

## **What Kind of Heroism Appears in the Ramayana of India?**

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### I Definitions of Terms in Europe

A. Hero (from the Oxford Etymological Dictionary and various dictionaries):

1. **a man of superhuman strength or physical courage**  
dates from the 14<sup>th</sup> century in Old French
2. **a man who exhibits great bravery in any course of action**  
dates from the 1600s in English
3. **a man born from a god and a mortal who has done service to mankind:**  
Dates ca. the 8<sup>th</sup> century in classical mythology
4. **a male character in a play or story**

B. Shero (on-line dictionary)

1. **a female hero**  
Recent coinage

C. Epic (a cross-cultural definition) by Heda Jason, *Ethnopoetics* (1975), p. 49:

- a narrative in verse or prose, or a combination of both that**  
**\*presents a confrontation between two societies (human or fabulous)**  
**\*on the plane of physical prowess**  
**\*which is brought about by their representatives (e.g. warrior-heroes)"**

### II Definitions of Terms in Sanskrit and Languages Derived from It

A. Nayakan

1. a male leader,
2. a male chief
3. a male guide
4. a male hero

B. Nayaki

1. a high-born lady
2. a mistress
3. heroine

C. Prati-nayakan

1. anti-hero or counter hero
2. a male who fights the hero

D. Maryada purushottam

1. Peerless in social propriety (civility, respect for elders, proper, comportment)

E. Dharmic

1. Adheres to one's code for conduct in accord with one's caste, sex, and stage of life

III Sets of Visual images

A. Illustrations of the Mewar Ramayana, commissioned by Jagat Singh

Based on Valmiki's ancient *Ramayana*

Rama as warrior of great physical strength, skill in archery, and social propriety

Dated 1649 to 1652

B. Images from a set of Pahari Paintings

Based on the *Ramacharitmanas* of Tulsidas

Dated to the late 18<sup>th</sup> century

C. Paintings by Mithila women painters

Based on *Ramacharitmanas* of Tulsidas

Dated from 1970s to present

IV. Overall argument:

Rama, Ravana, and Sita **all** perform deeds that can be termed "heroic" but in the Indian Ramayana tradition, even if a character performs a brave act, if that act is not also accompanied by self-discipline and adherence to one's own dharma those deeds are not fully heroic.

Thus, none of the three characters show heroism in all actions:

Rama acts most heroically, fights with his bow and arrow in battle

but does not show heroism when he slays Vali while concealed behind a tree

Ravana shows great heroism when he performs ascetic for 9000 years and wins invincibility

but when he considers himself invincible, he becomes arrogant and tyrannical

Sita depends on men to protect her until her banishment,

but then she heroically raises her sons to be warriors in accord with her dharma.