



Ramayana: An Epic of Environment Conservation

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Abstract

Environmental and ecological conservation has been a major concern since ancient times. Constant over-exploitation of natural resources by man has created havoc in our environment. The phenomena like ozone layer depletion, global warming, soil contamination, and industrial pollution of water and air are the hazardous consequences of this ruthless exploitation of natural resources. Today belatedly we are becoming aware and looking for the measures to prevent this degradation further. If we look back to our ancient times it was quite different from what we are facing today because our environmental and ecological problems are due to our way of living. Ancient Indian culture and tradition are based on holistic Vedic philosophy that always advocates a balance in all human activities to ensure economic growth without harming our ecology and social fabric. Our ancient Indian scriptures are filled with messages on various aspects of life, ranging from medicine, politics, economics, architecture and spiritual growth. Now it is time to look back at our Indian scriptures and draw useful ideas to preserve our environment and work together for the overall well-being of living organisms. This research paper attempts to explore the environmental and ecological perspective in Ramayana and highlight how even during the period of Ramayana there was a close connection with nature that comes forth through various instances that we come across in the epic. Drawing a plethora of experiences and examples from the epic this paper will try to analyze how eco-critical consciousness was already inherent in the psyche of the main characters of the epic and how through their actions in the works they always try to manifest that consciousness in different parts of the epic.

Keywords: *Environment Conservation, Ecology, Ramayana, Flora and Fauna, Indian Epics, Eco-Criticism*

Introduction

Environmental criticism or Eco-criticism is comparatively a young discipline. The term Eco-criticism was coined by William Rueckert in 1978 in his famous essay 'Literature and Ecology: an experiment in Ecocriticism'. Eco-criticism deals with critical writings that explore the relationship between literature and the physical and biological environment. It analyses the works of the writers in the context of environmental and ecology issues.

During the twentieth century, it is the publication of two influential books Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* (1962), drew attention to the degradation and devastation of the environment inflicted by newly developed chemical pesticides on wildlife, both in water and on land, triggered this momentum. There was widespread concern regarding the environmental crisis which was the result of the ruthless exploitation of natural resources and industrial and chemical pollution of the biosphere and animal species. The explosion of the human population worsens the situation, threatening to exceed the capacity of the earth to sustain it. During this environmental crisis, Eco-criticism was inaugurated. Today it has become a recognized and rapidly growing field of literary study.

In these circumstances of the environmental crisis ancient Indian culture holds prominent significance. We should look back to our ancient Indian culture and draw valuable messages and ideas to protect our environment and prevent further deterioration. As ancient Indian culture believes in the idea of Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam, it becomes the model in this respect. Ancient Indian literature is filled with the knowledge of environment conservation. They reveal the deep bond that ancient literature had with nature. Indian philosophy has always been very eco-friendly and it were very sensitive about environmental issues. It has always been advocating and practising the happiness and welfare of all the inmates of the global nest. Our ancient Indian scriptures like Ramayana and Mahabharata have extensively discussed environmental conservation, even in eras when the natural environment was intact and far from any kind of damage.

Ramayana, the great Indian epic which is usually famous for its valuable messages and ideals on various aspects like administrative, strategic, ethical, spiritual, societal and familial aspects, is also filled with knowledge about environment conservation. During ancient times people were not selfish and materialistic, they used to worship nature. They were leading a peaceful life and there was a balance in all human activities. Today what we face are the outcomes of our way of living. Modern people are becoming more selfish and self-centred, they are only concerned about their interests and happiness. The present development model followed in most parts of the world keeps human at the centre and develops system accordingly. All the natural resources are ruthlessly exploited for their interests and considered to be meant solely for their consumption and happiness.

In contrast, ancient Indian culture is not only centred around human interest and happiness but also ensures the happiness and well-being of all living organisms. There is a difference between temporary pleasure and well-being. Things that provide us with temporary pleasure and happiness do not necessarily contribute to the well-being of society.

Ramayana and Environment Conservation

Ramayana, the great Indian epic which is well known for its messages on the unshakeable sense of duty, and accountability of a brother, a wife, a son, a husband and a king, also talks about the balance between nature and culture and how human should adopt a balanced lifestyle that ensures their prosperity and happiness without disturbing the environment. A Marathi magazine Gatiman Santulan has beautifully covered these aspects of Ramayana in its various issues. An interesting comparison is made between the philosophies of life followed by the people of three kingdoms of Ayodhya, Kiskindha and Lanka.

Three kingdoms of Ramayana

Ayodhya, the realm of lord Ram, the people of Ayodhya were leading a lifestyle which was a combination of rural and urban. These people had all the civic amenities which were required for a reasonable and comfortable living. Their life was balanced, and people used their intellect but also adhered to their intuition. They didn't believe in a materialistic, gaudy and flashy display of wealth but in an ethical framework, equality, fraternity, simplicity, satisfaction and prosperity while ensuring sustainability. They were leading a peaceful and prosperous life without harming the flora and fauna of the region which has been described as Sanskriti.

Kiskindha, which was called the kingdom of Vanaras, was the embodiment of living in harmony with nature, which was visible in their dwelling and food habits. It was rich in Biodiversity and the flora and fauna of the region were well preserved. In Ramayana, there is a reference to the Madhuban forest protected by the rulers of Kiskindha. In Kiskindha there were many skilled leaders like Hanuman, Sugreev, Bali, Nal, and Neel who were well-versed in various fields of Law, administration, engineering, geography, psychology, and spirituality.

The dwellers of Kiskindha were very simple, honest, innocent, healthy and powerful. They behaved and acted spontaneously. They were living a harmonious life without destroying the flora and fauna of the region. A framework of equitable laws of nature was followed in Kiskindha which has been described as Prakriti.

The kingdom of **Lanka** was ruled by Ravan who was very egoistic and of demonic tendency. Like Ravan, the inhabitants of Lanka were very greedy, dishonest, egoistic, and self-centred. They were only concerned about their pleasure and happiness. They didn't care about the well-being of their society and environment. They misused their power and exploited natural resources to satisfy their own need and interests. There are mentions of the destruction of forests spanning many kilometres resulting in reduced rainfall and depletion of some rivers and lakes. They killed many wild animals and oppressed and subjugated the common people. The people of Lanka think that the whole world was for their benefit and consumption. There were no harmony and sustainability in their way of living. In Lanka, there was an ugly, gaudy and flashy display of wealth and consumerism in its urban area which was earned through unethical means. People didn't adhere to their intuition but were living only by their intellect which leads to manipulative mental processes that have been described as Vikruti.

If we look at Ayodhya which was ruled by lord Ram whose reign was called Ramrajya. Ram is described as an ideal king. In whose reign the people were prosperous and satisfied. He always took

care of the safety and well-being of his society and community. He was responsible for the overall well-being of living organisms. There was peace, justice, equality, discipline, stability, happiness and prosperity during his reign. The people were living in harmony with nature. Agriculture flourished due to the conducive atmosphere and rainfall. In Ramayana, we find a reference that when Ram had a chance to ask for a boon, he demanded the welfare and happiness of all living beings, freeflowing rivers and flourishing nature.

To demolish the oppressive and tyrannical rule of Ravan in Lanka and to establish peace, prosperity, justice, equality and the well-being of the community, Ayodhya and Kiskindha, the two kingdoms came together and collaborated.

The Forest Ashrams and Gurukuls

In Ramayana there are references to various Ashrams and Gurukuls, in which sages were living, conducting yajna and performing penance for the well-being of all living beings. One another main aim of these ashrams and gurukuls was to provide holistic education to the students. The princes of the Royal family used to get an education in these gurukuls as Ram and his brothers were educated in gurukul by sage Vashishth. The sages ensured the physical, mental and spiritual growth of their students. These ashrams were very rich in biodiversity and surrounded by a beautiful natural environment. The Rishis cared for and regularly enquired about the flora and fauna of the region.

During their fourteen years of exile in the forest Ram, Lakshman and Sita observed the peaceful, pleasurable and sustainable environment of the Ashrams. While going to the ashram of sage Agastya they noticed the peaceful attitude of the animal in the forest which they link to the positive vibrations emerging from the ashrams. They spent many years in Panchvati. Besides this when Sita was exiled, she got shelter in the ashram of sage Valmiki. Her two sons Lov and Kush were brought up and get educated in his ashram.

It seems that Valmiki gets unique pleasure in the beautiful description of the forest and ashrams as we find various references to the forest and ashrams in Ramayana.

The epic covers a vast area from Ayodhya to Lanka and provides an accurate description of different landscapes, mountains, river basins, forests and so on. In Ramayana there are references of thick forests in Naimisharanya, Dhandakaranya, Chitrakut and Panchavati. The Balakanda has mentions of plants and forests of the region on the other side of the river Ganges, Kishkindakanda describes the geography, forestry and the biodiversity of the Pampa lake area; and the Aranyakanda describes the vegetation of the hermitage of Rishi Agasthya. Panchavati serves as a model of a modified ecology with fruit yielding and medicinal plants where cereals, millets and Sali rice were found. These plants mentioned have an economic value, being sacred and utilitarian.

Rishi Matang had nurtured a forest for his meditation. There is a mention of Panchaspar lake which was created by Rishi Mandkarni. It is said that this lake held water throughout the year and satisfied the thirst of animals and birds. These beautiful elucidations show that all the living beings were living in blissful harmony in these forests.

Valmiki has excellently portrayed nature, seasons and natural phenomena. He treats nature as a human being. He strongly believed that Art is for man's sake. He advocated Dharma through an intriguing literary art form. He is of the view that life is the basis, interpretation and justification of art. He often seeks from art to life to embody the meaning of art and life. Some of his beautiful descriptions of

nature are in fine tune with the essence of Dharma, which is living in perfect harmony with cosmic rhythm.

Conclusion

Thus through these various instances and descriptions that we came across in the Ramayana, it is evident that Ramayana is filled with several ideas and messages about environment conservation. Ancient Indians felt a deep sense of identity with nature and were well aware of the ecological balance found in nature. There was a close connection with nature. Even during that period when natural habitats were intact and far from any damage, there have been extreme discussions about environment conservation and people were very well aware of preserving their environment.

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