Learning from *Ramayana*: the ill effects of psychological manipulation

Dr. BHARAT DASH
PROFESSOR AND DEAN
SRI SRI UNIVERSITY LEAD
GUIDE OF BHARAT KI SOCH

Dr. MANASHI GHOSH
JUNIOR RESEARCH
FELLOW,
BHARAT KI SOCH

We live in an age when information travels within seconds. Social media, artificial intelligence, online news and phone algorithms have transformed how we encounter events and opinions. Yet our greatest challenge today is often not a lack of information but the difficulty of telling reality apart from narratives designed to shape how we feel about it.

Long before any of these technologies existed, the *Valmiki Ramayana* offered a strikingly detailed portrait of exactly this problem - through the relationship between *Manthara, Kaikeyi* and *king Dasaratha*. The episode is usually read through the lens of ambition, family conflict and dharma, and rightly so; it is one of the most layered relationships in the epic, and *Kaikeyi*' s own reasoning and grief are as much a part of the story as anyone's influence over her. But alongside that reading, the episode also rewards a second look - as an early and remarkably nuanced illustration of how perception, once altered, can alter judgment and how judgment, once altered, can alter the fate of an entire kingdom.

Changing the Lens, Not the Picture

At the start of the episode, *Kaikeyi* is affectionate towards *Rama*. When she learns he is to be crowned, she reacts with genuine happiness, telling *Manthara* that *Rama* is as dear to her as her own son Bharata:

यथा वै भरतो मान्यस्तथा भूयोऽपि राघवः ।
कौसल्यातोऽतिरिक्तं च मम शुश्रूषते बहु ।।

(Ayodhya Kanda, 2.8.18)
"Rama is as dear to me as Bharata,
and serves me with even greater devotion
than Kausalya's own son."

This matters, because it tells us *Kaikeyi*' s starting point was not suspicion but warmth. *Manthara* does not need to invent a new reality; she only needs to change how an existing one is interpreted. She begins by turning celebration into unease:

हर्षं किमिदमस्थाने कृतवत्यसि बालिशे ।
शोकसागरमध्यस्थमात्मानं नावबुध्यसे ।।

(Ayodhya Kanda, 2.8.2)
"Foolish one, why do you rejoice at what should
trouble you? You do not realise you stand in the
middle of an ocean of grief."

She then steers *Kaikeyi*' s attention toward an imagined, frightening future:

यदा हि रामः पृथिवीमवाप्स्यति ध्रुवं
प्रणष्टो भरतो भविष्यति ।

(Ayodhya Kanda, 2.8.39)
"The day Rama gains the kingdom,
Bharata will surely be ruined."

Nothing in *Kaikeyi*' s actual circumstances has changed at this point - only the story she is being told about her circumstances. This is in essence how framing works even today: repetition lends weight to a possibility and a vivid enough possibility can begin to feel like a certainty. What is worth remembering, though, is that the epic does not present *Kaikeyi* as passive throughout this exchange - she resists initially, asks questions and only gradually is drawn in. The manipulation succeeds not because she is foolish but because fear, once seeded, is difficult to reason one's way out of - a very human vulnerability not a flaw unique to her.

From the Persuaded to the Persuader

The more consequential turn comes when *Kaikeyi*, having been moved by *Manthara*, approaches *Dasaratha* herself. She does not present a political argument; she draws on the emotional bonds between them - his affection for her, his sense of obligation, and an old promise of two boons:

तौ वरौ याच भर्तारं भरतस्याभिषेचनम् ।
प्रव्राजनं च रामस्य त्वं वर्षाणि चतुर्दश ।।

(Ayodhya Kanda, 2.9.20)
"Ask your husband for the two boons - the coronation of Bharata, and the exile of Rama for fourteen years."

Dasaratha is not persuaded through argument; he finds himself caught in a bind between two honest commitments - his word to *Kaikeyi*, and his duty as king and father to *Rama*. Both are genuine values. The tragedy is that they have been placed in direct opposition to one another, at a moment when he is least equipped, emotionally, to weigh them clearly. The *Bhagavad Gita* - speaking, admittedly, in an entirely different context, that of spiritual discipline rather than statecraft - nonetheless offers a useful description of how sustained emotional focus can cloud judgement:

ध्यायतो विषयान्पुंसः सङ्गस्तेषूपजायते ।
सङ्गात्सञ्जायते कामः कामात्क्रोधोऽभिजायते ।।

(Bhagavad Gita, 2.62-63)
"From dwelling on objects of attachment grows
longing; from longing, desire; from thwarted
desire, anger - and from anger, the ruin of
memory and judgement."

Read alongside the *Amrtabindu Upanisad*' s observation that "the mind alone is the cause of bondage and liberation" (2.2), the episode suggests something worth sitting with: that clarity of judgement is fragile, and that even good people - a loving stepmother, a devoted king - can be led to outcomes neither would have chosen with a clear mind.

An Old Lesson for a New Medium - Psychological war fare

Manthara does not need to whisper in a palace corridor today. Her modern equivalent might be a notification, a selectively edited clip, or a message repeated until it feels familiar. Social media and digital platforms have, on balance, done a great deal of good - they have widened access to information and given ordinary citizens a voice they didn't previously have. But systems built to hold our attention will often reward what is emotionally loud over what is merely accurate, because outrage and alarm travel faster than careful explanation.

The deeper risk is not always outright falsehood. Even true information can mislead when it is stripped of context, repeated relentlessly, or arranged to provoke a particular reaction. The lesson from *Manthara* is not that we should distrust every message we receive - that would be neither possible nor healthy. It is that we might usefully pause before trusting our own immediate emotional reaction to one. A few simple questions can help: What is the evidence here? Who benefits if I believe this? What context might be missing? Am I being shown facts, or simply being walked toward a conclusion?

The *Ramayana*, read this way, offers a gentle but enduring caution: the most consequential influence rarely begins by changing the facts in front of us. It begins, more quietly, by changing how we see them. That is as true of a palace in *Ayodhya* as it is of a phone screen today - the technology has changed considerably; the underlying psychology, perhaps, rather less.

We all too must recognise that information manipulation can become a form of invisible governance sabotage. So, we must be very conscious before believing anything. The *Ramayana* ultimately offers a deeper warning. The most consequential manipulation may not begin by changing reality. It begins by changing the way reality is perceived. *Manthara* changes *Kaikeyi*' s interpretation. *Kaikeyi* then changes *Dasaratha*' s choices. A mischievous private psychological intervention consequently can produce a public catastrophe which can also impact national security adversely. Gullible minds can become easy bait to unscrupulous foreign elements to promote strife and destabilize the country. In the digital age a whisper can become a notification and repetition of a lie can reach millions within minutes. The technology is new but the psychology is ancient. The enduring lesson is therefore that protecting a democracy requires not only securing its institutions but also preventing sabotage through misinformation.

Fable with Moral

The Tiger and the Traveller

(Hitopadesha)

Once upon a time, an old tiger lived near the banks of a secluded lake. In his youth, he had killed a wealthy merchant and kept a gold bangle as a souvenir of his hunt. Gradually, the tiger grew frail. Unable to chase preys, he realized he had to rely on guile rather than strength to survive. Recognizing that humans were inherently driven by greed, he devised a cunning plan. He placed himself on the muddy banks of the lake, holding the golden bangle high for all to see.

A solitary traveller happened to pass by the lake. The tiger called out in a gentle voice, offering the precious gold bangle as a gift stating that he no longer needed worldly wealth.

The traveller stopped and shouted back, *"How can I possibly trust a ferocious beast like you?"*

The clever tiger put up a highly convincing act. He wept openly, confessing that in his youth, he had been terribly wicked, killing countless animals and humans. As a punishment for his sins, his family had perished, leaving him alone in the world. A wandering holy man advised him to change his ways and practice charity to redeem his tarnished soul. The tiger gestured to his blunt claws and missing teeth.

The traveller stood confused, desperately weighing his options. Though the intense greed in his mind forced him to ignore the danger. He reasoned to himself, *"Nothing of great value is ever gained without taking a risk."*

Sensing the traveller's hesitation fading, the tiger gave the final instruction: *"Before you can accept this sacred gift, you must first purify yourself by bathing in the lake."*

Completely blinded by the gleam of gold, the traveller stepped eagerly into the water. Within seconds, his feet sank deep into a marshy swamp. Stranded and immobilised, he watched in horror as the tiger's gentle, holy demeanor instantly vanished. The old tiger smiled a wicked, knowing smile and easily killed the helpless traveller for a satisfying meal.

Moral of the Fable: Greed blinds judgment

Did you know?

In the eighteenth century, Maharaja Gharib Niwaz (Pamheiba) turned Manipur into a formidable military power. During the Manipuri Burmese wars (1717 to 1749), he repeatedly invaded Burma, annexed vast territories, rode deep into Ava and reached the walls of its capital. In 1738, his Meitei cavalry breached the stockade guarding the sacred Kaunghmudaw Pagoda and routed its defenders. Tradition records that the Maharaja struck the pagoda's eastern gateway with his sword, leaving marks that became a symbol of his victory.

His secret weapon was the indigenous cavalry, mounted on agile Manipuri ponies and armed with the deadly *arambai*, an iron tipped poisoned dart weapon fletched with feathers. Meitei warriors rode with high saddles, carrying quivers of *arambai*. They charged rapidly, hurled poisoned darts at full gallop and executed feigned retreats to unleash lethal salvos backward, instantly scattering enemy ranks.

This pony force remains crucial to Indian history as a pioneer of indigenous jungle warfare that defended India's eastern frontier. For modern national security, it highlights the immense value of local terrain expertise, native intelligence and potential of native ponies in border areas.

UNJUMBLE

1. Unjumble these scrambled words to form the terms from Ancient India often used in National Security:

MATRI

ESPNIAAT

GURD

ARKSAH

2. Arrange the circled letters to answer the following:

Secret counsel/strategic deliberation to the ruler: _____

Answer: 1. Mitra, Senapati, Durg, Raksha; 2. Mantra

Marvels of India

THE *ANTAPALA* SYSTEM

Guardian of the Frontier
Kautilya's *Arthashastra* prescribed the *Antapala*, i.e., "boundary-guard" or Commandant of the Frontier-Fort, as a dedicated officer securing the kingdom's extremities. Its *Adhikarana* II instructs that forts be built at the kingdom's edges, manned by *Antapalas* whose duty was to guard entrances into the realm, screening the movement of people, goods and enemy agents at every point of entry, hence effectively functioning as the earliest known frontier-checkpoint administration.

Rank and Remuneration
The post carried real institutional weight. Historical sources on Mauryan military organisation place the *Antapala*'s annual salary at 12,000 *panas*, ranking alongside the commandant of the capital and above ordinary brigade commanders, thereby reflecting its seniority within the security hierarchy, just below the king's personal bodyguard chief.

Intelligence and Vigilance
Beyond static defence, the *Antapala* doubled as an intelligence node. Kautilya's espionage doctrine lists frontier commandants among officials tasked, sometimes in disguise, with monitoring loyalty and detecting infiltrators, merging territorial defence with counterintelligence.

A Timeless Blueprint
This layered model, i.e., fortified checkpoints, salaried professional command and embedded intelligence, predated principles now central to modern border-security doctrine, underlining the sophistication of ancient Bharat's national-security framework.

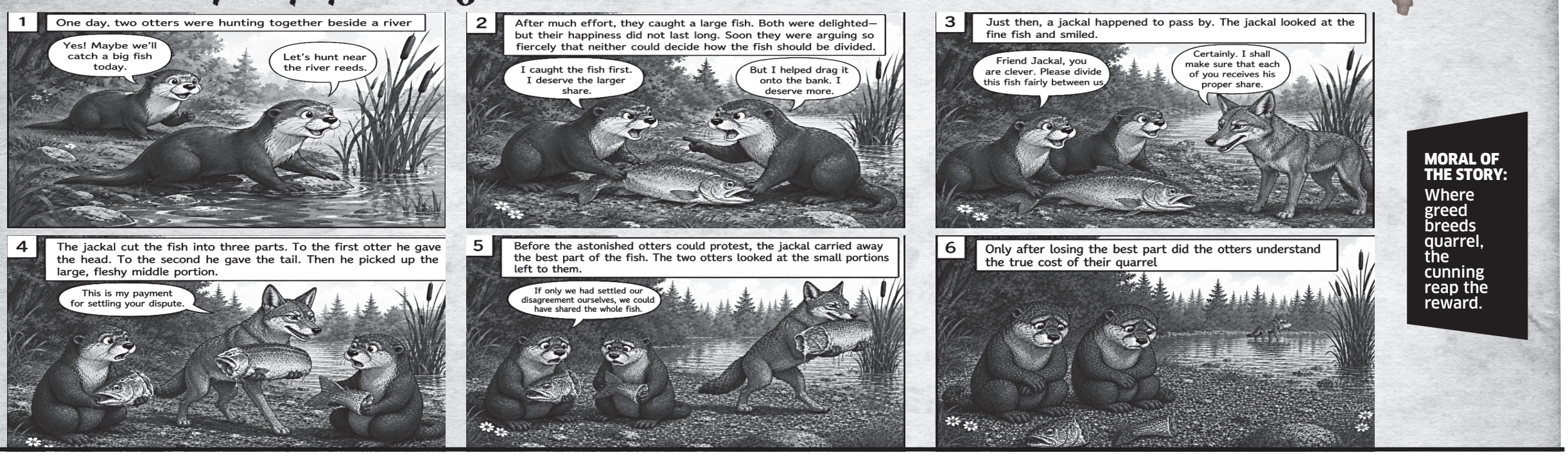
QUIZ National Security

	Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1	As per Thiruvalluvar, which of the following is not listed as one of the 6 essential elements of a secure and successful state?	People	Religious institutions	Allies	Wealth
2	What is identified as the ultimate shield that protects a military force from defeat in Tirrukural?	Geographical advantage	Superior weaponry	Numerical superiority	Military tradition
3	Valluvar emphasises that a kingdom must never start a security operation without first ensuring "Y". What is "Y" here?	Death of an enemy	Adequate treasury funds	A clear exit strategy	Consensus of all ministers
4	According to Nitisara by Kamandaki, which of the following is considered the most dangerous type of threat to a state's stability?	Natural calamities	Attacks by forest tribes	Invasion by a neighbouring state	Internal rebellion by ministers
5	In the context of Manipur's martial art Thang-Ta, what do the terms 'Thang' and 'Ta' literally represent?	Sword & Spear	Shield & Bow	Stick & Shield	Thigh & Arm

Answers: 1 - B, 2 - D, 3 - C, 4 - D, 5 - A

dabbhapuppha jataka

The two otters and the Jackal



MORAL OF THE STORY:
Where greed breeds quarrel, the cunning reap the reward.