā and Rājanīti: Distinction and Complementarity: Rājanīti (statecraft, political prudence) and Rājadharmā (righteous kingship) are frequently treated as near-synonyms in secondary literature, but the primary texts sustain a meaningful distinction. Rājanīti, exemplified by the Arthaśāstra's ṣaḍguṇya (six measures of foreign policy — sandhi, vighraha, āsana, yāna, saṁśraya, dvaidhībhāva) and its catalogue of upāya (sāma, dāna, bheda, daṇḍa), concerns the technical, strategic, and often amoral calculus of statecraft: what is expedient. Rājadharmā, by contrast, concerns what is right, and functions as the normative envelope

within which rājanīti's technical prescriptions must operate. Kane observes that the Dharmaśāstra writers, even while borrowing extensively from Arthaśāstra materials on administration and taxation, consistently subordinate expediency to dharmic constraint, so that rājanīti becomes, ideally, dharma's applied methodology rather than an independent or countervailing discipline (Kane, 1946, pp. 20–48). The two epics enact this complementarity narratively: both valorise political prudence (nīti) exercised by counsellors such as Vasiṣṭha, Vidura, and Kṛṣṇa, while insisting that prudence divorced from dharma — as in Duryodhana's statecraft — collapses into adharma.

2.5 Key Sanskrit Terms Analysed in This Study: The following terms recur throughout the epic discourse on kingship and will be analysed in context: dharmasya goptā (“guardian of dharma,” the king's foundational epithet); prajāpālana (the protection and nurture of subjects); nyāya (justice, right procedure, equitable judgment); satya (truthfulness, the ontological bedrock of both personal and royal dharma); ahimsā rāja-vyavahāre (non-violence as a royal disposition, held in productive tension with the kṣatriya's sanctioned use of daṇḍa); daṇḍa/daṇḍanīti (the rod of chastisement and its disciplined theory); and yoga-kṣema (the twin duty of acquiring what is not yet possessed, yoga, and securely preserving what has been acquired, kṣema — the classical formula for the welfare state avant la lettre, foundational to Kauṭilyan political economy).

3. Rājadharmā in the Rāmāyaṇa

3.1 Rāma-rājya as the Paradigmatic Ethical Polity: The Rāmāyaṇa is, among other things, a sustained meditation on Rājadharmā conducted not through abstract discourse but through narrative exemplum: Rāma himself is Rājadharmā embodied, and the poem's climactic vision of Rāma-rājya — the reign inaugurated after the defeat of Rāvaṇa and the coronation in Ayodhyā — functions as the epic's positive, utopian answer to the question posed abstractly by the Dharmaśāstra: what does righteous governance actually look like in practice? The Yuddhakāṇḍa closes the war narrative with an extended description of this ideal polity:

न पर्यदेवन् विधवा न च व्यालकृतं भयम्। न व्याधिजं भयं वापि रामे राज्यं प्रशासति॥
निर्दस्युरभवल्लोको नानर्थः कश्चिदस्पृशत्। न च स्म वृद्धा बालानां प्रेतकार्याणि कुर्वते॥

*na paryadevan vidhavā na ca vyālakṛtaṁ bhayaṁ | na vyādhijaṁ bhayaṁ vāpi rāme rājyaṁ
praśāsati || nirdasyurabhavalloko nānārthaḥ kaścidasprśat | na ca sma vṛddhā bālānāṁ
pretakāryāṇi kurvate ||*

“While Rāma ruled the kingdom, no widow had cause to lament, there was no danger from wild beasts nor fear born of disease. The world became free of thieves, no calamity touched anyone, and the aged no longer performed the funeral rites of children.”

*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa 6.128.99–100 (Shastri, 1959, Vol. 3, p. 372;
valmikiramayana.net critical text)*

The passage's rhetorical strategy is cumulative and negative: Rāma-rājya is defined not primarily by what is instituted but by what is abolished — premature death, disease, crime, and the inversion of the natural order in which elders bury the young. This apophatic mode of description — governance measured by the absence of suffering — recurs throughout the Rāmāyaṇa's political imagination and marks a distinctively epic (as opposed to śāstric) mode of theorising Rājadharmā: the ideal is rendered vivid through its social and even ecological consequences rather than through enumerated duties alone.

3.2 Exile and the Primacy of Satya and Piṭṛvākya: The Ayodhyākāṇḍa establishes the ethical grammar that governs the entire epic through the crisis of Rāma's exile. When Kaikeyī invokes Daśaratha's two boons

to have Rāma banished and Bharata crowned, Rāma's response subordinates his own claim to the throne — and indeed his own comfort — to two intertwined dharmic imperatives: satya (the inviolability of a given word, here his father's promise) and piṭṛvākya-paripālana (obedience to paternal command). Pollock's analysis of the Ayodhyākāṇḍa demonstrates that Rāma's acceptance of exile is presented by the text not as passive filial piety but as an active, deliberate assertion of dharma over personal artha and kāma — the same triad that Rājadharmā, as a genre, exists to adjudicate (Pollock, 1986, pp. 58–66). In accepting exile, Rāma enacts, at the level of the individual kṣatriya, the very principle that Manu and the Śāntiparvan will later formalise at the level of the office: that dharma binds the ruler more strictly than it binds the ruled, because the ruler's transgression corrupts the moral order of the entire realm.

3.3 The Coronation Debates and the Counsel of Vasiṣṭha: The debate that follows Rāma's departure, in which Bharata refuses the throne offered to him and travels to the forest to entreat Rāma's return, dramatises a second axis of Rājadharmā: the doctrine that kingship is an office of duty rather than a prize of ambition. Bharata's insistence — reinforced by the counsel of the royal preceptor Vasiṣṭha — that the throne belongs by dharma (both of primogeniture and of paternal intent) to Rāma alone, and his subsequent decision to rule as regent only through Rāma's sandals (pādukā) placed upon the throne, stages Rājadharmā as radically anti-possessive: sovereignty is administered in trust, not owned. Vasiṣṭha's role throughout the Ayodhyākāṇḍa as guhya-mantrin (secret counsellor) and upholder of kula-dharma exemplifies the Dharmaśāstra ideal of the purohita as the check upon royal caprice, a structural parallel to Vidura's function in the Mahābhārata.

3.4 Governance after the Return: Prajā-sukha and Varṇāśrama Harmony: Following the coronation (paṭṭābhiṣeka), the Rāmāyaṇa's Uttarakāṇḍa and the closing sections of the Yuddhakāṇḍa depict a reign organised around prajā-sukha (the happiness of the subjects) as its explicit measure of success, alongside the maintenance of varṇāśramadharmā — the harmonious functioning of the fourfold social order and the fourfold stages of life. The Uttarakāṇḍa's controversial narrative of Śambūka — a śūdra ascetic whose unauthorised tapas is held responsible for the untimely death of a brāhmaṇa's son, prompting Rāma's intervention — has generated extensive and often critical modern commentary on the epic's caste politics; the present study notes this episode as historically significant to the text's own theorisation of varṇāśramarākṣaṇa as a royal duty, while flagging that its ethical implications are contested in modern scholarship and lie beyond the primary comparative scope of this paper.

3.5 Rāma as Maryādā-puruṣottama: The epithet by which later tradition, particularly Tulsīdās and subsequent bhakti literature, canonises Rāma is maryādā-puruṣottama, “the best of men who upholds the boundary [of dharma].” Though this precise compound is a later theological crystallisation rather than a Vālmīkian coinage, it accurately names the structural logic of the Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa itself: Rāma is depicted throughout as a figure who consistently subordinates personal desire (his love for Sītā, his grief at exile, his private preference) to the maryādā, the outer boundary, of dharma — whether that boundary is defined by paternal command, by the norms of kingship, or, in the epic's most debated episode, by the expectations of public opinion regarding Sītā's chastity after her abduction (the agnipraveśa and subsequent banishment narrated in the Uttarakāṇḍa). This last episode in particular illustrates the cost, within the Rāmāyaṇa's own moral universe, of a Rājadharmā that prioritises the prajā's confidence in the ruler's impartiality even above the ruler's private happiness — a tension the epic itself registers as tragic rather than simply exemplary, and one that later commentators and modern scholars alike have continued to debate.

4. Rājadharmā in the Mahābhārata

4.1 The Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan as Central Locus: If the Rāmāyaṇa theorises Rājadharmā through exemplary narrative, the Mahābhārata theorises it through sustained, explicit discourse. The Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan — the opening and largest sub-parvan of the Śāntiparvan, comprising well over

a hundred *adhyāyas* — consists almost entirely of Bhīṣma's instruction to the newly victorious but grief-stricken Yudhiṣṭhira on the duties of kingship, delivered from Bhīṣma's bed of arrows (*śaratalpa*) in the interval between the war's end and his death. Hiltebeitel identifies this parvan as the structural and philosophical centre of the entire epic, arguing that the Mahābhārata as a whole is organised as Yudhiṣṭhira's extended education toward becoming a dharma-rāja, of which the post-war instruction is the capstone rather than an appendix (Hiltebeitel, 2001, pp. 111–120). The pedagogical frame itself is significant: Rājadharmā is transmitted not as abstract law but as testamentary wisdom, offered by a dying kulaguru to a king whose accession has been purchased at the cost of near-total fratricide.

4.2 Bhīṣma's Discourse: Duties, Daṇḍanīti, and Just Taxation: Bhīṣma's instruction covers an encyclopedic range of topics — the qualifications of ministers, the organisation of the treasury and army, the theory of the seven *prakṛtis* (constituent limbs) of the state (a formulation shared with the Arthaśāstra's *saptāṅga* theory), the conduct of foreign policy, and the principles of taxation, which Bhīṣma repeatedly likens to the bee's gathering of honey (*madhukara-vṛtti*) or the herdsman's gentle milking of the cow — extraction that must never so deplete the source as to destroy it. Central to the entire discourse is the theorisation of *daṇḍa* not as an instrument of royal will but as the visible embodiment of dharma's coercive necessity: Bhīṣma teaches that *daṇḍa* alone protects dharma, artha, and *kāma* when voluntary righteousness fails, and that the king who wields it unjustly — through excess, partiality, or self-interest — accumulates the gravest of all sins, since the corruption of the *daṇḍa*-wielder corrupts the entire moral ecology of the realm he governs. Protection of the weak — the widow, the orphan, the ascetic, the poor cultivator — is repeatedly singled out as the touchstone by which the justice of a reign is to be measured, echoing and elaborating the *prajāpālana* principle already established in the Dharmaśāstra.

4.3 War Ethics: Yuddhadharma: A distinctive contribution of the Mahābhārata to the theory of Rājadharmā is its sustained attention to yuddhadharma, the ethics of warfare, most famously articulated in the code governing combat that both sides ostensibly accept before the Kurukṣetra war: prohibitions on striking an unarmed, fleeing, or surrendering foe, on attacking after sunset, on unequal combat (one against many), and on the use of weapons against non-combatants. The epic's central tragic irony is that this very code is progressively abandoned by both sides as the war's moral and military desperation deepens — Bhīṣma's fall to Śikhaṇḍin, Droṇa's death through Yudhiṣṭhira's technically true but substantively deceptive proclamation regarding Aśvatthāman, Karna's slaying while his chariot wheel is mired, and Duryodhana's death by an illegal blow below the navel — so that the Mahābhārata's yuddhadharma functions less as a stable code successfully honoured than as a moral horizon whose violation, *adhyāya* after *adhyāya*, generates the very guilt that propels Yudhiṣṭhira toward the Śāntiparvan's Rājadharmā instruction in the first place.

4.4 Contrast Between Ideal and Real: Yudhiṣṭhira, Dhṛtarāṣṭra, and Duryodhana: The Mahābhārata's distinctive contribution to the epic theorisation of kingship lies in its refusal of straightforward idealisation. Yudhiṣṭhira, styled Dharmarāja and Ajātaśatru ("he who has no enemy"), is nonetheless a deeply compromised exemplar: his fatal game of dice, in which he stakes and loses his kingdom, his brothers, himself, and finally Draupadī, constitutes a catastrophic failure of Rājadharmā at the most basic level — the inability to protect (*rakṣā*) even his own household, let alone his *prajā*. His post-war crisis of conscience, in which he repeatedly expresses the desire to renounce the throne he has won through the deaths of his kinsmen and preceptors, dramatises the psychological and spiritual cost that a genuinely dharmic king must bear, a cost the Rāmāyaṇa's more idealised Rāma is largely spared. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, blind both literally and morally, exemplifies the failure of rāja-dharma through weakness and paternal attachment (*putra-sneha*) rather than active malice — his inability to restrain Duryodhana constitutes, in the epic's moral accounting, a dereliction as grave as active wrongdoing. Duryodhana himself embodies *adharma* in its purest epic form: a ruler who pursues *artha* and *kāma* (dynastic power, personal humiliation of rivals) with tactical brilliance

but in total repudiation of dharma's constraint, famously declaring his refusal to cede even land the size of a needle's point (sūcyagra) to the Pāṇḍavas without war — a statement the tradition reads as the paradigmatic renunciation of dharma-bound kingship in favour of naked artha.

4.5 Ahimsā versus Necessary Himsā, and the King as Servant of Dharma: The Śāntiparvan explicitly confronts the tension between ahimsā, upheld elsewhere in the epic (and in the Mokṣadharmaparvan that follows) as the highest personal virtue, and the kṣatriya's inescapable vocation of sanctioned violence (daṇḍa, yuddha). Bhīṣma's resolution is not to abolish the tension but to discipline it: violence exercised in the impartial protection of dharma and the prajā is distinguished categorically from violence exercised for private gain or vengeance, so that the king's daṇḍa, rightly wielded, is itself construed as an instrument in the service of the larger ahimsā of social order — the prevention of the far greater violence (mātsyanyāya) that anarchy would unleash. This is the epic's most sophisticated theoretical move: it does not resolve the paradox of the violent protector of non-violence but insists that the king's subjective disposition (nirmama, freedom from possessive self-interest) and objective impartiality (samatā) are what convert daṇḍa from adharma into dharma.

4.6 The Crisis of Dharma in the Kali Age: The Mahābhārata situates its entire Rājadharmā discourse against the backdrop of an explicitly theorised historical decline — the doctrine of the four yugas (Kṛta, Tretā, Dvāpara, Kali), in which dharma itself diminishes by one quarter in each successive age. The Utathya-Gītā passage cited above continues by asserting that the king himself constitutes the age (rājaiva yugam ucyate): a righteous king sustains a Kṛta-like condition regardless of chronological time, while a negligent or unrighteous king precipitates Kali-like collapse — collapsing the varṇāśrama order, the Vedas, and the fourfold āśrama system into confusion. This doctrine intensifies the moral stakes of Rājadharmā exponentially: the king is not merely one office among many but the linchpin upon which the cosmological stability of the entire dharma-order depends, a burden the Mahābhārata's post-war world, poised at the threshold of the Kali Yuga (traditionally reckoned from Kṛṣṇa's departure shortly after the epic's events), renders with acute historical urgency.

4.7 Vidura-nīti and the Counsellor's Voice: Complementing Bhīṣma's formal instruction, the Vidura-nīti (Udyogaparvan) offers a more compressed, aphoristic register of the same Rājadharmā tradition, delivered by Vidura to Dhṛtarāṣṭra on the eve of war. Vidura's counsel — emphasising self-restraint (dama), truthfulness, the cultivation of wise ministers, and the folly of a king who ignores sound advice out of attachment to an unworthy son — functions narratively as the road not taken: had Dhṛtarāṣṭra heeded Vidura as Yudhiṣṭhira ultimately heeds Bhīṣma, the epic implies, the catastrophe of Kurukṣetra might have been averted. The structural pairing of Vidura-nīti and the Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan — counsel rejected and counsel received — is itself one of the Mahābhārata's most powerful demonstrations of Rājadharmā's central claim: that dharma protects those who protect it (dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ), and abandons those who abandon it.

धर्म एव हतो हन्ति धर्मो रक्षति रक्षितः । तस्माद्धर्मो न हन्तव्यो मा नो धर्मो हतोऽवधीत् ॥

Dharma eva hato hanti dharmo rakṣati rakṣitaḥ | tasmād dharmo na hantavyo mā no dharmo hato 'vadhīṭ ||

“Dharma, when destroyed, destroys; dharma, when protected, protects. Therefore dharma must never be destroyed, lest destroyed dharma destroy us.”

Manusmṛti 8.15 (Bühler, 1886, p. 251); a closely parallel formulation recurs in Mahābhārata, Śāntiparvan 12.15 and Vanaparvan 313.128 (Ganguli, 1891, Vol. 8, p. 24)

5. Comparative Analysis

5.1 Points of Convergence: Read together, the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata articulate a remarkably unified doctrine of Rājadharmā despite their divergent narrative textures. Three convergences are especially significant. First, both epics insist absolutely on the primacy of dharma over personal desire and dynastic self-interest: Rāma's acceptance of exile and Yudhiṣṭhira's eventual assumption (and near-refusal) of the throne he has won are structurally parallel enactments of the principle articulated abstractly in Manusmṛti 7.1 and Mahābhārata 12.91.3 — that the king exists for dharma, not dharma for the king. Second, both epics converge on the king as goptā and moral exemplar simultaneously: sovereignty is legitimated by protective function (rakṣā) and reinforced by the homology of ruler's conduct and subjects' conduct (yathā rājā tathā prajāḥ), a principle Bhīṣma articulates explicitly in the Śāntiparvan and that the Rāmāyaṇa dramatises through Rāma-rājya's depiction of a virtuous populace mirroring its virtuous king. Third, both epics share an unwavering emphasis on prajā-hita (the welfare of subjects) as the operative criterion of righteous rule and on daṇḍa exercised with justice (nyāya) and impartiality as its coercive guarantee — the Rāmāyaṇa through the negative-utopian description of Rāma's reign, the Mahābhārata through Bhīṣma's extended prescriptions on taxation, judicial process, and the protection of the weak.

5.2 Points of Divergence and Complementary Emphasis: The two epics diverge, however, in narrative strategy and, consequently, in the register of ethical instruction each offers. The Rāmāyaṇa constructs an idealised, almost utopian vision of Rāma-rājya, in which the tension between dharma and worldly circumstance, though real (as the exile and the Śambūka and Sītā-banishment episodes attest), is ultimately resolved in favour of an exemplary, largely uncompromised sovereign. Rāma's dharma is tested but essentially unwavering; the epic's rhetorical energy is invested in demonstrating what perfect adherence to Rājadharmā yields for a polity. The Mahābhārata, by contrast, offers a realistic, crisis-oriented, and philosophically searching account: Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājadharmā is forged through catastrophic failure (the dice game), morally compromised victory (the war's ethical breaches), and persistent, unresolved anguish, so that the epic's Rājadharmā teaching in the Śāntiparvan is less a description of an achieved ideal than a therapeutic and pedagogical response to a king traumatized by the impossibility of perfectly embodying it. Where the Rāmāyaṇa shows Rājadharmā successfully realised, the Mahābhārata interrogates the limits, costs, and paradoxes of Rājadharmā under conditions of āpad — moral emergency — giving rise to the entire subsidiary category of āpaddharmā (the ethics of exceptional circumstance) that occupies a substantial portion of the Śāntiparvan following the Rājadharmānūsāsanaparvan proper.

5.3 Shared Conceptual Vocabulary and Its Semantic Range: A comparative philological reading confirms that both epics draw upon a common, stable technical vocabulary — dharmasya goptā, prajāpālana, daṇḍanīti, satya, nyāya, yogakṣema — even as each epic inflects this vocabulary differently through its narrative context. Satya in the Rāmāyaṇa is predominantly a matter of the inviolability of one's given word (Daśaratha's promise, Rāma's vow), while in the Mahābhārata satya becomes entangled with its own paradoxes — most famously in Yudhiṣṭhira's technically true but ethically deceptive statement regarding Aśvatthāman's death, which the epic itself treats as a genuine moral compromise rather than a clean vindication of truthfulness. Similarly, daṇḍa in the Rāmāyaṇa is largely depicted in its successful, restorative operation (the defeat of Rāvaṇa as the ultimate daṇḍa against adharma), whereas the Mahābhārata's Śāntiparvan theorises daṇḍa's proper limits and abuses in far greater technical and cautionary detail, reflecting the epic's own experience of daṇḍa's catastrophic misuse at Kurukṣetra. The shared vocabulary thus functions as a stable doctrinal skeleton onto which each epic maps a distinct narrative and emotional register — the Rāmāyaṇa's confidence and the Mahābhārata's chastened, hard-won wisdom.

6. Rājadharmā as Foundation of Ethical Governance: Contemporary Relevance

6.1 Lessons for Modern Governance: Several structural features of the classical Rājadharmā tradition offer suggestive, if partial, resonances with contemporary discourses on ethical and constitutional governance. The doctrine that the ruler exists for the ruled rather than the reverse (dharmāya rājā bhavati na kāmakaraṇāya tu) anticipates, in its own idiom, the modern principle of governmental accountability and the fiduciary theory of public office. The insistence that daṇḍa be exercised with impartiality (samatā) and constrained by procedural justice (nyāya) resonates with the modern principle of the rule of law, under which coercive state power is itself subject to legal and constitutional limitation rather than being the unconstrained instrument of ruling will. The Kauṭīlyan formula equating royal welfare with public welfare (prajāśukhe sukhaṁ rājñah) similarly prefigures, in a pre-modern register, the normative core of the modern welfare state and of yogakṣema as a template for developmental governance oriented toward both the acquisition and secure preservation of collective prosperity.

6.2 Caution against Anachronism: These resonances must, however, be drawn with methodological caution. The classical Rājadharmā tradition presupposes a hereditary, varṇa-stratified monarchy legitimated by cosmological and ritual theory, embedded within a social order (varṇāśramadharmā) whose hierarchical assumptions are fundamentally at odds with the egalitarian premises of modern constitutional democracy. The Uttarakāṇḍa's Śambūka episode and the Dharmasāstra's caste-differentiated penal codes (varṇa-based daṇḍa-vyavasthā) are stark reminders that the classical texts' notion of "justice" was not premised on the equality of persons before the law in the modern sense. Reading Rājadharmā as a direct precursor or validation of modern democratic governance therefore risks eliding these structural differences; the present study treats the classical worldview on its own terms as an object of textual-historical and ethical-philosophical inquiry, rather than assimilating it uncritically to modern political categories.

6.3 Possible Bridges without Forced Equivalence: Without forcing equivalence, three general ethical principles may be responsibly abstracted from the Rājadharmā tradition for contemporary reflection: (1) the principle that political authority is instrumentally justified by the protection and welfare of the governed rather than by the ruler's private interest; (2) the principle that coercive state power (the modern analogue of daṇḍa) requires internal moral and external institutional restraint to remain legitimate; and (3) the principle, dramatized with particular force in the Mahābhārata, that ethical leadership is forged through the honest reckoning with failure and moral compromise rather than through the pretense of unblemished virtue — a lesson the Śāntiparvan offers precisely because Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājadharmā emerges out of, rather than despite, catastrophic error.

7. Conclusion: This study has traced Rājadharmā across its etymological origins in the union of rājan and dharmā, its doctrinal systematisation in the Manusmṛti and the Arthasāstra, and its narrative elaboration in the Rāmāyaṇa and the Mahābhārata, to argue that both epics present Rājadharmā not merely as a branch of political science (rājanīti) but as a lived ethical ontology in which the ruler's personal moral discipline and the polity's collective welfare are rendered strictly inseparable. The Rāmāyaṇa's Rāma-rājya offers the tradition's positive exemplar — a reign in which unwavering personal adherence to satya and dharmā yields, as its direct social consequence, the negative utopia of a suffering-free realm. The Mahābhārata's Rājadharmānuśāsanaparvan offers the tradition's dialectical counterpart — a hard-won, crisis-tested wisdom in which Rājadharmā is not a possession secured once and for all but a discipline continually re-earned amid moral catastrophe, exceptional circumstance (āpaddharmā), and the ever-present gravitational pull of adharma in the declining Kali age. Together, the two epics converge on the single most important claim of the entire tradition: dharme tiṣṭhanti bhūtāni dharmo rājani tiṣṭhati — all beings abide in dharmā, and dharmā abides in the king (Mahābhārata 12.91.5) — so that the king's personal righteousness and the polity's collective righteousness are, in the last analysis, one and the same reality, differently named.

यत्र नार्यस्तु पूज्यन्ते रमन्ते तत्र देवताः । यत्रैतास्तु न पूज्यन्ते सर्वास्तत्राफलाः क्रियाः ॥

yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ | yatraitāstu na pūjyante sarvāstatrāphalāḥ
kriyāḥ ||

“Where women are honoured, there the gods rejoice; where they are not honoured, all rites bear no fruit.”

Manusmṛti 3.56 — cited here as the traditions own closing reminder (maṅgala) that Rājadharmā's measure lies finally in the condition of the most vulnerable members of the governed community (Bühler, 1886, p. 85)

It is fitting to close, in the spirit of the maṅgalaśloka convention of Sanskrit śāstric literature, on this note: the epics do not measure the success of Rājadharmā by the splendour of the throne but by the security and dignity it extends to those with the least power to demand it — the widow, the orphan, the ascetic, the vulnerable. In this final reckoning, Rājadharmā reveals itself as neither antiquarian curiosity nor a simple prototype of modern statecraft, but as a distinct and internally coherent ethical vision: sovereignty as service, power as trusteeship, and the throne itself as, in the last analysis, dharma's servant rather than its master.

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