
Violence in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*: Just War Criteria in an Ancient Indian Epic

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When is armed force considered justified in Hinduism? How do Hindu legitimizations of warfare compare with those of other religions? The Just War framework, which evolved from Roman and early Christian thought, stipulates distinct criteria for sanctioning the use of force. Are those themes comparable to the discourse on violence of ancient India? This article examines the influential Sanskrit epic *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* in order to broach these questions. This analysis demonstrates the presence in the ancient work of all seven modern Just War criteria—namely (1) Just Cause, (2) Right Intent, (3) Net Benefit, (4) Legitimate Authority, (5) Last Resort, (6) Proportionality of Means, and (7) Right Conduct. This study also shows the extent to which the criteria and the larger discourse in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* are distinctly couched within Indic ethical parameters, drawing particularly upon the moral precept of *ahimsā* (nonviolence). This article identifies both similarities and differences between the epic's criteria for warfare and those of the Just War framework. By comparing representations of violence in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* to modern Western legitimizations of force, this study advances the inclusion of Hindu thought into the global discourse on the ethics of war and peace.

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THE MONUMENTAL SANSKRIT epic *Rāmāyaṇa* functions as an ancient repository of social and moral values which are very much alive today in the Hindu world. The *Rāmāyaṇa* portrays the legendary exploits of the virtuous warrior-prince Rāma. The story has undergone innumerable interpolations, redactions, vernacular translations, and local retellings throughout its vast and dynamic receptive history. The themes thereof, however, have remained quintessential aspects of Hindu thought and culture over the centuries, inspiring art, dance, narrative, and moral instruction, not only in India but across South and Southeast Asia to this day.¹ Rāma is regarded within the Hindu tradition as *the* exemplar of social and moral conduct, serving to define and perpetuate South Asian social values. As Robert Goldman notes, “few works of literature produced at any time have been as popular and influential as the great and ancient Sanskrit epic poem, the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* [which has] entertained, moved, enchanted, and uplifted untold millions of people in India and much of Southeast Asia” (1984: 4).

The most ancient and influential rendition of the exploits of Rāma is ascribed to the primordial poet-sage figure Vālmiki, and serves as the culmination of a long bardic tradition resulting from an oral composition originating over two millennia ago. Vālmiki is lauded by the Hindu religious tradition as its *ādi kavī* (first poet). We are told that Vālmiki, while tranquilly engaged in his ritual bath at the banks of a river one morning, was admiring two beautiful *krauñca* birds engaged in the act of mating. The scene is sullied when an arrow from a hunter (*niṣāda*) pierces the breast of the male of the pair, leaving the female to wail in grief for her fallen mate. Vālmiki is so overwhelmed with pity at the sorrowful sight that the following curse spontaneously springs from his unknowing lips:² “Since, *niṣāda*, you killed one of this pair of *krauñcas*, distracted at the height of passion, you shall not live very

¹A. K. Ramanujan comments on the astonishing number of retellings of the story of Rāma and their vast range of influence over South Asia and South-East Asia. The list of languages in which at least one telling is found is as follows: Annamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Hindi, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Oriya, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, and Tibetan (Ramanujan 1991: 24).

²“Then in the intensity of this feeling of compassion (*karuṇa*), the Brahman thought, ‘This is wrong.’ Hearing the *krauñca* hen wailing, he uttered these words:” (*tataḥ karuṇaveditvād adharmo ‘yam iti dvijaḥ | niśāmya rudatīm krauñcīm idaṃ vacanam abravīt*, I.2.13). All translations in this study are taken from the “*Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* Translation Project” based at Berkeley University (California, USA), of which Robert Goldman is the director and general editor. This project marks a superb and unprecedented effort at yielding a scholarly English translation of the critical edition of the ancient masterpiece. The six volumes and the respective translators are I: *Bālakāṇḍa* (Goldman 1984), II: *Ayodhyakāṇḍa* (Pollock 1986), III: *Aranyakāṇḍa* (Pollock 1991), IV:

long!” (*mā niṣāda pratiṣṭāṃ tvam agamaḥ śāśvatīḥ samāḥ, yat krauñcamithunād ekam avadhīḥ kāmamohitam*, I.2.16). This verse is not only indicative of the aesthetic mood of the work, but is also revered as the very first instance of poetry within the Indian subcontinent. It is telling, for our purposes, that poetry itself is derived from grief, and grief born of violence. The sight of wanton violence affronts the sage’s moral sensibilities, and though he returns it with an act of violence of his own (albeit an arguably more refined variety), the violence of the hunter is condemned by the text, yet that committed by the sage is not: rather, the violent moment occasioning the hunter’s retribution occasions, too, the genesis of poetic verse, and thus constitutes cause for celebration. In a like fashion, *Vālmiki’s Rāmāyaṇa* functions to contrast proper and improper uses of force. While the epic speaks to many lasting ethical considerations, this study confines itself to one such concern: the legitimization of violence.

When is violent force justified? This question, especially when concerned with the large-scale loss of human life, has rightly occupied religious discourse worldwide over the centuries. A Just War framework evolved from Roman and early Christian thinkers (e.g. Cicero and St. Augustine) and has played a key role in the formation of modern international law. It remains the dominant Western approach, providing straightforward criteria to address some of the most basic question about the use of force. Its criteria can be grouped as follows:

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| Why use force? Just War requires: | (1) A just cause |
| | (2) The right intent |
| | (3) A net benefit |
| Who should authorize force? | (4) A legitimate authority |
| When can force be used? | (5) As a last resort |
| What level of force? | (6) Proportional means of force |
| How and where to apply force? | (7) With right conduct ³ |

To what extent does the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* include the criteria of the Just War model? In order to address this question, we performed a

Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa (Lefebvre 2005), V: *Sundarakāṇḍa* (Goldman 2005), VI: *Yuddhakāṇḍa* (van Nooten 2009) and VII: *Uttarakāṇḍa* (forthcoming).

³These include the distinction between military and civilian targets. While there is no single definitive source for a statement of the Just War criteria, the principal elements are described in Dorn and Cation (2009), Reichberg et al. (2006), National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1983), Johnson (1981), and Walzer (1977). For further reading on the development and application of the Just War tradition, see Elstain (1992) and Johnson and Kelsay (1990).

manual sweep of the epic and isolated all episodes and passages explicitly pertaining to armed force as well as violence more generally. These passages naturally congealed into groups strikingly similar to those of the Just War framework. The vast majority of the ethical conditions relating to violence were directly comparable to at least one of the criteria comprising the Just War model. Furthermore, while our examination of the epic retrieved no explicit discourse corresponding to the Just War framework's "presumption of peace," we did find significant material lauding *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and correlated values, such as patience, tolerance, forgiveness, and compassion.

While this examination serves only as one step toward understanding Hindu approaches to armed force, it supports the notion that the themes espoused in the Just War tradition are common to long-standing indigenous Indian deliberations on the ethics of warfare. Rather than an imposition of Western Just War themes, this study shows how very similar ethical considerations assume a distinctly Indian character in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. In doing so, the study also indicates the inadequacy of the Just War model to fully address the epic's complex affirmation of peace, a theme which ironically abounds in an epic largely concerned with the legitimization of warfare. This article serves to further incorporate the Hindu ethics of violence into the broader modern global discourse on war and peace.

RELATED SCHOLARSHIP

Despite the recent rise in scholarship on Hinduism and Just War (Clooney 2003; Subedi 2003; Allen 2006; Brekke 2006; Patton 2007; Roy 2009),⁴ this collective enterprise pales in comparison to work done on other religious traditions (Dorn 2010), including Christianity (Johnson 1981), Islam (Kelsay 2007), and Buddhism (Bartholomeusz 2002). Francis Clooney (2003: 109–126) acknowledges that the discussion of a Hindu Just War is still in its infancy; however, he manages to establish the importance in Hinduism of one key Just War criteria: right intention when going to war (*jus ad bellum*⁵). Similarly, Nick Allen focuses his insightful study of the *Mahābhārata* on Just Cause, in addition to

⁴Though these authors frequently refer to "the epics" as a whole, they rely much more heavily on analysis of the *Mahābhārata* in order to bolster their arguments, largely neglecting the *Rāmāyaṇa*. At least one article in the literature is devoted entirely to the Just War in the *Mahābhārata* (Allen 2006), while none give such treatment to the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

⁵The Just War (*bellum justum*) tradition uses Latin terminology in order to distinguish between two types of concerns: *jus ad bellum* pertains to the decision to go to war, whereas *jus in bello* pertains to the ethics of actual combat. Typically, *jus ad bellum* concerns the first five Just War

discussing the epic's ample supply of parameters for rules of engagement and briefly touching upon issues of Right Authority and Last Resort. But what of the other criteria? Torkel Brekke observes that the Hindu tradition has produced an extensive code of ethics for combat during war (*jus in bello*) but a relatively meager discourse on *jus ad bellum* criteria, while the Christian tradition exhibits an inverse emphasis.⁶ Is *jus ad bellum* discourse truly scarce in the Hindu context, or is it merely more subtly voiced? It is our task to probe narratives as richly didactic as the *Rāmāyaṇa* in search of the ethical discourses encoded within.

This study contends that, Brekke's observation notwithstanding, the absence of ample comparison between the war ethics of India and the West results in large part from the degree to which the Indian discourse is embedded in narratives such as the *Rāmāyaṇa*, narratives understudied throughout the history of Indological scholarship. While more overtly didactic strata of the Hindu corpus (e.g., *Vedānta*) have enjoyed far more probing and sustained scholarly attention than narrative texts (especially the *purāṇas*), it is worth noting that the vast and ongoing career of the *Rāmāyaṇa* has proved enormously more far-reaching than strands of philosophy intended for, and preserved by, India's social and religious elite.

The discourses on violence embedded in epic narrative, while far less succinct and direct than, for example, *Dharmaśāstra* literature, nevertheless constitute powerful avenues of insight into lasting ethical concerns within Hinduism. Though narrative is often considered *descriptive*, it is also *prescriptive* in the Indian context, particularly since the epics are replete with social and moral ideologies (Dhand 2002). This is especially the case with the *Rāmāyaṇa* since, as Laurie Patton remarks, the work attempts to integrate violence with Rāma's moral perfection (2007). Given the epic's preoccupation with the legitimization of violence, and its enormous clout as a source of social and moral guidance, it serves as an excellent text to help bridge the lacuna in scholarship regarding the intersection of Just War discourse and Hindu ethics pertaining to armed force.

categories (Just Cause, Right Intent, Legitimate Authority, Net Benefit, and Last Resort), whereas *jus in bello* corresponds to the last two (Proportionality of Means and Right Conduct).

⁶In a separate article titled "The Ethics of War and the Concept of War in India and Europe," Brekke (2005) argues that since, in the epic tradition, "war is never properly differentiated from the private duel between heroes," the distinction between "*bellum* and *duellum*, which is so important to the Just War tradition, is not made." This phenomena, he concludes, accounts (at least partially) for why "an Indian *jus ad bellum* comparable to the European tradition never existed" (Brekke 2005: 83).

A work as popular and influential as the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* has, of course, been subject to modification (interpolation, redaction) from one milieu to another across the sweep of its vast geographical and historical transmission. While historicist and philological analysis has by and large dominated the study of Sanskrit texts, “often occupied with excavating texts for the purpose of reconstructing the chronology of identifiably distinct textual layers” (Black and Geen 2011: 9), this study employs primarily a literary mode of engagement (similar to that of Black 2011; Geen 2011; Lindquist 2011; Patton 2011); that is, we are interested in the epic *in its current form*, embracing the ideological and creative enterprises of the text’s numerous interpolators and redactors. The search for a pristine, “original” text may be as futile as it is unimportant to the concerns of the living tradition which has sculpted the narrative to its current shape in accordance with prevailing values. While little can be certain about the intentions of Vālmiki (or even of his historical existence), it is clear that the narrative fabric of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* readily lends itself to discussion of the ethics of violence. Since Hinduism preserves *ahiṃsā* (non-violence) as an ethical imperative, it is no wonder that the *Rāmāyaṇa* exhibits so marked an anxiety regarding the use of force, an anxiety which the epic competently addresses through its characterization and dialogue. It is these literary elements to which we turn in search of counsel on the legitimate use of force.

THE JUST WAR CRITERIA

Just Cause

This first Just War criterion is arguably the most significant to the model as a whole: there must be an appropriate cause to justify violence. If this is also true of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, then what specific causes for warfare are cited therein? Vālmiki informs us very early in the epic that the world is imperiled by evil *rākṣasas*—i.e., demons—who, by means of violence and magical spells, threaten the sanctity and well-being of the other inhabitants of the planet. Their effort is spearheaded by the demon-king Rāvaṇa, who has come to represent the personification of evil against whose vice Rāma’s virtue is stanchly contrasted. Rāvaṇa and his entourage terrorize ascetics, interrupting their rituals, thereby causing imbalance in the cosmic order. The Hindu pantheon of gods implore the god Viṣṇu to take incarnation on earth in order to “kill Rāvaṇa in battle, that mighty thorn in the side of the world, for he is . . . a terror to ascetics and a source of lamentation to the world” (*pravṛddham lokakaṇṭakam . . . samare jahi rāvaṇam . . . tad . . . virāvaṇam*

tapasvinām taṃ bhayāvaham, I.14.17–I.14.21). Violence is condoned in this context, given the necessity of combating the force of evil. Viṣṇu descends during King Daśaratha's ritual sacrifice for progeny, and takes human birth as the warrior-prince Rāma.⁷ Viṣṇu's ultimate mission (as manifest in the Rāma *avatāra*, i.e., his divine descent) is clear: the defeat of evil and restoration of cosmic balance. The welfare of the world is, undoubtedly, viewed as just cause for violent action. Rāma, we are told, is driven by the goal of defending the welfare of all beings.

Born into the *kṣatriya* (ruler-warrior) caste as the son of King Daśaratha, Rāma is authorized to wield violent force in order to combat evil and protect righteousness. Violent means is the privilege, and indeed the duty, of the *kṣatriya* class, to whom, among the four castes, social governance is entrusted. Both protection and punishment are deemed equally vital to social welfare, without which society would decay. Both are accepted as noble causes for violence, as exemplified at several junctures throughout the text.

During his exile, Rāma encounters forest-dwelling sages who remind him of his *kṣatriya* duty, declaring that “a king who protects his subjects . . . acquires [a quarter] of the supreme righteousness amassed by a sage who lives on nothing but roots and fruit” (*yat karoti paraṃ dharmaṃ munir mūlaphalāśanaḥ tatra rājñās caturbhāgaḥ . . . rakṣataḥ*, III.5.13). They implore him to carry out his duty and protect them from the menacing *rākṣasas*. By wielding violence, Rāma becomes the sages' refuge from persecution and annihilation, which the text presents as ample cause for the exercise of armed force. Similarly, at the onset of the war between Rāma and Rāvaṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, Rāvaṇa's brother and court minister, defects to Rāma's army due to the demon-king's arrogance and ethical depravity. Though several of Rāma's advisors are suspicious, Rāma accepts Vibhīṣaṇa without hesitation because “it is a serious transgression to fail to protect those who come seeking shelter” (*evaṃ doṣo mahān atra prapannānām arakṣaṇe*); indeed, one should protect the vulnerable “even at the cost of his own life” (*prāṇān parityajya*) (VI.12.15–VI.12.18). As per the dictates of *dharma* (righteousness), Rāma openly welcomes Vibhīṣaṇa: the warrior-prince is sworn to “grant protection to all beings who come to [him] for shelter” (*sakṛd eva prapannāya tavāsmīti ca yācate abhayaṃ sarvabhūtebhyo dadāmy etad vratam mama*, VI.12.20). Protection is privileged over passivity.

⁷In actuality, Viṣṇu's incarnation peculiarly occurs among Daśaratha's four sons, since his essence is transmitted via a magical porridge from which Daśaratha's three wives eat, in varying proportions, in order to conceive.

By extension, self-preservation is a valid justification for the resort to violence. One must protect oneself against annihilation, especially in order to protect others. An example of this arises in a later episode, in which Hanumān, Rāma's staunch simian devotee, is captured in Laṅkā by Rāvaṇa and his entourage. Hanumān cleverly cites self-defense as his justification for killing several of the demon-king's warriors (V.48.13), though his official mission in Laṅkā is only one of reconnaissance. Similarly, Vibhīṣaṇa defends Rāma's killing of the demon Khara by invoking self-defense, stating that "all living creatures must strive to the limit of their strength to save their own lives" (*avaśyaṃ prāṇināṃ prāṇā rakṣitavyā yathābalaṃ*, VI.9.14). Clearly, protection (of both the self and other) warrants the execution of violence. Recall that on the cosmological level, Rāma's very incarnation takes place in order to protect his fellow creatures, and to protect *dharma* itself.

In keeping with the theme of protection, the safety of the collective often trumps other ethical considerations. For example, although the slaughter of a female is highly stigmatized in Sanskrit epic culture (see the "Right Conduct" section), Rāma is required to destroy the she-demon Tāṭakā (I.24.13–I.24.19), who poses a threat to the great sage Viśvāmitra, one of Rāma's early mentors. The sage urges Rāma to slaughter the she-demon without reservation, although doing so is generally considered morally reprehensible and against the code of the warrior. The fact that the text so explicitly argues against the slaying of a woman indicates that violence in the text is far from haphazard, but rather is executed deliberately and thoughtfully, with proper cause. Sage Viśvāmitra urges Rāma to kill her and not be "soft-hearted about killing a woman" (*strīvadhakṛte ghrṇā*, I.24.15). Viśvāmitra proceeds to cite precedents of great men who killed females for a greater cause (I.24.17–I.24.18), declaring in summation that "many other great and excellent men killed women who were set in the ways of unrighteousness" (*etaiś cānyaiś ca bahubhī rājaputramahātmabhiḥ adharmaniratā nāryo hatāḥ puruṣasattamaiḥ*, I.24.19). The threat that Tāṭakā poses toward other beings outweighs considerations of gender with respect to *kṣatriya dharma*. Viśvāmitra commands him to "kill this utterly dreadful and wicked *yakṣa* [demon] woman whose valor is employed for evil purposes" (*enām duvṛttām yakṣiṃ paramadāruṇām jahi duṣṭaparākramām*, I.24.13), especially given the immemorial responsibility of "a king's son [to] act for the welfare of the four great social orders" (*cāturvarṇyahitārthāya kartavyaṃ rājasūnūnā*, I.24.15). It is worth noting that this specific responsibility (i.e., collective welfare) does not belong exclusively to sovereigns. The text later instructs that

social harmony is a responsibility of the entire collective, stating that “all [should] unite to destroy [the] one whose deeds are brutal and perverse” (*karma lokaviruddham tu kurvāṇam . . . tikṣṇam sarvajano hanti*, III.28.4). But the text does not call the whole of society to arms: *kṣatriyas* alone may exercise force, and only when presented with reasonable cause.

Violence is sanctioned as a means of punishment as well as a means of protection and self-defense. For example, Rāma executes the monkey-king, Vālin, for the sake of upholding righteousness. He metes out punishment to Vālin for his adulterous transgressions as well as to fulfill a promise to his ally Sugrīva. In a lengthy speech, Rāma declares that “the right of punishing and rewarding” (*nigrahānugrahāv api* IV.18.6) belongs to the kings of the earth, who retain the right to “duly chastise whoever strays from the path of righteousness” (*te vyaṃ mārgavibhraṣṭam . . . nigrhṇīmo yathāvidhi* IV.18.11). Yet this does not appear to constitute license for rulers to issue punishment on a whim. Rāma is careful to invoke the law which states that Vālin’s crime—specifically, adultery with his brother’s wife—was a crime punishable by death. As Rāma declares, “death is the punishment prescribed for a man who out of lust approaches his daughter, sister, or younger brother’s wife” (*aurasīm bhaginīm vāpi bhāryāṃ vāpy anujasya yaḥ pracareta naraḥ kāmāt tasya daṇḍo vadhaḥ smṛtaḥ*, IV.18.22). Rāma consoles the dying Vālin that neither he who punishes nor he who is punished truly perishes, since “each serves the due process of justice” (*kāryakāraṇasiddhārthāv*) (IV.18.53–IV.18.55). Thus, punishment of gross ethical transgressions validates the application of lethal force.

Even the ideal kingdom requires arms. In Book II, Vālmiki portrays a utopia in Ayodhyā, the capital city of the idyllic kingdom of Kośala; yet it is described as well armed. Though Ayodhyā is prosperous, refined, and peaceful, we are told that it contained every implement and weapon (I.5.10) and its king, Daśaratha, had thousands of great chariot warriors with great fighting skills. Even a utopia must be protected from external threat; similarly, internal threats must be met with punishment, but in a reasonable and humane manner. We are told that in Ayodhyā, the king’s administrators would, “if the occasion demanded, punish their own sons” (*prāpta kālam yathā daṇḍam dhārayeyuḥ suteṣv api*, I.7.7) and that they “were constant protectors of all honest inhabitants of the realm” (*śucīnām rakṣitāraś ca nityam viṣayavāsinām*, 1.7.9). The Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa asserts that protection and punishment, when alloyed with reason, represent sanctioned and necessary expressions of violence.

Right Intent

The second criterion comprising the Just War framework is Right Intent, which can be interpreted as having a pure motivation to support righteousness, independent of selfish desires. Another interpretation in the Just War tradition is that war be implemented only for the sake of peace. The demon Rāvaṇa's "rationale" for violence is thoroughly condemned insofar as it is senselessly self-serving and conflict-provoking.⁸ By contrast, what can we gage about the intention of the noble warrior Rāma? On the day of his would-be coronation, upon being wrongfully sentenced to fourteen years of forest exile, Rāma had ample opportunity to exercise force for the sake of his own self-interest. He is even urged to do so by his brother, the passionate Lakṣmaṇa, who insists that they should right the wrong by forcefully seizing the throne. However, Rāma rejects this advice and gracefully acquiesces to his sentence of exile, seemingly disinterested in personal comfort or entitlement. For Rāma, the loss of kingship and all of its amenities does not constitute right intent for the use of force.

The prince regent's motives appear consistently noble overall, but are not without blemish. The episode narrating Rāma's slaughter of Vālin is far more questionable, specifically regarding the selflessness of Rāma's intentions. In Book IV, *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa*, Rāma defeats Vālin, having forged an alliance with Vālin's brother, Sugrīva. Rāma and Sugrīva had pledged mutual allegiance and aid in the recovery of their respective wives. Thus, Rāma is clearly motivated by self-interest. However, clearly conscious of the ethical conundrum, Vālmiki articulates intentions on Rāma's behalf which transcend the sphere of self-interest. Vālin himself, on the verge of death, inquires about Rāma's motivation for killing him, wondering what possible merit could be gained thereby. Vālmiki, speaking through the dying lord of the monkey-men, indicates that kings must act in accordance with noble intentions, including "conciliation, generosity, forbearance, righteousness, truthfulness, steadiness, and courage, as well as punishment of wrongdoers" (*sāma dānaṃ kṣamā dharmāḥ satyaṃ dhṛtiparākramau pārthivānām guṇā rājan daṇḍaś cāpy apakāriṣu*, IV.17.25) and that they "must not act capriciously" (*na nr̥pāḥ kāmavṛttayaḥ*, IV.17.28). At this juncture, Rāma maintains that he acted in the interest of his duty to punish evil-doers. That the text anticipates and defends against the charge that Rāma's motives are solely self-serving bespeaks an insistence on nobility of intent whilst engaging in violent force.

⁸See the "The Unjust War: Sage Counsel at the Court of Rāvaṇa" section.

Net Benefit

The third Just War criterion asks: is the fighting worth the cost? During their forest exile, Sitā cautions Rāma against the overall use of arms, highlighting the delusion that can arise from the possession of weaponry. She seems to be asking whether or not violence, however justified, is worth the risk it poses. She relays the tale of an ascetic who, upon receiving a sword as a gift, becomes obsessed with the weapon, carrying it everywhere. He eventually turns violent, forgetting his ascetic vow of *ahimṣā*. Delighting in wanton violence, his barbaric tendencies serve to rupture his virtue and amassed merit (*tapas*), causing him to eventually end up in hell (III.8.13–III.8.19). Hence, nothing good came of the weapon. Sitā relays the tale to question the benefit of violence. For the sage, there was no benefit, and only detriment. Ironically, Rāma employs violence to secure, rather than to compromise, the religiosity of the sages. It is the *rākṣasas* who thwart their work by desecrating their sacrificial altars. The benefit of protecting the sages is clear, and well worth the exercise of force.

Valmiki also considers the benefits and drawbacks of battle through Hanumān, who wonders aloud what intelligent person would haphazardly engage in an affair such as warfare whose outcome is so uncertain (V.28.35)—indeed, none can predict the outcome of combat. Nevertheless, the valiant Hanumān pledges allegiance to Rāma, an act signifying for him that the potential benefit of the war outweighs its cruel uncertainty. Hanumān’s musings occur long before the onset of battle, when there is great margin for speculation. However, soon into the war, the demise of the *rākṣasas* becomes easily foreseeable, and on this basis Rāvaṇa’s great-uncle and minister, Mālyavān, reminds him that “a king who is weaker than his rival or equal to him in strength should sue for peace [and] only one who is stronger should make war, but even he must never underestimate his enemy” (*hīyamānena kartavyo rājñā sandhiḥ samena ca na śatrum avamanyeta jyāyān kurvīta vīgraham*, VI.26.8). Mālyavān’s concern is a pragmatic one. What is to be gained from continuing the war? In the case of the *rākṣasas*, where defeat is inevitable, a sensible ruler heeding the net benefit argument would have happily surrendered.

Rāma, on the other hand, engages in violent combat not only for the rescue of his cruelly imperiled wife, but for the sake of righteousness (*dharma*) itself. As the *avatāra* of the god Viṣṇu, Rāma’s earthly purpose is to destroy Rāvaṇa and his entourage who threaten the rituals of the ascetics, rituals which maintain the welfare of the world. It is important to bear in mind the inextricability of the “cosmic” and “human” narratives in the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa*.

Sheldon Pollock argues on the basis of the epic's narrative logic (particularly with respect to the tale's boon motif) that Rāma must simultaneously be a divine and human being, and so, too, must the concerns of each setting be intertwined (1984). While at face value, the tale of Rāma easily appears to fit the ancient trope of a prince recapturing his princess from the clutches of evil, the details are dependent upon the necessities of the grander narrative, whereby Rāma must destroy Rāvaṇa in the interest of cosmic balance. For example, we are told that during Rāvaṇa's assault on Sītā, "perfected beings cried out 'This is the end of Rāvaṇa!'" (*etad anto daśagrīva iti siddhās tadā 'bruvan*, III.52.10); furthermore, Sītā explicitly voices the same during her captivity: "I know for certain I could never have been stolen away from the wise Rāma, were it not that Fate had destined it—to bring about your death!" (*nāpahartum ahaṃ śakyā tasya rāmasya dhīmataḥ vidhis tava vadhārthāya vihito nātra saṃśayaḥ*, V.20.21). It is through the backdrop of this cosmic narrative that one appreciates the ultimate benefit of Rāma's cause.

Legitimate Authority

The fourth Just War criterion concerns the following question: can force be rightfully decided upon and implemented by anyone? The society of the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* accepts both filial piety and the authority of the king. Elders are invariably respected. Rāma even renounces his right to kingship and agrees to dwell in the wilderness merely because his father (also his king) asks him to do so. In obeying his father's command, he cites the precedents of two noble individuals committing deplorable acts. The first one slays a cow, a highly revered animal in Indian culture, and the second slays his own mother, both at the behest of their father (II.18.27–II.18.29). These abhorrent and shocking acts are justified in the name of obedience and respect for authority. When later confronted by the impassioned Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma instructs his younger brother that their father's command "is based on righteousness and is absolute" and that "having once heard a father's command, a mother's, or a Brahman's, one must not disregard it" (*dharmasaṃśritam etac ca pitur vacanam uttamam saṃśrutya ca pitur vākyam mātur vā brāhmaṇasya vā na kartavyam vṛthā*, II.18.34) under any circumstances. On the familial level, one must obey one's parents and elders. Lakṣmaṇa imposes fourteen years of exile upon himself in order to accompany and serve his elder brother. Similarly, wives respect the authority of their husbands, and Sītā insists upon the same fourteen-year sentence out of reverence for her husband.

Obedience also extends from the social level to the priestly class. Rāma declares to the dying monkey-king, Vālin, that for righteousness to be in effect, “an older brother, a father, and a bestower of learning—these three are to be regarded as father [and furthermore that] a younger brother, one’s own son, and also a pupil with good qualities—these three are to be thought of as one’s sons” (*jyeṣṭho bhrātā pitā caiva yaś ca vidyāṃ prayacchati trayas te pitaro jñeyā . . . yaviyān ātmanah putrah śiṣyaś cāpi guṇoditah putravat te trayas cintyā*, IV.18.13–IV.18.14). Human society is stratified according to gender, age, and caste. In ancient India, the *kṣatriya* caste is the only one that can wield weapons and apply force for protection and punishment.

Upon entering into the wilderness, Rāma encounters a community of ashrams where ascetics of various kinds dwell. The hermitages comprised religious virtuosos who, having themselves renounced violence, implore Rāma to exercise his authority to protect them against the deadly malice of the *rākṣasas* (III.5.7–III.5.20). Kings (part of the *kṣatriya* caste) are referred to as guardians of righteousness, possessing legitimate authority to exercise power. The king rightfully uses force to protect his subjects and “wields the staff of punishment” (*daṇḍadharo*, III.1.17). To again refer to Rāma’s address to the dying *vānara*-king, he declares, in his own defense, that a ruler’s duty is to “duly chastise whoever strays from the path of righteousness” (*te vayaṃ mārgavibhraṣṭaṃ svadharme paramē sthitāḥ bharatājñāṃ puraskṛtya nigṛhṇīmo yathāvidhi*, IV.18.11). Clearly, the use of force is contingent upon authority in this cultural context, or else all castes within society would be permitted to wield arms.

However, we ought to note that the text offers a highly idealized portrayal of kingship, where the king is self-composed, true to his word, and attentive to moral precepts. It is unclear whether kings should be allotted this authority categorically, or whether they do so by their inherent merit. That Rāma is portrayed as personage of great virtue could be read as the basis of legitimization of his authority. The text in no way, for example, repudiates Vibhīṣaṇa for defecting to his king’s (Rāvaṇa) enemy in the midst of war. The authority of the king is arguably inextricable from his presumed virtue.

Last Resort

The fifth Just War criterion stipulates that all possible attempts at peace must be exhausted prior to engagement in warfare. Rāma is described as one who is not quick to anger; he therefore does not readily rely on violent means. He is by nature kind and compassionate, prepared to “ignore a hundred injuries, so great [is] his self-control”

(*na smaraty apakārāṅām śatam apy ātmavattayā*, II.1.16). As mentioned above, when he is sentenced to exile on the very day of his would-be coronation, he peacefully and graciously accepts his fate. By contrast, Lakṣmaṇa, his younger, rasher brother, emphatically suggests that they violently “seize control of the government” (*tāvad eva mayā sārddham ātmastham kuru śāsanam*, II.18.8) since “leniency always ends in defeat” (*mṛdur hi paribhūyate*, II.18.11). Lakṣmaṇa’s youth, brashness, and passion are consistently juxtaposed with Rāma’s equanimity, wisdom, and poise. Rāma refuses to heed his brother’s exhortations, and insists on going peacefully. Violence is never a first recourse for Rāma. He addresses the idea of violent action against his father, the king, by directly denouncing it, construing violence as action opposed to righteousness (*dharma*) itself and urging Lakṣmaṇa to relinquish his “ignoble notion that is based on the code of the *kṣatriya* [and instead to] base his actions on righteousness, not violence” (*tad enāṃ viṣrjānāryāṃ kṣatradharmāśritāṃ matim dharmam āśraya mā taikṣṇyaṃ madbuddhir anugamyatām*, II.18.36). So distant is violence from Rāma’s first recourse that he goes so far as to publicly repudiate the very duty of the warrior.

Ironically, once Sītā, Rāma’s beloved wife, is abducted, it is Rāma who becomes uncharacteristically enraged and unsound, and it is Lakṣmaṇa who reminds him that he has “always been mild in the past, self-restrained, and dedicated to the welfare of all creatures” (*purā bhūtva mṛdur dāntaḥ sarvabhūtahite rataḥ*, III.61.4). He then urges Rāma to maintain composure since “lords of the earth must be gentle and cool-headed, and must mete out just punishment” (*yuktadaṇḍā hi mṛdavaḥ praśāntā vasudhādhipāḥ*, III.61.9). Vālmiki here voices his sage counsel on the ethics of force through Lakṣmaṇa, who counsels his elder brother to first resort to “peaceful means, by conciliation, tact, or diplomacy” and to resort to violence only if these fail (*śīlena sāmṇā vinayena sītāṃ nayena na prāpsyasi cen narendra tataḥ samutsādaya hemapūṅkhair mahendra vajrapratimaiḥ śaraughaiḥ*, III.61.16).

Later in the text, when it is Lakṣmaṇa who is enraged, Rāma advises him to destroy evil by virtue, and to first exhaust “affection and friendship” using “conciliatory words, avoiding harshness” (*sāmopahitayā vācā rūkṣāṇi parivarjayan vaktum arhasi sugrīvaṃ vyatītaṃ kālapyayate*, IV.30.8). Although martial valor is extolled in the text, violence is by no means the “higher ground.” Whoever is the mouthpiece—whether Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa, or even the *rākṣasas*—Vālmiki’s criteria for the legitimate execution of armed force is derived from an esteem for peace that resounds throughout the work.

The text at several junctures explicitly insists that one must exhaust peaceful means prior to relying upon force. Hanumān, upon arriving in Laṅkā on his quest to find Sītā, considers various options but rejects them as unworkable in that situation. He states that “when it comes to the *rākṣasas*, there is no scope for conciliation, nor is there any scope for bribery, sowing dissention, or open warfare” (*avakāśo na sāntvasya rākṣaseṣv abhigamyate na dānasya na bhedasya naiva yuddhasya dṛśyate*, V.2.27). The four traditional escalatory steps (*upāyas*) found in the Indian epics are: *sāma* (conciliation), *dāna* (gifts), *bheda* (dissention), and *daṇḍa* (punishment).⁹ As Hanumān is leaving Sītā (who is held captive in the demon capital), he thinks to himself (V.39.3–V.39.4):

Conciliation does not yield good results in the case of the *rākṣasas*, nor are gifts appropriate in the case of those who have amassed great wealth. Dissention can have no effect on people who are proud of their strength. Physical force alone presents itself to me in this case. Indeed, no resolution other than physical force will be possible in this matter.¹⁰

That Hanumān considers nonviolent approaches to deal with demonic instigators underlines an insistence that violence be pursued only as a last resort. Hanumān concludes that he should engage the *rākṣasa* forces to test their strength and to make them more pliant (V.39.5). After allowing his tail to be lit on fire at Rāvaṇa’s order, Hanumān uses it to set fire to buildings in Laṅkā.

Last Resort even has a place among the *rākṣasas*. During the great war to regain Sītā, Rāvaṇa is chastized by his own brother, Vibhiṣaṇa, who at the first war counsel reminds the lord of the *rākṣasas* that “the learned have prescribed as appropriate the use of force only on those occasions where one’s objective cannot be achieved by means of the other three stratagems” (*apy upāyais tribhis tāta yo rthah prāptum na śakyate tasya vikramakālāms tān yuktān āhur manīṣiṇah*, VI.9.8). Similarly, another of Rāvaṇa’s brothers, the giant, Kumbhakarna, informs us that “the self-possessed monarch should consult with his ministers concerning the timely use of bribery, conciliation, sowing dissention, coercive force, or any combination of these means, as well

⁹See, for example, *Mahābhārata* V.148.8–V.148.16; *Manu Smṛti* 7.107–7.108.

¹⁰*na sāma rakṣaṣu guṇāya kalpate na dānam arthopaciteṣu vartate; na bhedaśādhyā baladarpitā janāḥ parākramas tv eṣa mameha rocate; na cāsya kāryasya parākramād ṛte viniścayaḥ kaścid ihopapadyate.*

as the proper and improper ways of applying them” (*upapradānaṃ sāntvaṃ vā bhedaṃ kāle ca vikramam yogam ca rakṣasāṃ śreṣṭha tāv ubhāu ca nayānayaṃ*, VI.51.11). Like Vibhīṣaṇa, he makes reference to the three other classical means for conflict resolution. All of Vibhīṣaṇa’s attempts to avert the war fail as the utterly self-engrossed *rākṣasa* lord refuses to heed his advice. Rāvaṇa returns the sage counsel with insults, causing Vibhīṣaṇa to defect to Rāma’s army. Vibhīṣaṇa’s actions dually signify that warfare should be averted wherever possible, and furthermore, if warfare becomes inevitable, it is imperative to fight on the side of the righteous. The text clearly prioritized peaceful means over violent conflict, when possible.

Proportionality of Means

This criterion suggests that one should exert force only to a degree commensurate with the assault or crime. The *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* offers an idyllic portrayal of the kingdom of Kośala, where the authorities “would not harm even a hostile man, if he had done no wrong” (*ahitaṃ cāpi puruṣaṃ na vihiṃsyur aduṣakam*, I.7.8) and meted out strict punishment “only after considering the relative gravity of a man’s offense” (*sutīkṣṇadaṇḍāḥ saṃprekṣya puruṣasya balābalaṃ*, I.7.10). This esteem for proportionality is mirrored even in the demon kingdom. Rāvaṇa’s advisors caution him against slaying the emissary Hanumān (V.56.126–V.56.127), stating that only when an emissary has committed some grave offence may punishment be dispensed. Punishment in such a case may include disfigurement but may never rightfully entail execution. Rāvaṇa relents to Vibhīṣaṇa’s counsel, admitting that “to kill a messenger is indeed reprehensible” (*dūtavadhyā vigarhitā*, V.51.2) and decides instead to merely punish Hanumān. He devises a punishment which he deems commensurate to the crime, declaring (V.51.3–V.51.4):

It is said that the tail is the monkey’s most cherished possession . . . therefore let his [tail] be set alight immediately . . . let all his kinsmen and relations, his friends and those dear to him, see him dejected and drawn by the disfigurement of his tail.¹¹

Rāvaṇa seeks to shame and disfigure Hanumān, though he refrains from taking his life. That Rāvaṇa seeks to distort the prized possession of the monkey-man without inflicting fatal harm on him is congruent

¹¹*kapināṃ kila lāṅgūlam iṣṭam bhavati bhūṣaṇam, tad asya dipyatāṃ śiḡhram tena dagdhena gacchatu. tataḥ paśyantv imaṃ dīnam aṅgavairūpyakarśitam samitrā jñātayaḥ sarve bāndhavāḥ sasahrjanāḥ.*

with an element of proportionality of the means of force, though it also suggests malicious intent. Ironically, Hanumān suffers no permanent disfigurement and even employs his flaming tail as an instrument to set fire to the city of Laṅkā.

Proportionality of means is also demonstrated in Rāma's encounter with the she-demon Śūrpaṅakhā, the sister of Rāvaṇa. Because of her lust for Rāma, Śūrpaṅakhā becomes greatly envious of Sītā, who is the sole object of Rāma's romantic affection, and threatens to devour Sītā before Rāma's very eyes to procure his attention. As she pounces upon Sītā, Rāma forcefully restrains her and instructs Lakṣmaṇa to disfigure her. Note that Rāma does not call for her execution. Lakṣmaṇa proceeds to cut off her ears and nose (III.17.15–III.17.23). Unlike the killing of the monkey-king, Vālin, Śūrpaṅakhā's life was spared, presumably due to the relative levity of her offence. Sītā, after all, remained unscathed throughout the ordeal. Soon thereafter the maimed Śūrpaṅakhā appears before her brother's court and manipulates him to avenge her mutilation. She cunningly conveys the allure of Sītā so as to incite her brother's uncontrollable desire, thus causing Rāvaṇa's abduction of Sītā, which results in the war with Laṅkā and the demon's fateful demise.

Right Conduct

Criterion seven pertains to ethics during actual fighting. The warrior's code of honor is paramount throughout the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. Though Rāma's ethical conduct is largely considered exemplary, it is not unblemished. Among Rāma's controversial actions is the slaughter of the she-demon, Tāṭakā, an act which outright violates the warrior's code since females are generally not to be killed. For example, Bharata, outraged at his mother's malicious conniving to deprive Rāma of the throne in order to give it to her son, states, "if any creature is not to be slain, it is a woman. Forbear! I would kill this woman myself, this evil, wicked Kaikeyī, were it not that righteous Rāma would condemn me for matricide" (*avadhyāḥ sarvabhūtānāṃ pramadāḥ kṣamyatām iti hanyām aham imāṃ pāpāṃ kaikeyīṃ duṣṭacāriṇīm yadi māṃ dhārmiko rāmo nāsūyen mātṛghātakam*, II.72.20–II.72.21). Similarly, the slaughter of his warrior-son Indrajit so angered Rāvaṇa that he threatened the life of the captive Sītā. His minister Supārśva succeeds in diffusing his wrath, invoking proper conduct to dissuade him from the heinous crime of killing a woman (VI.80.52–VI.80.56).

Other episodes exemplify key elements of proper conduct as advanced in the text. The *kṣatriya* code of conduct is breached in Kiṣkindhā, the realm of the monkey-men. Rāma, highly sympathetic to Sugrīva's loss of kingdom and wife, forges an alliance with him against

his brother Vālin. Rāma agrees to slay Vālin. However, he does so by shooting his arrows from the bushes, where he is concealed at the sidelines, while Vālin and Sugrīva are engaged in combat. Rāma's conduct, engaging an enemy while being concealed, highly problematizes the warrior's code which he so staunchly upholds throughout the epic. He is reproached at great length by the dying Vālin who considers it a cruel act, bereft of discretion. Rāma provides a lengthy rationale for his act but in no way claims that this justifies his questionable method. He makes no argument against the necessity of the accepted ethics of combat, but rather argues that those ethics do not apply while humans engage with animals. He reminds Vālin that men "in hiding or out in the open" (*narāḥ praticchannās ca dr̥ṣyās ca*) attack various beasts whether they "run away terrified or confidently stand still" (*mṛgān pradhāvitān vā vitrastān visrabdhān ativiṣṭhitān*), whether "attentive or inattentive or even facing the other way" and that there is "nothing wrong with this" (*pramattān apramattān vā narā māṃsārthino bhṛśam vidhyanti vimukāṃś cāpi na ca doṣo 'tra vidyate*, IV.18.34–IV.18.35). By regarding Vālin as subhuman in this context, Rāma cleverly defends against his breach of warrior conduct, which is stringently adhered to by himself and other warriors throughout the epic.

Once Vālin is executed, months pass and Sugrīva neglects to fulfill his end of his bargain; he fails to dispatch a search party for Sītā. Rāma becomes exceedingly worried and agitated, and sends Lakṣmaṇa to deliver a message threatening to slay Sugrīva, along with his family, if he does not honor their pact. He urges the newly reinstated lord of monkey-men to heed "the immemorial code of righteous conduct" (*pratiśrutam dharmam avekṣya śāśvataṃ* IV.29.51). Promise-keeping is a major obligation in the warrior's code of honor. Recall that Rāma's entire ordeal—his acceptance of life in the forest, and all of his subsequent hardships—stem from the importance of obeying his father's word in granting the misguided boons to Rāma's youngest step-mother, Kaikeyī.

At the court of Laṅkā, Vibhīṣana—who is described as "always committed to proper conduct" (*kāryavidhau sthitaḥ*, V.50.3)—counsels Rāvaṇa against the execution of the emissary Hanumān since it would be "contrary to righteousness" (*dharmaviruddham*, V.50.5); indeed, "the virtuous do not advocate killing an emissary" (*na dūtavadhyāṃ pravādanti santo*, V.50.6) since "a messenger never deserves death" (*na dūto vadham arhati*, V.50.11). While Rāvaṇa agrees to a lesser punishment, Vibhīṣana becomes frustrated by Rāvaṇa's insistence on rejecting virtuous counsel.

Warriors abided by the rules of warfare as prescribed by śāstric injunctions. For example, the warriors at Ayodhyā “would never loose their arrows upon a foe who is isolated from his comrades, the sole support of his family, in hiding, or in flight” (*ye ca bāṇair na vidhyanti viviktam aparāparam śabdavedhyaṃ ca vitataṃ laghuastā viśāradāḥ*, I.5.20) Also, during the great war in Laṅkā, Rāma proclaims to Lakṣmaṇa that “a foe who does not resist, is in hiding, cups his hands in supplication, approaches seeking refuge, is fleeing, or is caught off guard—[one] must not slay any of these” (*ayudhyamānaṃ pracchannaṃ prāñjaliṃ śaraṇāgatam palāyantaṃ pramattaṃ vā na tvam hantum ihārhasi*, VI.67.38). Engagement in battle is a highly systematized endeavor in these contexts. The *Rāmāyaṇa* definitely upholds the necessity for appropriate conduct whilst engaging in battle.

THE UNJUST WAR: SAGE COUNSEL AT THE COURT OF RĀVAṆA

Vālmiki’s overwhelming concern for just warfare, as evidenced by the inclusion of the seven criteria, is especially apparent in Book VI, *Yuddhakāṇḍa*, “The Book of War.” Given that several dialogues in Laṅkā contained in this book deal explicitly with the themes of statecraft and warfare, they have been given their own section in this article. The material therein serves to bolster several Just War considerations, particularly the criterion upon which the ethical system hinges: Just Cause. Goldman notes in the introductory essay that:

The *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is not entirely devoted to the strategies and conduct of war . . . the Book’s narrative offers many opportunities for discussions of statecraft, [and] moral and ethical debates. . . . The principal junctures for the exposition and discussion of ethical and expedient conduct are the councils . . . when the leaders, Rāma and Rāvaṇa, are confronted with crises and calamities and are forced to make critical decisions. (van Nooten 2009: 28)

At three of these critical decision-making junctures—the two councils at the court of Laṅkā and in Rāvaṇa’s encounter with Kumbhakarna—Vālmiki demonstrates the irrefutable unrighteousness of the villain’s cause, and, by contrast, the righteousness inherent in the cause of the hero Rāma. Vālmiki reinforces Rāvaṇa’s villainous nature throughout the book by repeatedly calling attention to the injustice of so unethical a motive for waging war as forcefully coveting the wife of another. Ironically, at these pivotal junctures, the poet delivers his sage

counsel on the nature of war and peace by using three of the demon-king's closest kinsmen as mouthpieces. The three are: his brother, Vibhīṣaṇa; his great-uncle Mālyavān; and another of his brothers, the giant warrior Kumbhakarna. These three exchanges articulate a concern underscored throughout the epic, i.e., that violence never be deployed in the absence of just cause, and conversely, that it must be readily deployed in defense of righteousness.

The first of the two *rākṣasa* war councils takes place before Rāma and his army cross the ocean, well before the deployment of weapons. The very existence of a prewar council is significant: war ought not to arise from rashness or impulse, but, rather, from careful and methodical consideration. So great is the necessity for counsel in times of war that even the self-absorbed Rāvaṇa respectfully requests his ministers' advice, declaring that "those who are venerable and wise say that counsel is the cornerstone of victory." If it is ironic that the rash and self-absorbed monarch would humble himself before his ministers for deliberation about the prospect of war, the allegedly sagacious "advice" he receives from among that congregation is also befittingly ironic. While the *rākṣasa* council enthusiastically assure Rāvaṇa of his prowess and inevitable victory—thus further inciting his arrogance and misguided sense of invincibility—Rāvaṇa's own brother, Vibhīṣaṇa, dares to offer sensible counsel (VI.9.12–VI.9.13, 15–16, 19–20, 22):

By no means, night roaming *rākṣasas*, should we rashly underestimate our foes; for their forces and valor are immeasurable. And what offence had Rāma previously committed against the king of the *rākṣasas* that the latter should have abducted that illustrious man's wife?¹² . . . Vaidehī¹³ constitutes a grave danger to us. She who has been abducted must be surrendered. There is no point in acting merely to provoke a quarrel. It would therefore not be appropriate for us to engage in pointless hostility with this powerful and righteous man. You must give Maithili back to him . . .¹⁴ If you do not of your own free will give back Rāma's beloved wife, the city of Laṅkā and all of its valiant *rākṣasas* will surely perish. As your kinsman, I beseech you. Do

¹²*balāny aparimeyāni vīryāni ca niśācarāḥ pareṣāṃ sahasāvajñā na kartavyā kathamcana; kiṃ ca rākṣasarājasya rāmeṇāpakṛtaṃ purā ājahāra janasthānād yaysa bhāryā yaśasvinaḥ.*

¹³Vaidehī and Maithili are common epithets for Sītā, implemented interchangeably throughout the narrative.

¹⁴*etān nimittaṃ vaidehī bhayaṃ naḥ sumahad bhavet āhr̥tā sā parityajyā kalahārthe kṛte na kiṃ; na naḥ kṣamaṃ vīryavatā tena dharmānuvartinā vairaṃ nirarthakaṃ kartuṃ dīyatām asya maithili.*

as I say. What I am telling you is both salutary and beneficial¹⁵
 Give up your wrath, so destructive of both happiness and righteousness. Practice righteousness, which is conducive to pleasures and fame. Calm yourself, that we may survive together with our sons and kinsmen. You must give Maithili back to Dāśaratha.¹⁶

Vibhīṣaṇa advises his king to surrender Sītā, who is being sought by both sides. Insofar as she is the object of dispute, she is also the proximate cause of the war. The war does not begin with Rāma's siege of Laṅkā, but rather originates from Rāvaṇa's malicious abduction of Sītā, which we are told is the mundane impetus for Rāma's cosmic conquest of Rāvaṇa, evil personified. It is that very misdeed which Vibhīṣaṇa addresses as an unjust cause for warfare. He argues that Sītā's abduction was unwarranted, and that Rāma had committed no previous offence against the lord of the *rākṣasas*, save for the slaying of the demon Khara, which according to Vibhīṣaṇa was in self-defense, and thus justified. This confirms the twin notions that violence must be sanctioned by just cause, and that self-defense is a legitimate cause for the use of force.

Once the war is underway and Rāma and his troops have made headway toward Laṅkā, Rāvaṇa holds another council. Yet again his *rākṣasa* ministers assure him that victory is inevitable and prod him to continue on his path of destruction. However, reason is again voiced by one of Rāvaṇa's kinsmen. Similar to Vibhīṣaṇa's courageous challenge, Mālyavān (the paternal uncle of Rāvaṇa's mother) challenges the ethical foundation of the war (VI.26.6–VI.26.8):

Your majesty, a king who is well versed in the traditional branches of learning and who acts in accordance with sound policy will long exercise sovereignty and bring his foes under his power. And if he makes peace or war with his enemies at the appropriate times and strengthens his own side, he will thus enjoy broader sovereignty. A king who is weaker than his rival or equal to him in strength should sue for peace. Only one who is stronger should make war, but even he must never underestimate his enemy.¹⁷

¹⁵ *vinaśyed dhi puri laṅkā sūrāḥ sarve ca rākṣasāḥ rāmasya dayitā patni na svayaṃ yadi dīyate; prasādāye tvam bandhutvāt kuruṣva vacanaṃ mama hitaṃ pathyaṃ tv ahaṃ brūmi dīyatām asya maithilī.*

¹⁶ *tyajasva kopaṃ sukhadarmanāśanaṃ bhajasva dharmaṃ ratikīrtivardhanaṃ, prasīda jīvena saputrabāndhavaḥ pradīyataṃ dāśarathāya maithilī.*

¹⁷ *Vidyāsv abhiviniṭo yo rājā rājan nayānugaḥ sa śāsti ciraṃ aiśvaryaṃ arimś ca kurute vaśe; saṃdadhāno hi kālena vigṛhṇaṃś cāribhiḥ saha svapaḥsavardhanaṃ kurvan mahad aiśvaryaṃ aśnute; hīyamānena kartavyo rājñā saṃdhiḥ samena ca na śatrum avamanyeta jyāyān kurvīta vīgraham.*

Mālyavān launches an argument based on the inevitability of defeat and a consideration of net benefit. Just as Vibhīṣaṇa insisted upon the return of Sītā to avert the war, so too does Mālyavān insist upon her return to avert further destruction and salvage what is left of the city of Lānkā. Thus, they both recommend that Rāvaṇa make peace with Rāma. While Vibhīṣaṇa offered his counsel when war was a mere possibility and not yet a reality, emphasizing the unrighteousness of their cause, Mālyavān somewhat sidesteps the question of righteousness at this later stage of the game. Given that armed conflict has already arisen, he focuses on the necessity for survival, emphasizing the inevitability of defeat. This is reminiscent of the category of Net Benefit and the component “reasonable prospect of success,” for which there is little chance for the *rākṣasas*.

The third and final juncture examined here occurs after much destruction has taken place. Rāvaṇa, desperate for aid, decides to awaken his brother, the giant Kumbhakarṇa who sleeps for six-month intervals. Upon lamenting his dire predicament (for the war has taken several turns for the worse since the second council), he sues for the giant’s assistance in the war. Kumbhakarṇa delivers a lengthy speech in which he severely chastizes Rāvaṇa for not heeding the advice of his ministers and for being blinded by arrogance and committing wicked acts without reflection. Kumbhakarṇa condemns such rash, selfish disregard for counsel as “unsound policy” since it is opposed to “the texts on polity.” Such wanton passion is unbecoming the ideal monarch. The giant informs us that (VI.51.12–VI.51.13; VI.51.20):

He who . . . practices righteousness, profit, and pleasure at their appropriate times never comes to grief in this world. And the king who, together with ministers who understand the true nature of things and have this interest at heart, deliberates over what he ought and ought not to do in this world in order to achieve a beneficial result thrives. . . . And so a king who underestimates his enemy and fails to protect himself meets with calamities and falls from his lofty state.¹⁸

The giant rebukes Rāvaṇa not only for ignoring the sage advice offered in the war councils, but also for his “wicked deed” that caused the calamity, i.e., the fateful abduction of Sītā. However, unlike both

¹⁸*kāle dharmārthakāmānyaḥ saṃmantrīya sacivaiḥ saha niṣevetātmavāṃlloke na sa vyaśanam āpnuyāt; hitānubandham ālokyā kāryakāryam ihātmanaḥ rājā saharthatattvajñaiḥ sacivaiḥ saha jīvati* (VI.51.12–VI.51.13); *yo hi śatrum avajñāya nātmānam abhirakṣati avāpnoti hi so ‘narthān sthānācca vyavaropate* (VI.51.20).

Vibhīṣaṇa and Mālyavān, Kumbhakarṇa appears oblivious to or unconcerned with the inevitability of Rāvaṇa's defeat, though he eventually submits to Rāvaṇa's request and agrees to fight on his behalf. Interestingly, he in no way appeals to Rāvaṇa to end the conflict, and, unlike his two fellow interlocutors, makes no plea for Rāvaṇa to return the wife of Rāma. Perhaps his omission is indicative that the conflict has escalated to a point of no return. Instead, he rebukes the lord of the *rākṣasas* for having gone to war in the first place. He also invokes three of the four *puruṣārthas*, the aims of human life sanctioned in classical Hindu philosophy,¹⁹ harshly criticizing Rāvaṇa for not "taking to heart" which of these aims deserves priority in *dharma* or righteousness. Since the war being waged presents Rāvaṇa with no economic gain, he must not be motivated by *artha*. That leaves only *kāma*, which is pleasure, and desire. Rāvaṇa was desirous of Rāma's wife, and his desire threatened to destroy him. Kumbhakarṇa's central critique of the lord of the *rākṣasas* is his selfish lack of awareness and foresight. Blinded by *kāma*, Rāvaṇa remains heedless to *śāstric* injunctions and is deaf to the advice of his learned ministers. He wages a war born of desire, which by its very hedonistically selfish nature precludes concern for righteousness, or the welfare of the kingdom at large.²⁰

With respect to his ultimate indifference to the dictates of *dharma*, Rāvaṇa is the antithesis of the self-composed Rāma, who effortlessly surrenders his own throne for fourteen years for the sake of *dharma*. Rāvaṇa, on the other hand, would not even sacrifice the ill-begotten wife of another for the sake of protecting his entire kingdom and his multitude of *rākṣasa* subjects. Thus, the diatribes of Kumbhakarṇa, Vibhīṣaṇa, and Mālyavān constitute a thematic triangulation of critique: Rāvaṇa, drunk with desire, demonstrates his moral depravity by waging a war entirely ungrounded in *śāstra* (scriptural authority), lacking just cause, and detrimental to the fabric of *dharma*. His vice also serves to define by contrast Rāma's unblemished virtue. Vālmiki's concern for just warfare as exemplified in *Yuddhakāṇḍa* is evident, and rings true centuries later, as victory in the battle of Rāma over Rāvaṇa is celebrated to this day.

¹⁹These are profit (*artha*), pleasure (*kāma*), righteousness (*dharma*), and *mokṣa*, emancipation from the wheel of *samsāra*, rebirth, a concept about which the epic is conspicuously silent. There is much debate about whether the author(s) of the epic were aware of this classical Hindu worldview, which is exemplified quite clearly in the *Mahābhārata*.

²⁰Anantanand Rambachan (2003: 116) differentiates *dharma-yuddha* (the righteous war, for example, as waged by Rāma and the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*) from the *kāma-yuddha* (war based on desire) and the *artha-yuddha* (war undertaken for material gain).

CONCLUSIONS ON THE APPLICATION OF JUST WAR CRITERIA

The *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* is an epic tale of a warrior-prince's valorous rescue of his abducted wife. It is also a tale of the descent of divinity to destroy cosmic evil on earth. Yet it is by no means a tale that celebrates unbridled force. Violence is permissible only under specific conditions. All of the Just War criteria are present in the text, though not consolidated in one place. In order for violence to be just in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, there must be adequate cause. These include restoration of cosmic order, punishment of evil doers, protection of those under attack, and self-defense. Although other key Hindu texts go so far as to permit force for the purpose of conquest (Dorn *et al.* 2010), the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* does not give righteous examples of such.

As in Just War, there must be the right intention, namely preservation of the welfare of others and society in general. The force must be authorized and applied by proper authority, in this case, the ruling members of the *kṣatriya* class. There must also be a net benefit for society or at least the absence of senseless loss. The text expresses the need for proportionality between the amount of force wielded and the gravity of the offense. Also, violence must be the last resort, occurring only once peaceful stratagems (three are commonly cited) have been exhausted. Additionally, a warrior must not harm civilians, a norm which is increasingly being asserted in Western military circles.

There are, of course, differences between the Just War model and the treatment of violence in the *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*, incongruities which are compounded by the fact that the Just War tradition includes various interpretations of its criteria. Four differences can be clearly identified. First, the epic tells us that *kṣatriyas* (the ruler and warrior caste) may wield weapons and apply force for punishment as well as protection. By contrast, contemporary Just War thinking (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1983) and international law (United Nations Charter) do not make provisions for punishment *per se*.²¹ Secondly, international law disallows conquest but allows for self-defense when an armed attack has occurred on a state (UN Charter, Article 51). However, in modern Just War discourse, the legitimacy of preemptive self-defense is highly debatable, though the Charter

²¹Torkel Brekke (2004) makes a notable contribution to the relationship between war and punishment in the context of classical Indian tradition of statecraft, as represented in Kauṭilya's *Arthaśāstra*. It is noteworthy, however, that whereas the ethics of prudence is valorized in this tradition, the epic tradition, in stark contrast, stanchly valorizes the ethic of chivalry over prudence.

provisions speak against it. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* offers no examples of preemptive self-defense, but it does allow for wars of conquest, though *Rāmā* does not avail himself of that right. Thirdly, legitimate authority under contemporary Just War thinking can be either the national authority, the international authority, or both. Under the UN Charter, the international authority that has a monopoly on the use of force is the UN Security Council. Obviously, there is no equivalent organizational body in the world of the *Rāmāyaṇa*; however, the use of counsels therein might be considered analogous to national authorities (parliaments). The ruler and counselors are determined by caste in the rules of that system, though this would be taboo today. Fourthly, the rules of combat represented in the epic differ from their modern counterpart insofar as only combatants of equal advantage may rightly engage one another, whereas modern warfare stipulates no such standards. Indeed, in epic warfare, one could not even engage a combatant from aboard a chariot unless he is similarly mounted, yet modern Just War discourse does not even prohibit the air launch of missiles on ground targets.

This study nevertheless demonstrates the remarkable affinity between the Just War criteria and the sanction of violence in the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. The ancient Indian justifications for force found therein, which may very well prefigure their Western counterparts, appear quite compatible with modern Western notions on morally acceptable force. The fact that all seven Just War criteria are traceable in the ancient Sanskrit epic strongly suggests that elements inherent in the Just War model are not as culturally defined as one might think. The counter-examples found in the text (e.g., the hero *Rāma*'s harsh slaying of *Vālin*) are presented in a way that shows the moral tension and does not obviate the concern. These examples actually reinforce the value of the Just War criteria. The authors of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa*, from so distant historical, geographical, and cultural spheres, exert so much effort on specifying the conditions legitimizing warfare, suggesting a universality to the human anxiety concerning the ancient enterprise of organized violence.

Despite its remarkable compatibility with the components of Just War ideology, the text evades a categorical "presumption of peace" for the warrior class, whose caste duty is to fight. However, this is not to say that the maintenance of peace is presumed to be of no value in the text. It would be impossible to be so concerned with the justification and systemization of violence without an underlying interest in peace. Why else would the authors of the text exert so much effort discouraging on the justification for violence had peace not been of great value?

AHIMŚĀ: THE RĀMĀYAṆA'S "PRESUMPTION OF PEACE"

John Brockington (2004) notes that the word *ahimśā* appears only twice in the text of the *Valmiki Rāmāyaṇa*. The absence of the term *ahimśā*, however, in no way denotes the absence of an esteem for non-violence. Sītā is the primary but not exclusive proponent of nonviolence within the text. At one point, she describes Rāma as possessing all virtues, including "*ahimśā*" (VI.23.31). In the forest, she requests that Rāma not harm the *rākṣasas* unless he is provoked. Moreover, once the great war is over and Hanumān recovers her from Rāvaṇa's private grove, Hanumān asks permission to slaughter the she-demons who have been tormenting Sītā over the past year (VI.101.23–VI.101.25). The compassionate Sītā refuses to consent, seeking neither vengeance nor punishment of her tormenters. She rather embodies an ideal of peace and forbearance, sagaciously invoking *śāstric* injunctions in her speech to Hanumān as follows (VI.101.34–VI.101.37):

There is an ancient verse in keeping with righteousness that a bear once recited in the presence of a tiger. . . . "A superior person never requites evil on the part of evildoers with evil". . . . A noble person must act compassionately whether people are wicked, virtuous, or even deserving of death. For, leaping monkey, no one is entirely innocent. One should not harm *rākṣasas*, who can take on any form at will and take pleasure in injuring people, even when they do evil.²²

While punishment is well within the parameters of her *dharma*, Sītā instead espouses the loftier moral precept of *ahimśā*. Sītā, however, is not alone in her esteem for nonviolence. Rāma also expresses qualms about the use of violent force, which is especially remarkable given his duty as a warrior. Despite his right of succession, Rāma eschews Lakṣmaṇa's suggestion of using force to seize the throne.²³ At the conclusion of Book II (*Ayodhyākāṇḍa*), when we find Rāma at the outskirts of Ayodhyā about to commence his exile, the Brahmin Jābālī presents

²² *ayaṃ vyāgrasamīpe tu purāṇo dharmasaṃhitaḥ ṛkṣeṇa gītaḥ sloko me taṃ nibodha plavaṅgama; na paraḥ pāpam ādatte pareṣāṃ pāpakarmaṇāṃ samayo rakṣitavyas tu santaś cāritrabhūṣaṇāḥ; pāpānāṃ va śubhānāṃ vā vadhārhanāṃ plavaṅgama kāryaṃ kārūnyam āryeṇa na kaścinnaparādhyati; lokahimśāvihārāṇāṃ rakṣasāṃ kāmārūpiṇāṃ kurvataṃ api pāpāni naiva kāryaṃ aśobhanam.*

²³ Unlike the heroes of the *Mahābhārata*, for example, Rāma remains entirely unwilling to combat his kin for worldly rewards. Rāma, on the other hand, asks incredulously, "How, after all, could a son kill his father, whatever the extremity, or a brother his brother, Saumitri, his very own breath of life?" (*kathaṃ nu putrāḥ pitaraṃ hanyuḥ kasyāṃ cid āpadi bhrātā vā bhrātaraṃ hanyāt saumitre prānam ātmanaḥ II.91.6*).

Rāma with a harsh critique of ascetic values, arguing that they are mere conceits contrived by the priestly class. He urges Rāma to relinquish his superstitious notions and return to society and pursue a life of worldly enjoyment at the court of Ayodhyā (II.100.2–II.100.17). Rāma, in turn, explicitly declares that he rejects the *kṣatriya* code where “righteousness and unrighteousness go hand in hand, a code that only debased, vicious, covetous and evil men observe” (*kṣātram dharmam ahaṃ tyakṣye hy adharmaṃ dharmasamhitam kṣudrair nṛśamsair lubdhaiś ca sevitaṃ pāpakarmabhiḥ*, II.101.20). In denouncing the warrior code, Rāma implicitly extols nonviolence. His restraint and passivity are valorized, despite the threat they pose for his social caste duty as a warrior. Rāma does not even consider defending his own throne with force while at Ayodhyā.

Rāma openly engages in violence only while away from “civilization,” far from Ayodhyā and the sphere of utopian human order. In exile, he regularly employs violence in order to protect sages, slay several demons, slaughter a usurper monkey-king, and wage war against the *rākṣasas* in order to regain his abducted wife. Rāma is valorized for defeating his wife’s captor, Rāvaṇa, who is the embodiment of evil. Violence never erupts in Ayodhyā, nor does Rāma ever engage in combat with human beings. The warrior-king only exercises the use of force away from Ayodhyā. He only combats *rākṣasas* and *vānaras* and these encounters occur only in the wilderness: in Kiṣkindhā, which is the city of the *vānaras*, and in Laṅkā, the city of the *rākṣasas*. Violence becomes a recourse for dealing with the demonic and the animal, “quite literally, the strategy of the inhuman” (Pollock 1986: 20). However, the values that Vālmiki articulates through Rāma’s interaction with the *rākṣasas* and *vānaras* are obviously meant to apply equally (if not more so) to the human world. Recall that Vālmiki voices sage war counsel via the demons at the court of Laṅkā, which itself is described as possessing a highly sophisticated and refined social culture. Also, Rāma holds the *vānaras* accountable to human social values, to which they themselves appear to adhere; Rāma rebukes Sugrīva for not keeping true to his word, and Vālin for adultery. The epic consistently holds these nonhuman characters to highly refined human standards. They are not mere ogres and apes living in depravity: both species of nonhuman foils are described as living highly civilized lives, particularly the *rākṣasas*. Furthermore, the use of nonhuman interlocutors serves to preserve the idyllic status of Ayodhyā, of which peace is a crucial element.

Vālmiki portrays Rāma as the ideal human even at the expense of being the ideal warrior, since at times nonviolence takes ethical priority

over sanctioned violence. At the very onset of the epic, Vālmiki questions the great sage Nārada about the ideal man, i.e., one “who is benevolent to all creatures” (*sarvabhūteṣu ko hitaḥ*, I.1.3), yet “who when his fury is aroused in battle is feared even by the gods” (*kasya bibhyati devās ca jātarośasya saṃyuge*, I.1.4). Nārada responds with a glowing description of Rāma, whom he describes as “the protector of all living things and the guardian of righteousness [and] versed in the science of arms” (*rakṣitā jīvalokasya dharmasya parirakṣitā . . . dhanurvede ca niṣṭhitaḥ*, I.1.13). Rāma is extolled as a great warrior, a champion of the underprivileged, and a defender of the devout, yet he is also described as “always even-tempered and kind-spoken, [and as one who] would ignore a hundred injuries, so great was his self-control” (*sa hi nityam praśāntātmā mṛdupūrvaṃ ca bhāṣate ucyamāno ‘pi paruṣaṃ nottaraṃ pratipadyate; kathaṃcid upakāreṇa kṛtenaikena tuṣyati na smaraty apakārāṇaṃ śatam apy ātmavattayā*, II.1.15–16). Yet the text unambiguously states that Rāma’s martial prowess is unequalled: indeed, we are told that “in his wrath he resembles the fire [of destruction] at the end of time” (*kālāgnisadrśaḥ krodhe*, I.1.17). He conquers many foes throughout his legendary career. Yet he advocates passivity on several important occasions, subverting his social duty in favor of the doctrine of nonviolence. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* extols sagacious equanimity in tandem with martial prowess. Thus, the formidable prince-regent is content to live in the forest in ascetic garb for fourteen years. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* celebrates Ayodhyā as the ideal state and Rāma as the ideal warrior who engages in combat for a righteous cause, in a righteous fashion. However, Rāma is well-endowed with moral ideals of nonviolence, tolerance, equanimity, self-restraint, forgiveness, etc., thereby rendering our hero an intriguing champion of peace. The *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* engages the tension between legitimizing and reproaching the use of force. This dichotomy is at the heart of the tradition as enshrined in the tensions between ascetics and kings, and *brāhmaṇas* and *kṣatriyas*. The text is consciously both world-affirming and world-denying, which helps to account for its poignant social relevance for twenty-five centuries: Hinduism to this day preserves both ideals, and thus preserves this tale which speaks to both.

The presumption of peace, expressed through the motif of *ahimsā*, dominates the epic’s vision of the ideal society. The ultimate state is a peaceful one, as symbolized by the utopic Ayodhyā. Combat occurs only under certain conditions, the foremost of which is Just Cause, including the restoration of *dharma* (righteousness). It is this very prerequisite which defines the valor of the hero of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, since Rāma fights for righteousness, *dharma* itself, fulfilling his function as

avatāra by quelling the demonic forces and restoring cosmic balance. This rebalancing of cosmic and social order entails the establishment of peace, corresponding to the Just War notion of fighting only in order to achieve peace. Given the concerns entertained by the authors of the *Vālmiki Rāmāyaṇa* regarding the legitimization of violence, this ancient Indian epic exhibits a remarkable adherence to both the spirit and criteria of the modern Just War model. It is our hope that this is one of many possible contributions toward rendering audible Hindu voices in the global conversation on the justifications for the use of force.

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