



RAMAYANA: A STUDY OF ETHICS IN THE ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper undertakes the study of Ramayana from the point of view of Ecocriticism, in order to examine how the text presents the profound connection between humans and nature in ancient Vedic time. In the epic, the forests, rivers, animals, and plants are not just the background of the story, but act as living parts of life. The text also focuses on how the characters respect nature and live in harmony with it. The forest stands for peace, truth, and learning; instead city stands for power and conflict.

INTRODUCTION

The *Ramayana* is one of the two great and immortal epics of Sanskrit literature in India, the other is the *Mahabharat*. The epic is attributed to the sage Valmiki, and its influence spreads far beyond the borders of the country. It was written back over two thousand years in its earliest form. The work blends history, myth, and spiritual philosophy into a narrative that has shaped the ethical imagination of India. The work is composed in about 24,000 verses divided into seven books or *kandas*. The epic tells the life story of Prince Rama, but it is far

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more than a heroic adventure. It is a meditation on *dharma*, that is, righteousness, the duties belonging to family and society, and the eternal fight between virtue and vice.

For centuries, the *Ramayana* has been restated and reinterpreted in the form of prose and poetry, through music, theatre, dance, and visual art. It has been adapted to diverse cultures and languages while preserving its central moral core. In Valmiki's vision, the human, divine, and natural worlds are woven together by an unifying moral thread, which is *dharma*, righteous conduct. The violation of that fabric initiates the events of the story.

Course of action:

The epic *Ramayana* tells the story of the life of Rama, Prince of Ayodhya. He was the eldest son of King Dasharatha, others being Laxman, Bharat, Shatrughn. He is esteemed as an incarnation of the god Vishnu. King Dashratha decided to crown Rama but, the palace intrigue leads to his unfair exile for fourteen years. He decides to obey his father's word and set out for exile. Sita, his wife, and Lakshmana, his brother, accompany him into the forest. They live in peace and harmony with sages and wildlife.

One day, their peace is broken when Ravana, the demon-king, kidnaps Sita in the disguise of a sage and carries her to his island kingdom of Lanka. Both brothers tried hard to find Sita. In their search, Jatayu told them Ravana had forcefully abducted Sita and taken her to Lanka. Later, with the help of Hanuman and an army of vanaras, Rama builds a bridge to Lanka through the sea and defeats Ravana in battle, and rescues Sita.

When the period of exile comes to an end, Rama returns to Ayodhya. He became the crowned king, leading an age of justice and prosperity. In the latter *Uttarakanda*, one person in the kingdom doubts about Sita's purity, leading her to exile again. She lives in the ashram of Sage Valmiki and looks after her children. When Rama asks again to prove her purity. Deeply hurt by this demand, she takes such an oath and returns to her mother, the Earth. King Rama is left to rule until his departure from this world and returns to his divine abode.

Ecocritical Perspectives on the Ramayana

The great epic *Ramayana*, attributed to the Sage Valmiki, has been revered for centuries. It is a foundational text of Indian culture, helping to shape moral values, political ideals, and spiritual practices for the ages. More focus has been given to its ethical and religious aspects; at the same time, there is an equally compelling ecological dimensions observed. Ecocriticism studies the literature's engagement with the natural environment. Through the lens of Ecocriticism —the *Ramayana* emerges not just as a heroic epic, but as a constant contemplation on humanity's relationship with nature. Forests, rivers, mountains, and animals



are not passive backgrounds; they participate in the course of action morally, reflecting and affecting the fate of human beings.

The ecological reading of *Ramayana* lines up with an older Indian perspective, which states that the human and the non-human are deeply intertwined. The concept of *Prakriti*, that is, nature in Vedic and post-Vedic thought, represents both the physical environment and a divine, life-giving principle. The *Ramayana* references this cosmology; it has portrayed nature as a living presence that can bless or retain, nurture or repel, based on the moral state of the world.

Nature: An active Energy:

From the opening scenes, the *Ramayana* locates its course of action in a natural world that is vividly alive. Nature seems like a living force. Rivers like the Sarayu and Ganga are mentioned with reverence, almost as divinities. The forests of Dandaka and Panchavati are also referenced, abounding with flora and fauna, offering both solace and ordeal. Mountains like Chitrakoot are portrayed with a painter's eye: "The slopes were adorned with flowering trees, echoing with the cries of peacocks and the murmur of streams" (Valmiki, *Ayodhya kanda*, 94.7, trans. Goldman, 1984).

These descriptions are not ornamental; Nature in the *Ramayana* itself is active, responsive, and morally attuned. The poet frequently uses the state of the environment to reflect the moral condition. When Rama rules Ayodhya in the *Uttarakanda*, "no living creature suffers; the trees are laden with fruit in every season, and the rain falls in due measure" (Valmiki, trans. Dutt, 1891). This ecological harmony underscores the moral and ethical order of his reign. On the other hand, during moments of moral failure—such as Ravana's kidnapping of Sita—nature is shown as disturbed: birds cry out, winds howl, and the earth itself quivers.

Ethical importance of the forest:

The forests mentioned in *Ramayana* are not mere forests but ethical landscapes. The fourteen years of exile take Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana deep into the forests, the heart of the Indian subcontinent. In an ecocritical frame, this journey is also a remarkable change from the cultivated urban life into the rhythms of the wild. The forest is both sanctuary and testing ground. In Panchavati, they build a modest hut from forest materials, take only what they need, and learn to identify edible fruits and roots. This way of life reflects sustainable living practices and the recognition that human life is but one strand in the web of existence. The principles of sustainable living practices are the core of deep ecology, the term coined by Arne Naess (1973)



The forests mentioned in the *Ramayan* are home to hermitages and sacred groves, spaces where sages live in harmony with wildlife. Yet it is also an insecure space, threatened by the *rakshasas* who disturb the sages' way of life. These battles can be read symbolically as a struggle between sustainable and exploitative uses of the environment.

Animals as moral agents:

Animals serve as moral agents in *Ramayana*. They are portrayed as conscious moral beings. The vulture Jatayu dies defending Sita, his bravery earns Rama's lasting gratitude. Hanuman, the monkey warrior, not only proves extraordinary physical competence but also diplomatic skill, intelligence, and moral judgment. He was totally devoted to Ram-Laxman. The union of humans, monkeys, and bears in the battle against Ravana's forces is a rare cooperation of interspecies in world epics.

In an ecocritical light, these associations show that ethical community in the *Ramayana* spreads beyond the human. The idea that animals can represent dharma challenges modern anthropocentrism and strengthens traditional Indian beliefs in the moral and spiritual abilities of all living beings (*sarva bhuta hite ratah*—"devoted to the welfare of all creatures," *Bhagavad Gita* 5.25).

Sita: Daughter of Earth

The birth story of Sita is deeply related to the land. She is found in a furrow to King Janaka while ploughing the earth, thus she is literally a child of the earth. It shows her connection to fertility and agricultural abundance. It is clear: as a daughter of the Earth, Bhumija, her presence brings prosperity, and her suffering is mirrored in the land's anguish. Ravana's abduction of Sita can be read as an act of ecological violation—removing the life-giving principle from her rightful place.

In the *Uttarakanda*, when Sita returns to the Mother Earth, it is not only a personal tragedy but a closing of the ecological cycle. The land retrieves what it has given, and the narrative upholds the sacred inviolability of nature. Sita proves to be the daughter of Mother Earth, an ecological symbol.

The *Ramayana*'s journey traces a geography that is also an ecological map. It leads from the fertile plains of Ayodhya to the forests of central India, the coastal stretches of Rameshwaram, and finally the island of Lanka. But each landscape is distinct, rich in its own flora, fauna, and cultural practices. Chitrakoot, the famous mountain in *Ramayana* emerges as a place where the human and non-human meet in mutual care—hermits feed deer, birds nest in ashram courtyards, and streams provide both spiritual cleansing and physical sustenance.



Lanka is also described in terms of lavish abundance: golden orchards, fragrant gardens, and rich wildlife, despite its moral and ethical corruption under Ravana. The problem is not scarcity but misuse—nature's bounty turned into a stage for power and excess.

Ecological Ethics and Dharma

One of the lasting insights of the *Ramayana* is that dharma, ethical morality, is inseparable from ecological harmony. A ruler's justice is not only judged in social terms but in the flourishing of the land, the regularity of the seasons, and the well-being of animals. The restoration of Rama to Ayodhya is simultaneously the restoration of environmental order. In this, the epic foreshadows what modern environmental ethics has been arguing: that the health of human society is bound to the health of its ecosystems.

Relevance to the present Era:

The ecological wisdom of the *Ramayana* has renewed its significance in a time of climate crisis, deforestation, and biodiversity loss. The epic ideally presents an ethic of care that includes rivers, forests, and animals within the circle of moral concern. Its geography offers an indigenous environmentalism rooted not in abstract principles but in lived, place-based relationships. For scholars and activists alike, the *Ramayana* offers not a sentimental retreat into the past, but a resource for a sustainable future.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, the ecocritical study of *Ramayana* gives important lessons in the preservation of the environment and humble coexistence with nature. To take proper care of the surrounding environment and live in balance with other living beings is an ethical duty of human beings. The epic teaches that protecting nature is a part of moral and spiritual duty.

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