

## **The Rama-dharma Doctrine: Understanding India's Strategic Decision-Making through Lord Rama's 16 Virtues**

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### **Abstract**

The 16 virtues of Dharma, as articulated by Valmiki, are the essence of Lord Rama's journey in Ramayana. The qualities are of being Virtuous, Righteous, Self-determined, Adept, Brilliant, Civilized, Knowledgeable, Grateful, Non-envious, Competent, Truthful, Equanimous, Benevolent, Aesthetic, Courageous, and Deterrent. These 16 virtues form the core of Lord Rama's personality and by extension translate into the civilizational character of India, subconsciously reflecting in India's strategic decision making.

The research investigates, how these 16 virtues have historically translated into the Socio-Ethical base of India's Strategic decision-making and Foreign Policy. Ranging from India's policies of Non-alignment, Nuclear doctrine, techno-economic and military prowess to India's role in humanitarian missions, environment, and as a leader of the global south, the research highlights key areas in which India has successfully manifested these virtues.

The research however also acknowledges the challenges of embodying Lord Rama's 16 qualities in contemporary geopolitics. Despite potential contradictions and criticisms, India's attempt to follow this path distinguishes it as a unique, principled, and rooted rising global power, garnering global acclaim and support, catering to the socio-cultural essence of following the path of Lord Rama.

**Key Words:** Foreign Policy Ethics, Rama-Dharma, Strategic Decision making, Indian Foreign Policy, Strategic Culture, Ramayana

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### The Rama-dharma Doctrine:

#### *Understanding India's Strategic Decision-Making through Lord Rama's 16 Virtues*

*“kaḥ nu asmin sāmpratam loke guṇavān kaḥ ca vīryavān |  
dharmajñāḥ ca kṛtajñāḥ ca satya vākya dhr̥ḍha vrataḥ || 1-1-2  
cāritreṇa ca ko yuktaḥ sarva bhūteṣu ko hitaḥ |  
vidvān kaḥ kaḥ samarthaḥ ca kaḥ ca eka priya darśanaḥ || 1-1-3  
ātmavān ko jita krodho dyutimān kaḥ anasūyakaḥ |  
kasya bibhyati devāḥ ca jāta roṣasya saṃyuge || 1-1-4”*

"Who is the person, existing in the present, with virtue and vigor,  
who is conscientious, is grateful, a proponent of truth, who is determined?"

"Who is well-behaved, and interested in the wellbeing of all,  
who is omniscient also uniquely pleasant for the eyes?"

"Who is the composed one, with control over his ire, who is brilliant, non-jealous,  
and who is feared even by the gods, when provoked to war?"

(Valmiki Ramayana, book-1, Bala Kanda, Sarga 1)

### Introduction

*“The essence of ultimate decision remains impenetrable to the observer— often, indeed, to the decider himself.”* – John F. Kennedy

As rightly articulated by the Late U.S. President Kennedy, the nature of strategic decision-making by a state is often a mystery. This is especially true for decisions that have been sustained consistently through the ever-changing internal and external circumstances of a state.

In 1977, American Political Scientist Jack Snyder attempted to address this very mystery in the realm of strategic decision-making, more specifically in the area of nuclear strategy among Cold War superpowers.

In his attempt to find an answer to this mystery, Snyder developed the phrase ‘Strategic Culture’ defined as ‘the sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community share with regard to nuclear strategy.’ (Snyder, 1977)

However, Snyder did not specify the relationship between this strategic culture and the consciousness of the decision maker i.e, if the decision maker consciously makes a decision using strategic culture or if it directs the decision maker through other subconscious means.

In this area comes a term coined by Psychologist Carl Jung called the “*Collective unconscious*” which is defined as the inherited element of one's consciousness that is shared between all of humanity.

If one combines both these phenomena to study strategic decision-making, one can conclude that in a nation's strategic culture, there can be a significant influence of the national collective unconscious that can be used to explain several decisions and policies that remain consistent irrespective of their outcomes or changes in external circumstances.

Coming to India's strategic culture and the national collective unconscious, one can highlight the importance of ancient Indian Vedas, Puranas, and other texts as the basis for Indian decision-making.

Ramayana is often consciously used in this regard to direct statecraft in India traditionally as seen in the common use of the term ‘Rama Rajya’ in India's political discourse. However, one of the more important elements of Ramayana is the 16-guna concept that embodies lord Rama's character.

These 16-gunans, which this study discusses in-depth going forward were widely accepted socially and acted as the central pillar to bring prominence to the tales of Lord Ram among the nation's masses.

However, with ever-changing morals and norms in changing times, these 16-gunans have become increasingly limited in popular discourse in India and have been tagged as somewhat unachievable and idealistic, even at an individual level let alone at the state level.

This study argues that, although these 16-gunans are limited in public discourse today, their inherent significance and role in India's traditional knowledge is so strong that they remain core guiding principles behind India's strategic decision-making.

### **Ramayana and Statecraft**

“Ram is an idea; Ram is also a policy” These words of India's 14th Prime Minister, Narendra Modi at the Ram Mandir Pran Pratishtha event in Ayodhya (PIB, 2024) highlight the impact the idea of lord Ram has had. This impact is not only on the society, cultures, traditions, and moral values of South and Southeast Asia but also on their policy practices, governance, and more importantly strategic decision-making.

Ramayana has been regarded as one of Hinduism's fundamental and most important epics, guiding individuals towards the path of Dharma for centuries (Hooda, R. 2019). Ramayana has also been central in guiding the Kings (Singh, 2010) towards a path of Dharma, establishing a state's norms, rules, and responsibilities.

In the chronological timeline of Indian Puranas and the Dasaavatars of lord Vishnu, one can argue that the role played by lord Rama is the most unique. This uniqueness comes from the fact that Ramayana is not merely a story of the all-mighty god intervening to protect dharma and save the common folk (Rao, K., 2013). It is, on the contrary, the all-mighty's reincarnation

in the form of an earthly human, with mortal human abilities, weaknesses, influences, consciousness, and circumstances, and it is this very difference that makes Ramayana unique and vital to study from a state perspective.

Lord Rama was born in an era where Dharma was forgotten and misinterpreted for selfish motives, and where the followers of Dharma were deterred from following it. In this context, it became the main mission of lord Rama to not only end Adharma but also to provide a path for the common folk to follow Dharma. He used his reincarnation as a display of how a mortal human can follow the path of Dharma and achieve great things, contributing to the 'Loka Kalyan' or 'Universal Prosperity'.

When one views the international arena from the perspectives of thinkers like Hobbes one can compare the behavior of the state stemming from that of the individual (Bull, 1981). In this regard, this path of Dharma which Lord Rama proposed for the individual can also be applied to states, especially in understanding their behavior.

This study aims to achieve this by comparing the 16 qualities of lord Rama to India's Foreign and National Security Decision making, and India's behavior globally. It is a detailed analysis of how each of the 16 qualities are reflected in India's major strategic decisions to pave the way for a just, safe, secure, and harmonious international arena.

### **Idea of Ramadharm**

Before analyzing India's strategic decision-making or its Foreign and National security policy choices, it is important to define the idea of a Ramadharm doctrine. To define such a concept that is deep-rooted in theological and cultural complexity coupled with a restricted jargonic assumption, let us begin by defining what it is not.

Ramadharm doctrine is not a normative framework that defines right from wrong or judges the state, in this case, India on the nature of its choices. The framework accepts the human limitations that the decision-makers face, the nature of circumstances that they face, and any other seemingly ignored element behind a strategic choice.

This doctrine is also not a rigid principle that aims to justify controversial decisions, oftentimes made by individuals in times of crisis. It instead aims to separate the decision-making process as that of the state, the society, and the individual and concentrates on the reasons behind a state's decision-making- not of individuals or social groups, but of the state as a whole.

Here arises a question on what comprises the decision made by the 'state' and how one differentiates it from that of the individual leaders, societal groups, etc. The key to this answer lies in the term 'consistency'.

External Affairs Minister of India, Dr. Jaishanker has referred to Indian Foreign Policy as having 'remarkable consistency'. This consistency is reflected even after several changes in governments, leadership, and parties with strong ideological differences. It is in this context that one can define the role of the Ramadharm doctrine

Ramadharna doctrine can be defined as a tool of analysis that attempts to root different priorities and choices of the decision-makers in one of the 16 qualities of lord Rama. The tool operates on the principle that these 16 qualities, passed on through generations, are so deep-rooted in society that they invariably influence decision-making subconsciously if not explicitly.

In understanding this relationship between a decision and its root among the 16 gunas, one can also understand the general direction that the Indian state takes while deciding on strategic, state-related long-term issues.

With the Ramadharna doctrine, this study analyses several policies of the Indian State and several choices that have stood the test of time. Through the analysis, the study aims to highlight two key phenomena. Policies and practices that, irrespective of their results, have been accepted and continued consistently have followed at least one of these 16 principles. Similarly, policies, that despite their positive results have not been followed consistently have failed to abide by any of these 16 gunas.

The doctrine, operating on twin concepts of ‘Strategic Culture’ and ‘Collective unconscious’ states that the 16 gunas of this principle form the core of India’s Strategic Culture (Paranjpe, 2013) and the culture of strategic decision-making and influence the state’s decision making if not explicitly then through a process of collective unconscious (Jung, 1916).

### **The 16-qualities: Sakalagunabhi Rama**

***Gunavaan-* Someone with strong virtues, and principles; *Dharmajnah-* righteous; *Dhrida Vratah-* Self-determined**

On the eve of independence, India chose to adopt a strong policy against colonialism and an overall policy of non-alignment, subtly resisting the evils that led to its destruction for over four centuries. Today as India is on the path to emerge as a strong global power, these policies have evolved into India’s stance against neo-colonialism and its associated socio-economic domination. It is also coupled with India’s leading role as the champion of the Global South. Be it the issues associated with the unfair practices of world trade and finance, or the equal but differentiated climate responsibilities, India has always protected the core values it stood for. This core value of using its geopolitical, economic, and political power to become a voice of the global under-represented.

From its days as an infant post-colonial country with various social, political, and economic challenges to grapple with to today, becoming a strong neo-colonial power, India has consistently advocated for the various virtues and principles that led to its independence. No challenges, in the form of the Cold War, the American hegemony, or the continued conflicts in the unstable neighborhood of India distracted it from its mission. No opportunities, ranging from India’s growing soft power, its military or nuclear capabilities, not its growing political influence and reliability have deterred it from its mission.

It is this remarkable consistency that makes India’s Foreign Policy virtuous, principled, righteous, consistent, and determined.

***Veeryavan- with Prowess; Dhyutimaan- with brilliance; Chaarithrena- Good conduct; Vidvaan- with knowledge.***

India is a leading power today in various areas. Be it the more widely known areas of military or economic growth or the less widely known prowess that comes through India's human resources, India's prowess in various fields is getting recognized globally.

However, it's not just mere recognition that makes Indian Foreign Policy embody the quality of Veeryavaan. Instead, it's how India's prowess, or excellence is helping the various nations and people of the Global South. Be it the example of India's recent humanitarian interventions in Turkey and Syria, or India's governmental education institutions operating in various African states such as Tanzania.

India's prowess can be, in this regard, showcased in four core areas Technology, Economy, Human Resource,s and Military. The areas of science and technology, which can most prominently be seen in the strides India has made in the space sector in recent times with several path-breaking missions at the lowest possible costs. Be it Chandrayaan 3 and its achievement of landing near the south pole of the moon (ISRO, 2023), or Aditya L1 (ibid.), the solar satellite aimed at the study of solar phenomenon. This technological prowess overlaps with India's prowess in the remaining three areas as well, extending to India's economic prowess.

Economically, India is the fifth biggest economy in the world in terms of Nominal GDP (IMF, 2022) and the third biggest in terms of Purchasing Power Parity (ibid.). India's dominance in the Industrial and Agricultural sector also stands as a testimony to the fact that India is the second biggest player in coal and steel production (BP, 2019) and the third largest energy producer (ibid.)

This extends to India's third and most important prowess- the prowess of the youth population. In 2023, India surpasses China to become the largest population in the world. 66% of this population are people below the age of 35 (ILO, 2023). An additional factor to this is also the rise of Indian CEOs as the heads of prominent Fortune 500 companies, with over 11% of CEOs of Indian origin (CNBC, 2023). A growing number of Indian-origin leaders in International organizations such as the IMF, or in the governments of powerful countries such as the US, UK, Canada, or Singapore is also an extension of this fact.

***Krithajnah- Grateful; An- Asuyakah- One who is free from envy; Samarthah- Competent.***

Gratitude is a concept with a unique perspective and grounding in the Indian culture, which also extends to India's Foreign Policy. India recognizes that most actions by actors of the global community are the result of them displaying, enhancing, or protecting their national interests. However, this does not change the fact that the lives of many have benefited through these actions, not to mention that of India itself.

Be it the American support for India's freedom movement, the economic support the U.S. provided to India on the eve of independence or the role of the U.S.S.R. in strengthening India's military and industrial sectors in the early years, India expresses gratitude for all. In times of need, such as Russia's military operations in Ukraine or America's response to 9/11, India's

display of solidarity stands as a mark of India's expression and reciprocity of gratitude to these countries and more importantly their people.

On the eve of India's successful landings near the South Pole of the Moon, Chinese scientists and news media were among the first to dismiss India's claim to be the first country to reach the South Pole. Stating how the South Pole was still 600 miles away from the landing zone, (Ziyuan & Science Times, 2023) they displayed a form of envy that is common all across the international arena.

India, however, has often celebrated the achievements of various countries in Space and China's second manned mission in 2005 and India's response to it stands as a testimony to the fact (Zee, MEA, 2005). India's perspective of viewing this as an achievement of humanity is unique in its own way and brings a positive, envy-free direction to the competitive international arena.

***Satyavaakyah- Truthful in his statements; Jita Krodhah- Conquerer of Anger, Composed.***

Scholars and analysts for over seven decades have described India's strategy with a term 'strategic ambiguity' (Mitra & Schöttli, 2007).

Being truthful and sticking to one's word in the complex-dynamic international arena is often impossible. This is true for even the biggest of powers not the mention for a newly emerging power like India. In many situations, this 'word' or 'truth' can be open for interpretation.

It is in this context that the legitimacy of countries is put in doubt when one makes promises or threats that one is incapable of acting upon. However, this is something India had avoided. (ibid.)

India's threats are reasonable and are often backed by ability or precedence as seen in India's actions against terrorism during the post-Uri surgical strikes or the Balakot airstrikes. Similarly, India's promises are achievable and realistic. The examples of this can be India's vaccine diplomacy (Singh & Chattu, 2023) or India's economic aid to Sri Lanka during their recent economic crisis.

In this regard, India refuses to admit the untruth, and has consistently delivered on its promises, through the challenges of circumstances and time. This consistency is also attributed to the pragmatic decision-making and leadership style that the country experienced as compared to the anger-emotion-driven, often impulsive leadership styles seen in many authoritarian countries globally.

***Sarvah Bhuteshu Hitah- Benefactor of all living beings.***

This quality of 'Sarvah Bhuteshu Hitah' is reflective of India's perspective towards environmental protection and its reverence towards nature. This respect towards the natural world and the environment at large is deeply embedded in Indian culture and religions, making India one of the few countries where the ideas of environmentalism and nationalism politically align.

India has been a proponent of shared but differentiated responsibility when it comes to climate regulations and recognizes the importance of the global South in adopting clean energy alternatives. In this regard, India has time and again called for increased support from the West and the developed nations at large to support this transition in an economically sustainable manner.

This can also be seen in the New Delhi Declaration of the G20 summit, which focused on the shared yet differentiated responsibilities- highlighting the unique challenges faced by the developing countries in the realm of climate action (G20 & MEA, 2023). This is coupled with an emphasis on the disproportionate climate impact on women and the calls for gender-inclusive climate action. (ibid.)

### ***Eka Priya Darshanah- delightful in appearance.***

India has historically been known for its rich and vibrant environment, coming from its diverse geography, cultures, religions, and regional variations. This cultural heritage is not only reflected in the many monuments, and historical sites but also in the day-to-day life of an average Indian citizen. Ranging from their unique dressing styles and eating habits to the exotic languages and art forms, from literature to more importantly films and music, this richness is displayed internationally, through the Indian diaspora.

Indian festivals add to this element of appearance as they are often regarded as one of the most colorful, pristine, and aesthetic forms of celebrations globally. Be it Indian films winning the prestigious Oscars, or Indian songs winning the Emmy, be it the White House lit with diyas (White House, 2022) on Holi or the 10 Downing Street, colored on Holi, India's visual beauty is often on display and contributes to India's growing soft power internationally.

Domestically, through programs such as the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM, 2023), India is also religiously attempting to develop cleanliness, hygiene, and sanitation awareness and infrastructure even in the most rural parts of the country (ibid). This achieves the dual goal of boosting tourism in the country and improving the health status of many individuals, who fall victim to a lack of hygiene, access to facilities or infrastructure. These factors invariably also contribute to enhancing India's global image as a rising power.

### ***Aatmavan- Courageous; Jaata Roshasya asya samuge devaah ca bibhyati- Even Gods are afraid when provoked to war.***

India's fourth area of prowess, and one of the country's biggest strengths are its military capabilities. Indian military is ranked as the fourth most powerful military (Forbes, 2023), and the second largest military in the world (IISS, 2021). India also has the largest volunteer military in the world with over 140,000 service personnel (ibid.). India is also one of the 9 nuclear-armed states in the world with an arsenal of 90-110 nuclear warheads (SIPRI, 2023).

India has fought in 4 full-scale wars since its independence, coupled with several small-scale confrontations and skirmishes. India has been successful in most of these confrontations with the exception of the 1962 Sino-Indian war. India has also contributed actively to the UN



Peacekeeping missions becoming the fourth largest troop-contributing country (UN, 2023), participating in 49 out of 71 UNPK missions (ibid.).

However, what makes India a strong military power is not mere data or statistical figures, but the philosophical base on which India's security strategy had been developed. International Humanitarian Assistance, anti-terrorism, and no-first-use nuclear policy can be regarded as some of the key components of this larger strategy that provides a normative base to the often pragmatic military-level decision-making in times of crisis. It is this nature of the Indian military, its leadership, and its strategic apparatus that helped India emerge as a strong global leader.

### **Criticisms and debates: the neighborhood case study**

India's strategic decision-making is filled with instances where the Indian state's moral directions have been questionable. Sometimes it is in the Indian state's reaction to internal security situations, and sometimes it is India's reaction to external entities, oftentimes other nations.

However, considering the element of consistency as a feature of our analysis, one core area where India's moral direction is questioned repeatedly is in the areas of India's neighborhood. India's neighborhood especially the countries of Nepal (PTI, 2015), Maldives (Warrier, 2024), Bangladesh (Dwan, 2001), and Sri Lanka (Jain, 2021) often criticize India's influence in the region as a display of a big brother attitude.

By this big brother attitude, one refers to a relationship of unequals where a stronger nation treats its so-called partner national as a 'junior partner' in a relationship. This is also extended to another aspect of the relationship where the stronger nation's support is rooted in conditionalities and reciprocity from the junior nation, often at the cost of one's economic, social, or strategic sovereignty.

USSR and the Russian Federation have been blamed for this behavior in the erstwhile Warsaw Pact and today's post-Soviet sphere of Russian influence in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (Shogren, 2019). The newly emerging right-wing groups in some of the European NATO nations also accuse the U.S. of such behavior.

In India's case, it is important to understand the history of India's relationship with its neighborhood. On the eve of Independence, India was greeted with a hostile neighbor to its west in the form of Pakistan and their relationship of mistrust is deep-rooted in the partitioning of these states. Towards the north, there was the Tibetan neighbor, coupled with the Himalayan Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. There was also East Pakistan, Burma, and Sri Lanka.

In the Nehru era, there was an attempt to handle and counter the growing external influences in these regions (Sahoo, 2016). There were concerns regarding the growing American influence in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Chinese influence in Tibet too resulted in a disaster in the 1962 war and now threatened to extend itself into the Himalayan states as well.

It was in the late 60s and early 70s that the Indian government's 'sphere of influence' strategy began to materialize as a response to these circumstances. Called the 'Indira Doctrine' (Ogden, 2019), under the leadership of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, India aggressively sought to extend its influence in South Asia and countered all external influences in the region. This was most prominently seen in Sikkim's accession into the Indian Union in 1975 and the liberation of Bangladesh in 1971.

Since then, India's dominance in South Asia has been a cornerstone policy in India's larger strategic direction and has been consistently implemented by various governments irrespective of parties or ideologies.

One arguable exception to this can be the Gujral doctrine which attempted to pacify the relationship with the principles of Unilateral Accommodation, Non-interference, Peaceful Resolution, Mutual Respect, and Non-use of Force (Murthy, 1999). This doctrine was viewed not as an attempt to redefine India's relationship with its neighbors but to isolate Pakistan in India's Foreign Policy. It was also viewed as a new direction for India's hegemony by several neighbors that moved away from direct interference of the past to a policy of subtle, voluntary domination of India. (ibid.)

In Conclusion, the Gujral doctrine, despite its attempt, made India's domination in the region subtle but did not completely change it. Indian states and policymakers often deny these allegations using the Gujral doctrine as the core principle, however, this is not the case in the neighborhood that occasionally calls to action 'India-out' campaigns.

Keeping debates aside for the sake of this analysis, if we attempt to assess the truth in the concerns of our neighbors through the lens of Ramadhrama doctrine, we can arrive at certain conclusions.

Ramadhrama doctrine aims to guide relationships between two sovereign nations and their people (not necessarily sovereign states). However, when it comes to India's neighborhood, another element of the national collective unconscious comes into play, the element of the Indian subcontinent's shared identity.

Through a complex system of kinship, history, cultures, traditions, Ethno-linguistic identities, and geography, India is strongly connected with its neighborhood. As a result of these relations, it can be argued that India through its strategic-cultural perspectives views its neighborhood as its extension and not as a siloed entity. (Shivamurthy, 2023)

This perception of viewing one's neighborhood as one's extension thus restricts India from dealing with its neighborhood through the 'issue-based' alliance method it uses to treat other nations such as Iran, Russia, or the U.S. Such perspective thus, also limits the impact that the Ramadhrama ideals have on India's relations in its neighborhood.

With the resurgence of the Indic identity, it can be stated that this perspective is only going to strengthen. The conflict between India treating its neighborhood as a sovereign independent nation vs. it treating its neighborhood as its cultural and philosophical extension thus cannot be

ignored as a result of geopolitical compulsions alone, and its roots in India's strategic culture and larger identity need to be acknowledged as well.

## Conclusion

In his 2013 talk, preacher Chaganti Koteswarrao talks about the hardships of following the path of Lord Rama through the 16 qualities that this study discusses (Rao, K., 2013). He concludes by stating how even the mere attempt of trying to live up to even one of these 16 qualities would lead to a blessing by the lord himself (ibid.). This blessing would manifest in the form of unimaginable serenity, happiness, and satisfaction for the individual and allow them to garner global acclaim and achieve their true potential. One can say the same in the context of India's attempt in this regard.

Consciously, or unconsciously, in attempting to follow the path of Lord Rama through these 16 qualities, deeply rooted in Indian culture, India is garnering global acclaim and support. One can always argue in the context of contradictions or point out the straight-out failure of India's global strategy to walk on this path, however, it is the attempt to walk on this sensitive yet glorious path that sets India apart and makes it a unique, principled and rooted rising global power.

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