



# The Eternal Essence of Dharma in Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata: A Tapestry of Virtue and Duty

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**Abstract** – Dharma, the timeless principle of righteousness, duty, and cosmic order, forms the heartbeat of the Indian epics, Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. These monumental texts weave intricate narratives that illuminate dharma's multifaceted nature, portraying it as a guiding light for individuals, societies, and the cosmos. This article explores dharma's portrayal in Rāmāyaṇa, where it manifests through Śrī Rāma's unwavering adherence to sanātana dharma, and in Mahābhārata, where it unfolds as a complex interplay of svadharma and universal compassion. By analyzing key episodes, characters, and philosophical discourses, the study reveals how dharma shapes moral choices, social structures, and spiritual aspirations. The article underscores dharma's enduring relevance, offering insights into its role as a unifying force in navigating life's ethical dilemmas.

**Keywords:** Dharma, Rāmāyaṇa, Mahābhārata, Sanātana Dharma, Svadharma, Varnāśrama Dharma, Ānṛśaṃsya, Bhakti, Kṣātradharmā, Mārga.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the luminous tapestry of Indian civilization, dharma shines as the eternal thread that binds the human soul to the cosmic order. Derived from the Sanskrit root dhṛ (to uphold or sustain), dharma is the principle that maintains harmony in the universe, guiding individuals through the labyrinth of duties, virtues, and moral choices. The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki and the Mahābhārata of Vyāsa, India's grand epics, are not mere stories but profound expositions of dharma, each presenting its nuances through vivid narratives and philosophical dialogues. In Rāmāyaṇa, dharma is the steadfast path of Śrī Rāma, who embodies maryāda puruṣottama (the ideal man of virtue), while in Mahābhārata, it is a dynamic force, tested amidst the chaos of war and human frailty. This article embarks on a journey to unravel dharma's essence in these epics, exploring its manifestations in personal conduct, social roles, and spiritual quests. By delving into key episodes and teachings, we illuminate how dharma serves as a beacon, guiding humanity toward righteousness and liberation.

## 2. DHARMA IN RĀMĀYAṆA: THE PATH OF SANĀTANA DHARMA

In the Rāmāyaṇa, dharma is portrayed as sanātana dharma the eternal law that transcends time and circumstance. Śrī Rāma, the protagonist, is its living embodiment, navigating life's trials with unwavering commitment to righteousness. The epic underscores dharma's centrality through Rāma's adherence to varnāśrama dharma (duties based on caste and life stage), pitṛdharma (duty to one's father), and rājadharmā (kingly duty).

One of the most poignant illustrations of Rāma's dharma is his acceptance of exile. When King Daśaratha, bound by a promise to Queen Kaikeyī, orders Rāma's banishment, Rāma responds with serene resolve: "In this world, dharma is the highest. Truth is established in dharma. The command given by my father, being based on dharma, is supreme".<sup>1</sup> This episode highlights Rāma's prioritization of pitṛdharma over personal



ambition, rejecting Lakṣmaṇa's suggestion to seize the throne by force. Rāma's rebuke of kṣātradharmā (warrior's duty) as mere aggression underscores his preference for sanātana dharma, which values obedience to elders and moral integrity over power.

Sītā, Rāma's consort, complements his dharma with her steadfast pativrata dharma (duty as a devoted wife). In the face of adversity in Aśoka Vāṭikā, Sītā's resolve remains unshaken: "Just as the moon cannot be separated from its radiance, I cannot deviate from dharma".<sup>2</sup> Her assertion that "dharma leads to prosperity, happiness, and everything"<sup>3</sup> reflects her profound understanding of dharma as the essence of existence. Sītā's adherence to dharma, even under duress, elevates her as a paradigm of feminine virtue, reinforcing the epic's message that dharma sustains both individual and cosmic order.

Rāma's interactions with other characters further illuminate dharma's nuances. His alliance with Sugrīva exemplifies maitrī dharma (duty of friendship), where Rāma upholds his promise to aid Sugrīva, stating, "For a man who values dharma, helping a friend is itself dharma".<sup>4</sup> Conversely, his rejection of Jābālī's pragmatic advice to seize power reflects his disdain for nāstika (atheistic) ideologies that undermine dharma.<sup>5</sup> Rāma's victory over Rāvaṇa symbolizes the triumph of dharma over adharma, affirming that righteousness prevails when guided by truth and duty.

The Rāmāyaṇa also emphasizes gṛhastha dharma (householder's duties), with Rāma advocating for rituals like sandhyā tarpaṇa, charity to Brāhmaṇas, and hospitality. His instructions to Sītā before exile to distribute wealth to Brāhmaṇas and feed mendicants reflect his commitment to social dharma.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Rāma's adherence to vānaprastha dharma during exile living ascetically, consuming fallen fruits, and performing rituals demonstrates his versatility in upholding dharma across life stages.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. DHARMA IN MAHĀBHĀRATA: THE DANCE OF SVADHARMA AND UNIVERSAL COMPASSION

The Mahābhārata presents dharma as a complex, multifaceted principle, often described as sūkṣma (subtle) due to its context-dependent nature. Unlike the Rāmāyaṇa's linear portrayal of dharma, the Mahābhārata explores its tensions through the Kurukṣetra war, where characters grapple with conflicting duties. The epic's core lies in svadharma (one's own duty) and ānṛśaṃsya (compassion), as articulated in the dialogue between Yudhiṣṭhira and the Yakṣa in the Vanaparva.

Yudhiṣṭhira's response to the Yakṣa's question, "What is the highest dharma in the world?" encapsulates the Mahābhārata's ethos: "Ānṛśaṃsya (compassion and fairness) is the highest dharma; Vedic dharma yields eternal fruits; controlling the mind prevents sorrow; and friendship with the virtuous endures".<sup>8</sup> This definition elevates compassion as a universal dharma, transcending rigid varnāśrama norms. Yudhiṣṭhira's choice to revive Nakula, his half-brother, over his full brothers, exemplifies ānṛśaṃsya, prioritizing fairness over personal attachment.<sup>9</sup>

The Bhagavad Gītā, embedded within the Mahābhārata, offers a profound exposition of dharma through Kṛṣṇa's counsel to Arjuna. Faced with the moral dilemma of fighting his kin, Arjuna hesitates, fearing the destruction of dharma. Kṛṣṇa urges him to embrace svadharma as a kṣatriya: "Considering your own dharma, you should not waver, for there is nothing more auspicious for a kṣatriya than a righteous war".<sup>10</sup> Kṛṣṇa's injunction, "Better is one's own dharma, though imperfect, than another's dharma well-performed",<sup>11</sup> underscores the importance of fulfilling one's role within the social and cosmic order. The Gītā harmonizes karma yoga (path of action), bhakti yoga (path of devotion), and jñāna yoga (path of knowledge), presenting dharma as a dynamic balance of duty and detachment.

The Mahābhārata also critiques rigid interpretations of dharma. In the story of Dharma-vyādha, a



butcher justifies his profession as kuladharmā (family duty), stating, “This is the trade inherited from my ancestors; I uphold my dharma”.<sup>12</sup> This narrative challenges conventional notions of purity, suggesting that dharma lies in conscientious fulfillment of one’s role, regardless of societal judgment.

Bhīṣma’s discourse in the Śāntiparva further enriches the epic’s understanding of dharma. He recounts a time when “there was no state, no king, no punishment, and no enforcer; all people protected each other through dharma alone”.<sup>13</sup> This idealized vision contrasts with the Kurukṣetra war’s chaos, highlighting dharma’s role in restoring order. Bhīṣma emphasizes virtues like satya (truth), dayā (compassion), and ahimsā (non-violence) as dharma’s pillars, asserting that “dharma sustains the world; nothing exists outside it”.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS: UNITY IN DIVERSITY

While both epics exalt dharma, their approaches differ. Rāmāyaṇa presents dharma as a clear, unwavering path, embodied by Rāma’s adherence to sanātana dharma. Mahābhārata, however, portrays dharma as a labyrinth, where characters like Yudhiṣṭhira and Arjuna navigate conflicting duties. Rāmāyaṇa emphasizes varnāśrama dharma and familial obligations, while Mahābhārata foregrounds svadharmā and universal compassion. Yet, both epics converge on dharma’s ultimate purpose: to uphold cosmic order and guide humanity toward mokṣa (liberation).

The Rāmāyaṇa’s dharma is ritualistic and hierarchical, rooted in Vedic traditions, as seen in Rāma’s respect for Taittirīya and Kaṭha Brāhmaṇas.<sup>15</sup> The Mahābhārata, conversely, embraces a broader, more inclusive dharma, accommodating diverse perspectives, as evident in the Gītā’s synthesis of mārgas. Both epics affirm satya as dharma’s foundation, with Rāma declaring, “Truth is the basis of dharma”,<sup>16</sup> and the Mahābhārata echoing, “Truth is the principal limb of dharma”.<sup>17</sup>

#### 5. CONCLUSION

Dharma, as portrayed in Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata, is the eternal compass of human existence, guiding individuals through the vicissitudes of life. In Rāmāyaṇa, it is the radiant path of Śrī Rāma, whose life exemplifies the triumph of righteousness over chaos. In Mahābhārata, it is the subtle dance of svadharmā and compassion, navigating the complexities of human conflict. Together, these epics weave a timeless narrative, affirming dharma’s role as the sustainer of order, the harbinger of virtue, and the gateway to liberation. As we reflect on their teachings, dharma emerges not as a rigid code but as a living principle, inviting us to align our actions with truth, duty, and compassion. In an ever-changing world, the eternal essence of dharma remains a beacon, illuminating the path to a harmonious and meaningful life.

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- [3] Ibid, 35.10
- [4] Ibid, Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 38.20-21
- [5] Ibid, Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 21.40-44
- [6] Ibid, 30.43-45
- [7] Ibid, Araṇyakāṇḍa 28.12-16



- [8] Mahābhārata, Vanaparva, 313.76
- [9] Ibid, 312.19
- [10] Bhagavad Gītā, 2.31
- [11] Ibid, 3.35
- [12] Mahābhārata, Vanaparva, 207.20
- [13] Ibid, Śāntiparva, 59.14
- [14] Ibid, Vanaparva, 290.6
- [15] Rāmāyaṇa, Yuddhakāṇḍa, 128.104
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