

Cultural Ecology and Sacred Landscapes in Bibek Debroy's Valmiki Ramayana

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ABSTRACT

This paper has discussed the Ramayana as a formative literary work by Valmiki, in which he asserts an ecological vision with a cultural foundation by depicting the sacred spaces and the human-nature interactions. Based on ecocritical and cultural positions, the paper claims that the epic not only shows ecology as a peripheral issue but also as a systemic part of ethical life, spiritual practice, and culture. Trees, streams, flora, fauna, and forces of nature are represented as dynamic narrative actors that influence ethical behaviors and communal arrangements. With the help of the analysis, this paper concludes that ecological awareness in the Ramayana has been ingrained in the narrative action, the formation of characters, and a sacred geography, and not theorized in abstract terms. The paper examines the role of the forest as a place of moral discipline and sustainability, and rivers and water bodies as places of purity, perpetuity, and harmonious coexistence of the ecosystem. Here, special focus is made on the illustration of vegetation, biodiversity, and interspecific ethics with the most importance on the concept of reciprocity, restraint, and care about non-human life in the epic. The epic creates a moral vision that is both inclusive and ethical responsibility through other characters and creatures, such as forest sages, Sita, and Vulture Jatayu. By situating ecological awareness within sacred landscapes, the Ramayana's developmental model of sustainability incorporates local values in place of exploitation. The paper concludes that the epic provides timeless values to modern ecological thinking and contributes to the Hindu literary discourse by revealing the extent to which environmental ethics is ingrained in the artistic traditions of the past.

KEYWORDS

Ecology, Sacred Landscapes, Ramayana, Cultural Ecology, Environmental Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Ecology, in the broadest sense of this term, or the study of the connection between living organisms and the environment, provides a fruitful approach to rereading classical literary works that encode cultural attitudes toward nature. Borthakur (2014) explained these texts by stating that nature is not seen as a resource but an ethically and spiritually important presence.

The Ramayana provides a strong illustration of this kind of ecological consciousness in which sacred spaces are vital to the moral framework, cultural values, and spiritual awareness of the people. Forests (*Arananaya*), rivers, hermitages, and mountains are effective players in the story

rather than a passive background of the story and direct ethical training, restraint, and coexistence. The ecological sensitivity of the epic is also conveyed through the life and transformation of the authorial character. Goldman says that the figure of Valmiki occupies a fundamental role in Sanskrit literature as the Ādikavi, a poetic consciousness that originates in compassion and moral awakening. The change from violent to ethical sensitivity symbolically expressed in the transformation of Valmiki serves to reinforce the ecological and moral vision that is embedded in the epic (Goldman 1984). According to Narayan (1988), the Ramayana, which was written in the second century BCE and the second century CE, is a cultural discourse that attracts human attention to take care of the natural world.

Forests, rivers, hermitages, animals, and plants are shown as ethically important spaces that influence human behavior and spiritual growth. The study aims to answer the following research question: How does Valmiki's Ramayana portray ecological relationships and sacred landscapes, and what cultural meanings emerge from these representations? In this paper, it is acknowledged that Ramayana builds an ecological vision based on the cultural context, ecological diversity, and inter-species ethics, from a perspective that can contribute to the current ecocriticism and Hindu literary discourse meaningfully. Methodologically, this study employs a cultural-ecocritical framework, drawing on Cheryll Glotfelty's foundational literary environmental approach (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996) and Guha's scholarship on indigenous ecological traditions (Guha, 2000). Rather than treating nature as a passive backdrop, this lens reads the Rāmāyaṇa as a culturally embedded text that constructs environmental ethics through sacred geography, interspecies relationships, and narrative symbolism.

Textual Complexity of the Valmiki Ramayana

The Valmiki Ramayana is not a monolithic or textually fixed epic but a layered literary tradition preserved through multiple manuscript recensions and long historical transmission. Scholars generally identify two major recensions of the text, namely the Northern and Southern recensions, which differ in verse arrangement, wording, and certain narrative details. These variations reflect the dynamic oral and textual transmission of the epic across regions and time. As Ramanujan (1991) famously observed, there are "many Ramayanas," each shaped by cultural, linguistic, and historical contexts. Therefore, any critical reading of the Ramayana must acknowledge its textual plurality rather than treating it as a fixed, singular work.

The dating of the Valmiki Ramayana also remains a matter of scholarly debate. While the core composition of the epic is generally placed between the fifth and second centuries BCE, several scholars argue that revisions and redactions continued into the early centuries CE. Certain sections, particularly the *Uttara Kanda*, are often considered later additions due to stylistic and thematic differences. Furthermore, the epic contains internal tensions that complicate a singular interpretive approach. Although the Ramayana frequently presents forests, rivers, animals, and sacred landscapes as spiritually significant and ethically meaningful, it simultaneously depicts warfare, violence, exile, and ecological disruption. These tensions suggest that the epic cannot be read as a

purely ecological text. Rather, it is a complex literary work in which ecological consciousness coexists with political power, moral conflict, and narrative contradiction. Recognizing this textual complexity allows the present study to develop a more nuanced ecocritical reading of sacred landscapes in the Valmiki Ramayana.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The methodology used in this study is cultural-ecocritical approach which is based on the ecocritical theory of Cheryll Glotfelty and the indigenous environmental thinking of Ramachandra Guha. Rather than treating ecology as an abstract concept, the study operationalizes these theoretical notions into six analytical parameters, which are to be applied for text analysis.

Three questions are used throughout Glotfelty's ecocritical framework: (1) how nature is represented in the text, (2) how relationships between humans and the natural environment are structured, and (3) what environmental ethics emerge from these interactions. These parameters are used to investigate whether forests, rivers, vegetation and animals are merely settings for the stories of the Ramayana or active ethical characters in the Ramayana.

Three more lenses are applied in Guha's ecological thought: the lens of ecological restraint, the lens of reciprocity, and sustainability. Ecological restraint is the disciplined consumption and non-exploitation of non-human life; reciprocity is mutual ethical duties of human and non-human life and sustainability is sustainability of ecological balance between generations.

In these six parameters, episodes are analyzed in detail from Valmiki Ramayana and their implications are studied with respect to the creation of ecological consciousness, moral discipline and cultural values through sacred landscapes.

Ecological Awareness in Vālmikī's *Rāmāyaṇa*

The concept of ecological awareness in Valmiki's Ramayana (240) is expressed through narrative action, ethical behavior, and the ongoing interrelation between human beings and the environment. Sanskrit epics, Sharma(1960) and Dwivedi (2000) note, are full of messages of harmony between flora, fauna and human beings, which indicate that ecology is the foundation of moral and social order. With such representations, the ecological consciousness in the epic implies that it serves as a central moral principle and cannot be separated from dharma.

The ecological consciousness of the epic becomes evident from its very poetic origin. When Vālmikī witnesses a hunter killing one of a pair of *krauncha* birds, he spontaneously utters the first śloka:

“O hunter, you shall find no lasting glory, because you killed one of the krauncha birds while it was absorbed in love” (*Vālmikī Rāmāyaṇa*, Bāla Kāṇḍa, Sarga 2, Śloka 15).

This foundational moment establishes compassion toward non-human life as the ethical and poetic beginning of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, revealing that ecological sensitivity is embedded in the epic from its inception.

Righteous action is repeatedly connected with respect for non-human life. According to Goswami (1965) this makes the Ramayana an environmental ethic, based on the environmental principle that nature is not only utilitarian but also morally significant. Dwivedi (2000) also points to the reciprocity and responsibility that underlie the ecological ethic of the epic, rather than exploitation (57). The concept of ecological awareness in the Ramayana is therefore not only one of description of nature, but also one of moral and value-based approach, wherein the survival of human beings and their moral behavior is rooted in the balance of nature.

Sacred Geography in the *Ramayana*

Sacred geography plays a central role in the ecological vision of the Ramayana, which sees landscapes as places of spiritual power that help to form ethical and cultural awareness. Narrative movement and moral development are both enabled by forests, rivers, mountains and hermitages, which are not just settings, but also sacred spaces. Goldman (1984) argues that geography functions as a vehicle for physical movement and moral and spiritual growth in the Ramayana.

One of the most spectacular examples of sacred geography is when Rama arrives at Chitrakuta during his exile. He gazes at the mountain: “Look at this mountain, beloved, where many birds are found, and peaks pierce the sky.” (Valmiki Ramayana, Ayodhya Kāṇḍa, Sarga 94). This verse not only describes the place of Chitrakuta but also brings forth the image of an ecologically and spiritually significant landscape that supports the diversity of life and its natural splendor. So, the land becomes a place of active morality that can form the consciousness and ethical awareness. This spatial imagination is able to establish a cultural geography where ecology meets sacredness. The epic thus portrays landscapes as living ethical actors where environmental consciousness and moral education are shaped.

Forests as Sacred Ecological Landscapes

Forests, however, are depicted as a place of spiritual discipline, whereby sages, exiled royalty, and students learn how to co-exist with non-human life. In the ecological and moral world of the Valmiki Ramayana forests take a central role. Forests like Dandakaranya, Panchavati, and Chitrakuta are not shown as wild or chaotic places, but as sacred areas of nature that are used to develop moral discipline and the ability to live in harmony with nature. Exile in the forest is, as Goldman (1984) and Sharma (1960) argue, a transformative narrative experience in which characters are set outside of the political sphere as well as material privilege. Forest areas directly make human life dependent on nature, and thus emphasize the limits and dependence upon natural resources. The choice of Panchavati as a place of residence is a direct reference from the text that there is an ecological harmony. He says that the forest is a perfect place:

“This place is beautiful, rich in fruits and roots, full of deer, birds, and clear waters” (Valmiki Ramayana, Aranya Kanda).

The description focuses on ecological abundance and without exploitation, reiterating forest as a model of sustainable coexistence. In the forest-related scenes of the Ramayana, forests are seen as "spaces of coexistence" of plants, animals and human beings, suggesting a "moderation" and "non-dominating" approach to nature (Pokhrel 2019).

Dandakaranya is depicted as a wilderness and also as a sacred ascetic space, where sages live by disciplining and limiting their use of forest resources. This duality makes the forest an ecologic and spiritual space of moral values. The presence of sages and hermitages further sanctifies these forests and ascetic communities live with reduced consumption and do not harm trees and animals. Goswami (1965) reads forest asceticism as an order of morality based on awareness of ecological relations rather than on the material. Dwivedi (2000), too, states that Hindu ecology has advantages of coexistence and non-violence in relation to nature as fundamental parts of an ethical life. The forest in the Ramayana is therefore not only a place of banishment, but also a teaching ground, a place that transforms human desire, a place that makes one less arrogant, more humble and more dependent upon the natural world.

Rivers and Water Bodies in Sacred Ecology

Water, rivers and other water bodies are a central theme in sacred Ramayana, which represent life, purity, continuity and environmental sustenance. The epic repeatedly represents the sacred rivers, like Gaṅgā, Sarayu, Yamunā and Mandākinī as not only geographical but also as living entities in cultural and spiritual life. Sita has a moment of reflection before crossing the river Ganga while she is in exile, bowing before the river and praying for its protection and safe return:

“O Devi Ganga, protect us during exile and grant our safe return to Ayodhya.”

In this prayer the river is not just a resource, but a living, sacred presence that deserves reverence, devotion and protection. Haberman (2006) observes in Hindu traditions respect for rivers leads to the moral responsibility to conserve water.

The purity of water is always correlated to social and moral peace throughout the story. This notion again comes to the fore in the worship of the Mandakini River at Chitrakuta and Rama's assertion that it is pure, life-giving, and spiritually soothing. Rama's description of the Mandakini River is connected to purification, renewal of emotions and quietude. As such, the river becomes an ecological, psychological and spiritual force in the epic region. As per Pokhrel (2019) observance, water bodies in the epic represent freshness, abundance and harmony in nature and imply pollution and improper use. Haberman (2006) elaborates that Hindu narrative traditions regard rivers as living beings whose sacredness requires safeguarding and respect, thereby linking religious devotion and ecological responsibility. These images are indicative of early cultural consciousness of the importance of water conservation for ecological balance (Sharma, 1960).

Water in the *Ramayana* therefore functions not merely as a physical resource but as a sacred ethical force through which ecological responsibility becomes inseparable from spiritual consciousness.

Plants, Vegetation, and Ecological Sustainability

Plants and vegetation are also an important component of the ecological consciousness of the Valmiki *Ramayana* and are described as life-giving, sacred, and emotionally significant. The epic abounds with instances of the author's botanical insight, as he speaks about flowering trees, creepers, fruits, and medicinal plants as sources of nourishment, shelter, and ritual significance. "Ancient Sanskrit literature demonstrates advanced knowledge of plants as food, medicines, shelter and ritual symbol (Goyal, 1988). In epic, therefore, vegetation is not only a means of performing tasks but it is a basis of ecological balance and sacred living as well.

Epic trees are not resources, but sacred beings. It is particularly important to mention the Ashoka grove in Lanka, where Sita is kept prisoner. The grove represents beauty in nature and consolation in the midst of pain. With trees and flowers around her, Sita's bond with nature mirrors the role of flora and fauna in the *Ramayana* that have psychological and symbolic significance in addition to their functional value. Dwivedi (2000) proposes that these depictions indicate an indigenous ecological ethic that is based upon the idea that biodiversity contributes to environmental stability and spiritual wellness. Goswami (1965) also suggests that the conservation of plants in the epic is closely related to moral discipline and cultural continuity. The imagery of plants then serves as a symbolic ecology, a connection of vegetation with emotional strength, spiritual continuity and long-term sustainability in the *Ramayana*.

Animals and Birds: Inter-Species Ethics

In the *Ramayana*, animals and birds are considered moral entities and their lives are closely linked to human moral actions. The epic underscores the importance of compassion toward non-human life, a theme that is carried out throughout the epic. Animals are neither passive background figures, but instead are active agents, emotional, and with an ethical value. The scene of the death of the Krauncha bird that gives the first utterance of grief to the poet creates empathy for the suffering of animals as a rudimentary moral drive. For Goswami (1965), this is a basic statement of interspecies ethics, in which animal cruelty is an offense against nature and morality.

The ecological ethic is also reinforced through the figure of Jatayu. When Ravana kidnaps Sita, Jatayu boldly confronts him and declares that he will never take Sita away, "As long as I live." This is a moment where a non-human entity obtains full moral agency as well as courage and ethical responsibility. The sacrifice of Jatayu proves that there is no boundary to moral duty in the *Ramayana*, as it is not limited to human beings only. Goldman (1984) argues that these moments make it difficult to distinguish the moral from the nonmoral, and they are not only human, but also extend moral responsibility across species. The Vanaras are also an important part of the epic, particularly Hanuman, who is known as the protector of the natural world. The Vanaras are not just a class of animals, but they are intelligent ethical agents who are engaged in dharmic action. Hanuman represents devotion, wisdom, courage, moral judgment and that non-human beings play

an active role in the maintenance of righteousness. All the animals in the epic are linked with compassion and righteousness, which is important for maintaining the ecological balance (Pokhrel, 2019). The Ramayana foregrounds interspecies ethics to create a cultural-ecological vision in which humans, animals, and the rest of the ecosystem are ethically bound together, thus engaging with anthropocentric worldviews and foreshadowing contemporary ecological thought.

Sacred Landscapes and Ethical Formation

In the Valmiki Ramayana, sacred landscapes are crucial to both character formation and moral development and their ethos is tightly bound to experience of the environment. The forest, rivers and hermitages act as creating spaces of ethical values: self-control, sympathy, modesty, responsibility. The epic takes its characters out of the structured hierarchical world of royal life into the natural world where kingship and virtue are redefined by ecological experience (Goldman, 1984). Rama's behavior in the forest is restrained and shows great reverence for non-human life. Ethical leadership then is not just about politics, it is about ecological discipline and moral restraint, the epic suggests. Sharma (1960) also claims that moral clarity is linked to the simplicity of forest life and contrasted to the moral complexities of political power.

In addition to being formed by the actions of the protagonists, sacred landscapes also influence the moral growth of the non-protagonist figures, such as Sita and the forest sages. Sita's relationship with the land and nature reinforces the symbolic relationship between femininity, nurture, endurance and ecological harmony. According to Dwivedi (2000), these depictions are part of a larger Hindu moral code that emphasizes the importance of maintaining nature and moral order is inextricably linked. The forest sages' way of life is also ascetic, a manifestation of ethical living based on non-violence, restraint and sustainability. These characters reflect a moral paradigm of coexistence instead of domination, which makes a sacred landscape a "moral accountancy" (Goswami, 1965). Narrated in such ways, the epics of Ramayana teach ecology as a formative factor in ethical life, thereby indicating that human values are not just a product of social norms but can also be a product of the ongoing experience of sacred nature.

Contemporary Relevance of the *Ramayana's* Ecological Vision

The ecological message of the Ramayana is still applicable to the current ecological problems like deforestation, biodiversity loss, scarcity of water and climate change. The current environmental conversation is centered on the need for both technological and ethical/cultural solutions to environmental matters. Haberman (2006) claims that the Ramayana, for instance, provides alternative ecological imaginations that move beyond the exploitation of nature and are based on the moderation, reverence, and coexistence of people and nature. Sharma (1960) thinks that the ethical frameworks in the Sanskrit literary tradition can complement the modern thinking on ecology in societies where cultural values are still influencing the environment. The epic also exemplifies eco-responsiveness in the form of story rather than rules (Goldman, 1984). The Ramayana in the modern context provides a culturally embedded environmental ethic, which connects sustainability to one's moral responsibility, reverence and restraint to the environment,

or to the non-human life. In particular, its ecological vision is still relevant for the environmental humanities in which it interprets conservation as an ethical way of life rather than a policy.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations to this study that should be noted. Firstly, the analysis is largely confined to passages where the ecological balance is foregrounded, as well as sacred landscapes and environmental ethics; cases of violence, warfare and ecological disruption receive comparatively little attention. For example, in the Aranya and Yuddha Kanda (the two battle books of the Ramayana), there are scenes involving the destruction of forests, the upsetting of animal life and extensive damage to the environment, making an ecological interpretation of the epic difficult.

Secondly, using a cultural-ecocritical theoretical framework, and hence focusing on ecological interpretation, this study does not consider other ways of reading the story, such as feminist, political, psychoanalytical or postcolonial. For this reason, some aspects of the epic have not been examined here.

Thirdly, the study focuses primarily on an interpretive and textual approach, and therefore does not compare all the recensions of the manuscripts or regional traditions of the Ramayana. Related research can be continued in the future by comparative studies of several recensions of the Ramayana, as well as by adding other interdisciplinary fields to understand the ecological and ethical complexity of the Ramayana.

CONCLUSION

Valmiki's Ramayana offers a complex ecological perspective where nature, morals, and cultural life are all closely intertwined. Forests, rivers, vegetation, animals and sacred landscapes function as living moral actors in the formation of consciousness, spiritual development, and moral obligations. The epic creates a sacred geography as a pedagogical space: ecological restraint, reciprocity and coexistence become essential values. Meanwhile, its dual nature of harmony and violence within the text shows that the book's environmental outlook is not idealistic. The Ramayana emphasizes interdependence between human and non-human life that promotes an indigenous ecological ethic based on compassion, moderation and respect for biodiversity. The Ramayana provides a culturally rich foundation for a re-imagined understanding of sustainability, one that is informed by ethical responsibility, spiritual consciousness, and respectful relations with nature in the face of today's environmental emergencies. It continues to be a valuable contribution to Hindu literary studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities.

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