

KINGSHIP AND THE FOREST IN EPICS OF ANCIENT INDIA

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The *Ramayana* of Valmiki (completed circa 550 B.C.) and the *Mahabharata* of Vyasa (circa 400 B.C.–400 A.D.) are the two great epics of ancient India. Composed in the Sanskrit language, the epics are imaginative narratives that grew around political and historical events of the warrior clan societies in ancient India. They reflect the values of the ancient Brahmanical religion and revolve around the central concept of *dharma*, the cosmo-moral order. In its most basic sense, *dharma* is one's duty, or what one ought to do in familial, social and religious spheres of activity. Careful attention and adherence to one's *dharma* is essential to the preservation of the cosmic moral order. In the cosmos of the Vedic religion, the king was viewed as a microcosmic representative of *Purusa*, the macrocosmic primeval man; he also represented the divine powers in the universe.¹ The *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* depict the trials of Rama and Yudhishthira, respectively, kings who have lost their kingdoms due to the political machinations of their kinsmen. Both epic heroes are exiled to the forest for several years, and a substantial part of the epics are devoted to their exploits and experiences as kings in the wilderness. The complex relationship between the warrior and priestly classes during the epic age shows how the priest holds the key to legitimacy and authority.² In such a situation, what is the source of kingship and royal authority?

The aim of this study is to explore the role of the forest as a source of nurturing kingship in contrast to the kingdom in the two epics. The forest is often viewed in opposition to the kingdom as an area that lacks civilization and is home only to the dangerous and harmful. The ambiguity seen in the behavior of Rama and Yudhishthira throughout their journey into this previously unknown region is mirrored in the ambivalent nature of the forest itself. Studies of the epics, as well as scholarship on Vedic ritual and the notion of kingship in ancient India reveal that the forest plays a crucial role in the development of the narrative and, more importantly, of the hero-kings themselves. Absence of materialism, acquisition of knowledge from sages, encounters with demons and closer contact with nature aid Rama and Yudhishthira in harnessing royal powers in preparation for their return home from exile.

¹ Thomas J. Hopkins, *The Hindu Religious Tradition*. (California: Dickenson, 1971) 22.

² J. C Heesterman, *The Inner Conflict of Tradition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985) 111.