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ECO-CONSCIOUSNESS IN *VĀLMĪKI-RĀMĀYAṆA*: AN AESTHETICAL STUDY OF ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY AND BIODIVERSITY

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The paper traces the expressions of eco-consciousness through an eco-aesthetical reading of the text of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the oldest Sanskrit epic. It brings to the fore the representation of ecological integrity, beauty of biodiversity, interrelations between different organisms of the ecosystem, and environmental knowledge through its analysis of the eco-religious/cultural practices prevalent during the *Rāmāyaṇa-kāla* (the period of *Rāmāyaṇa*). In this Anthropocene epoch, the sentiment of eco-caring has taken a back seat in human minds, leading to a severe ecological crisis. Humans have acquired dominance over the natural environment that jeopardises not only the lives of humans themselves but also of fellow beings. There is a need to revive aesthetic impulses in humans to keep up the symbiotic relations with nature. Aesthetics is an important tool for the appreciation of nature in its varied forms of everyday activities, which forms a link between ecological aesthetics and ethics. Further, the idea of ecological harmony is one of the key concepts of eco-aesthetics, which can be often seen in the text of *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*. While the epic has been approached from the ecological perspective by different scholars, there has not been any significant study that explores the eco-aesthetical dimension of the text. Keeping this gap in view, this article attempts to explore the relevance of eco-aesthetical method for addressing the issue considering simultaneously the contemporary discourse of eco-aesthetics. Also, the paper analyses the sentiment of eco-caring in light of various episodes of the epic. Finally, the summation of the paper accentuates the importance of eco-aesthetical sentiment to assist the reorientation of humans towards ecological attunement.

Keywords: *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, eco-aesthetics, ethics, harmony, anthropocene, religion, culture

Introduction

Eco-consciousness represents an ethically motivated approach to the environment, i.e., a sentiment of caring for the environment and fellow beings. V. I. Panov notes, “Ecological consciousness [...] is created and developed in collaboration with the environment (social and natural), and that allows people to feel and experience directly the unity with

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nature and the world around her own nature” [Panov 2013, 381]. Given the contemporary discourse of eco-aesthetics, an eco-conscious mind is expressed through an aesthetical appreciation of nature, i.e., appreciation of ecological integrity and harmony, appreciation of interrelations between different living organisms of an eco-system, appreciation of rich biodiversity, and understanding of cosmic order etc. Ecology, to Ernst Haeckel, is the study of the interrelations of living organisms to their environments [Chapman and Reiss 2012, 2]. In other words, it is the study of living beings (including humans) and their dwelling places, analysing their past, present, and future environments, their response to the surroundings, interactions among various species, and the processing of energy and materials in ecosystems [Nadkarni 2017, 412]. The relationships between different living species have been a matter of the natural history of human development. And to understand these relationships, aesthetics is a suitable tool, a logic that paves the way to understanding one’s behaviour in their surroundings.

In the Anthropocene epoch, human ecological interventions to the ecosystem have caused unparalleled loss to nature, due to which the existence of the natural environment and the lives of several living species are at stake. Thereby, there is a massive challenge to identify the root cause of the problem and tackle the environmental issues. For this, scholars across the globe focus on mitigating anthropocentric human preferences and activities. It is indeed a need of time to adopt sustainable means to use natural resources to meet our daily essentials and stay tuned with an eco-centric worldview. But we need to understand what led to the ecological crisis on this planet and how we can restore eco-centrism (eco-centric world) in this world. In this regard, Rachel Carson blames the modern world for their cultural orientation to see nature as a commodity to be exploited rather than an integrated living whole [Carson 2000, 23]. Her contemporary Gregory Bateson identifies the combined activities of technological advances, rapid increments in population, and conventional ideas and attitudes of people as the root causes of ecological crisis [Bateson 1972, 490]. HAH Bartholomew I observed the ecological turmoil rooted in the human heart. He proclaims that the basic problem is not to be found outside our surroundings but inside ourselves, not exactly in the ecosystem, but in our way of thinking [Bartholomew I of Constantinople 2002, 2; Orr 2017, 1]. So, drawing from the views of the aforementioned scholars, it is evident that the root of ecological problems lies in human attitude. But we need to understand what shapes or influences human attitude. In this regard, scholars like Lynn White [1967], Evelyn Tucker and John Grim [Tucker and Grim 2000], Murali Sivaramakrishnan [Sivaramakrishnan 2017], and Lance E. Nelson [Nelson 2012] are of the opinion that human consciousness is mainly influenced and shaped by their cultural practices informed by the teachings of religious resources. So, they are of the opinion that the problems start with religions that largely shape human thinking. In corroboration with these scholars, we believe that since the problem lies in religions so is the solution because they are the source of knowledge that envisions an integrated and holistic world which just needs rethinking. Therefore, we must revisit our religious resources that need to be reconsidered with a more ecological and eco-friendlier perspective. In Indic religions, we have taken up the oldest Sanskrit epic, the *Rāmāyaṇa* that holds the status of being a scripture. It is treated as a prescriptive text for an ideal Hindu way of life as shown by *puruṣottam* (the best of men) Rāma. Its analysis and interpretation from the ecological perspective give the whole Hindu community a scope to reconsider their approach towards nature as Rāma himself led a life that exemplifies the life of a person who cares for all beings on this planet. The primary goal of composing the epic itself is to present the life-tale of a person who is concerned for the wellbeing of all species. The epic teaches the value of righteousness to the world, which inspires embracing healthy ecological practices. However, we do not claim that our analysis of the text is a comprehensive ecoaesthetical study of the epic. We have attempted here to understand the ecoaesthetical approach that the poet has adopted in portraying the

eco-conscious characters in a world full of biodiversity and ecological integrity. This poetic cosmos that Vālmīki creates in the epic is not flawlessly eco-centric. It unfailingly depicts the eco-unfriendly practices that humans usually resort to in their usual course of life, but at the same time, some recourse is also brought forth by the poet to make the damage to the ecosystem less impactful. The narrative has its own religious didactic purposes but simultaneously it informs the reader that the righteousness which a religion purports is not solely contained in the service to humanity but to the ecology at large.

The history of Indic tradition tells that the Hindu religion has been very sympathetic and friendly to the world, revering nature and all living and non-living bodies. However, Tucker and Grim observed that, now, religious traditions that have been very sympathetic to the ecology and environment are misusing resources [Tucker and Grim 2000], and Hinduism is one of them. This is because a wide gap has occurred between theories and practices in religions due to the colonial impression and commercialisation of religious traditions, which is alarming to the ecology. This gap should be narrowed down by reviving knowledge that instills an eco-friendly sentiment in our behaviours, for which a more pragmatic investigation is needed into the religious resources to explore and widen our ecological perspectives. David L. Haberman, in this regard, opines that like other religious traditions, Hinduism encapsulates many diverse and sometimes contrary voices. There are some practices that connote ecologically detrimental views, and some could be identified as eco-friendly views [Haberman 2017, 35]. In his review article on Haberman's *People Trees*, Joshua Nash rightly outlines that ecological ethics promulgated by ancient Hindu texts, in spite of some shortcomings, still fosters practical and theoretical ecological insights to the world [Nash 2016, 364]. Lance E. Nelson advises reconsidering the comprehensive source of the Hindu culture, inspired by the teachings of Sanskrit scriptures, that imparts an eco-friendly realignment and rebuilding [Nelson 2012, 663]. David Lee stresses that readings of ancient Sanskrit texts, particularly the *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*, might prove to be a compelling "cultural force" to humanity, upholding ecological balance [Lee 2000, 259]. Philip Lutgendorf observed a significant aspect of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and proposed that the reading of epic can direct the world with the notion of balance and mutual survival [Lutgendorf 2000, 285]. Against this backdrop, the present article aims to investigate the ecological ideas and attitudes entwined into the narrative of the epic and attempts to revive the underpinned eco-ethical values.

Henceforth, this paper briefly discusses the relevant concepts of contemporary eco-aesthetics in connection with varied episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The analysis of the epic mainly relies on the original Sanskrit text and its English translation. Further, the paper analyses the text of *Rāmāyaṇa* for the philosophico-aesthetical deliberations of eco-consciousness in the light of various episodes from the epic. Finally, the concluding section brings out the significance of the present study in light of the current ecological crisis.

Contemporary Eco-aesthetical Framework for Praxis

According to Malcolm Miles, aesthetics, with regard to the environment, investigates the interrelations between a subject and an object (fellow subject). It denounces the perception of seeing the world/environment as an object as it implies exploitation; rather, it focuses on seeing the world/environment as a reflection of our own self, which implies a sense of eco-caring [Miles 2014, 59–50]. Here, it can be understood that eco-aesthetics interplays between the two branches of study: ecology and aesthetics. Xiangzhan Cheng writes that eco-aesthetics focuses on "to form an ecological aesthetic way (or manner) by letting ecological awareness play a leading role in human aesthetic activity and experience" [Cheng 2013, 221]. Cheng observes that the fundamental characteristic of the metaphysical nature of a human being is to perceive the world to find a suitable position in the world. This endeavour on the part of humankind shows the integration of ecology and spirituality, which promotes the idea of intersubjectivity against the conventional

notion of subject-object dualism [Xiangzhan 2010, 788]. To Cheng, this intersubjectivity is the philosophical base of eco-aesthetics, supporting my contention in this paper. Cheng provides a four “keystones” model to the eco-aesthetic theory which ascribes to the notions of ecological integrity and harmony. Allen Carlson observes that Cheng’s “keystones” model focuses on incorporating various resources such as human-world unity, ecological facts, ethical values, biodiversity, and ecosystem health – which are essential for addressing eco-ethical values [Carlson 2018, 406]. Cheng’s first keystone idea proposes not to rely on the conventional idea of aesthetics that was based on the notion of antagonism between humans and the world. It, instead, takes up a model called “aesthetic engagement” that strengthens the notion of the unity of humanity and the world – “It completely abandons a conventional aesthetics that is predicated on an opposition between humanity and the world. Subsequently, it is replaced by the model of aesthetic engagement that promotes the idea of the unity of humans and the world” [Cheng 2013, 222]. His second keystone idea emphasises more on ecological ethics and awareness. It recapitulates traditional aesthetics by proposing a strengthened revised relationship between ethics and aesthetics. It suggests that ecological aesthetic appreciation is an activity based on ecological ethics, and it takes ecological awareness as a premise for ecological appreciation. It purports the notion that to appreciate nature aesthetically, one must have ecological consciousness – “Ecological aesthetic appreciation is an aesthetic activity predicated on ecological ethics. It revises and strengthens the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in traditional aesthetics, and it takes ecological awareness as the premise of ecological appreciation. In this sense, the presupposition of ecological aesthetic appreciation is to have ecological consciousness” [Cheng 2013, 224]. His third keystone idea relies on ecological knowledge to appreciate nature. It proposes that understanding of basic ecology helps us engage with ecological aesthetic appreciation – “It is imperative for ecological aesthetic appreciation to rely on the ecological knowledge to refine taste and to enjoy the hidden rich aesthetic properties of the ordinary (even the trivial). Without basic ecological knowledge, it will be impossible to engage a full ecological aesthetic appreciation” [Cheng 2013, 228]. Finally, the fourth keystone idea sees biodiversity and ecosystem health as two crucial ideas that influence the ecological aesthetic appreciation the most. It proposes to overthrow the anthropocentric worldview that determines the value standard for aesthetic appreciation, preferences, and habits – “The two guiding principles of ecological value for ecological aesthetic appreciation are biodiversity and ecosystem health. Humanity must overcome and transcend anthropocentric value standards and human aesthetic preference, reflecting and criticising anthropocentric aesthetic preferences and habits” [Cheng 2013, 231]. In this way, for Carlson, Cheng shuns conventional Western presupposition and makes a movement from aesthetic realisation of nature to moral obligation concerning it essential. Thus, Cheng’s aesthetic ideas succeed in bridging environmental aesthetics to environmental ethics [Carlson 2018, 408]. Thereby, this paper mainly relies on Cheng’s eco-aesthetical model for the philosophico-aesthetical deliberations of eco-caring in the text.

Representation of Eco-Consciousness in Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa

The *Rāmāyaṇa* stands as a seminal work among Hindu epics that delineates the ancient way of living through the story of Rāma, the protagonist of the epic. The epic represents the ecological culture and practices of the time, featuring human-nature interrelation, environmental integrity, the beauty of integrated biodiversity, worshipping of nature, and ecological knowledge and cosmic order. The story of the *Rāmāyaṇa* beautifully covers the vast biodiversity of India and portrays the architecture of the Indian ecosystem describing over 200 species of plants. The description of these widespread natural habitations tells us about the contemporary ecological attitudes toward nature, which still influence the vast areas of the Indian subcontinent [Thiyagarajan 2014, 22]. Also, the epic

represents contemporary agrarian Hindu societies in which forests were residences and integral parts. People would live in proximity to nature, relying on fruits, root vegetables and plants for food, herbs for medicines, and fibres for garb [Lee 2000, 256]. This teaches us how to live in nature without damaging natural resources. Besides, the epic expresses the idea of aesthetics through Hindu conceptions of *dharma*¹ (righteousness), the idea of *ṛta*² (cosmic order), and principles of *Advaita*³ (non-dualism), which could also be marked in the modern discourse of eco-aesthetics. Jain notes that the notion of *dharma* and its implication for ecology can be traced in the Sanskrit word *dhṛ*, which means sustain, support or hold [Jain 2011, 105]. According to B. A. Holdrege [Holdrege 2004], the following mantra has been inscribed in the Vedas – *pr̥thvīm dharmaṇā dhṛtam* (“dharma as sustainer of the earth”) that signifies *dharma* as the backbone of the earthly ecosystem [Jain 2011, 106]. It is similar to the idea of *ṛta* – cosmic order or rhythm. Both *ṛta* and *dharma* are celebrated to adhere to the cosmic law and order which sustain this universe, consolidating the order of the cosmos [Jain 2011, 106]. That is, all of these three conceptions of Hinduism are ecological positions aligned with the modern philosophy of aesthetics.

The ecological integrity and unified biodiversity could be marked as the most recurrent expressions of nature in the *Rāmāyaṇa* through its illustration of rivers, mountains, and trees. The vicinity of forests, mountains, and rivers finds its initial illustrations in the text when Rāma reaches the vicinity of Śṛṅgaverapura on the bank of the Gaṅgā river for a sojourn during his journey to the woods. Vālmīki describes the ecosystem of the river as repleted with Swans, Cranes, and Chakrawākas birds and covered with full-blown lotuses. The surrounding forest is replete with different breeds of elephants, fruits and flowers, and shrubs of different kinds [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 357]. Having observed the surrounding ecosystem and the richness of the place’s biodiversity, Rāma decides to take a rest on the bank of the very river. He said to his charioteer,

“Let us halt at this very spot today. Not very far from the river stands this very large Īṅudī tree containing abundant flowers and fresh leaves. Let us halt under this very tree, O charioteer! I shall clearly behold (from that place) the benign Gaṅgā (the foremost of rivers), whose waters deserve to be respected by gods, human beings, gandharvas, beasts, reptiles and birds (alike)”⁴ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 358].

The above-described observations by Rāma and his affinity with the river are suggestive of his close interaction with nature and his deep reverence for the water bodies. It represents the society where the rivers are treated as the goddess and are worshipped because of their inevitable contributions to a human civilization whose earthly flows enrich the beauty of the biodiversity on this planet. This reverence for the river shown in the character of Rāma is an expression of the aesthetic impulses that he had refined by dwelling in close proximity to nature. He is a person who follows the attitudes of *dharma* (righteousness) and *advaita* (non-dualism), which assist him in realising the sentiment of fellow feeling with the environment as believers of *advaita* see fellow beings as a reflection of their own selves, which is an eco-aesthetic sentiment [Miles 2000, 50]⁵. Unlike the above-quoted excerpt, in the Anthropocene, water pollution has affected aquatic life to a great extent. Aquatic fauna is suffering as they are inhaling contaminated water and pollutants by default due to the excessive dumping of garbage in the rivers. Coral reefs are dying as they do not receive proper sunlight for photosynthesis because contaminated water debar sunlight. These and other ecological crises result from our lost sense of reverence toward water bodies. This is because Murali Sivaramakrishnan notes, throughout history, people have continually tried to reconstruct nature and the environment, which has moulded their attitude to nature accordingly [Sivaramakrishnan 2017, 65]. One of the several reasons for this state of water pollution could be misunderstanding the faith in religious idealism or the sacredness of nature. Most people consider that rivers like Ganga

and Yamuna (as mother goddesses) can never be polluted in a true sense. They believe these deities have remarkable resilience to clean or revive themselves and remain uncontaminated. As a result, they are uncaring towards the rivers and other natural bodies. Therefore, this is the time to disinter expressions of ecological reverence in the text through the character of Rāma. To illustrate, while dwelling in the woods, Rāma was suggested by sage Bharadwāja to set his abode on the sacred mountain of Citrakūta. The sage talks about the value of dwelling in the natural surroundings. He states that while dwelling in the lap of nature and in the serenity of natural places, one cannot turn one's mind toward unrighteous actions; such is the power of natural vicinity [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 375]. In other words, engagement with nature keeps our consciousness attuned with mental peace and harmony that assist one's inner soul in connecting with the outer world, inducing a sense of affinity with the environment and fellow beings. A similar conception could be marked in the contemporary eco-aesthetic idea proposed by "aesthetics of engagement", which supports the concept of active and close interaction with the environment and advocates the unification of humans and the world. Engagement with nature expresses an aesthetic impulse that can stimulate eco-consciousness in one's mind. An eco-conscious sentiment is a cornerstone for eco-caring, protecting, and conserving biodiversity and ecological integrity. This expresses concerns over the current anthropocentric situation where people need to reorient their attitude towards the ecosystem. Unless we engage with nature, we will not realise the ecological devastation humans have been leading over the year.

Moving through the text, Baharat (Rāma's brother) returns to Ayodhyā from his maternal place of Rājagṛha after the demise of his father, of which he was ignorant. While entering the city, he noticed some despondency and desolation in the ambience of the town and the surrounding environment. To know the cause behind such desolation, he speaks to the charioteer as follows:

"The gardens (in the city) formerly looked excited with joy and enraptured and were extremely favourable for love contacts of men. Today, I find those very gardens bereft of joy in every way, with their trees shedding (tears in the form of) leaves on the alleys and piteously wailing as it were. Not even at this hour (of sunrise) is heard the cry of deer and birds in rut profusely and inarticulately giving forth their sweet and impassioned utterances...."⁶ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 424].

The above description of the desolated environment and ambience of the city is an expression of the solidarity and tuning between different beings of the environment. After the banishment of Rāma and the king's demise, the people of the town and fellow beings in nature are in a state of bereavement that causes desolation to the entire surrounding environment. If desolation in the lives of humans could affect the lives of flora and fauna, it could happen otherwise, too. That means the integrity or beauty of an environment depends not only on human beings but on fellow species as well, i.e., only through the harmony between humans and fellow species a place achieves its ecological attunement. Nature always stays tuned with the rhythm of the animate and inanimate lives, and a catastrophe in any manifested part of nature affects the life of fellow beings. Hence, ecological harmony and integrity are key to eco-aesthetic expressions, which could also be marked in Cheng's fourth keystone idea of contemporary eco-aesthetic discourse. The notion discards anthropocentric human choices and value standards. It criticises aesthetic preferences that are anthropocentric in nature. This is the need of the hour in the current situation to inculcate reverence for the diversity of earthly lives in all their forms, advising love and caring for the community of life. Further, the scene is a beautiful portrayal of biodiversity integrity in which various constituents of nature are involved in the celebration when Bharata, along with the people of Ayodhyā, reaches the hermitage of sage Bharadwāja on his way to Chitrakūta. Additionally, it is seen that not only people but the cattle and animals also received warm hospitality: "Bharata's men on their back duly fed

the horses, elephant, donkey as well as the bullocks with articles fit for their consumption... the (aforesaid) very mighty keepers fed them with pieces of sugarcane as well as with fried grains of paddy soaked in honey”⁷⁷ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 477]. This is an epitome of human-nature interrelations characterised by mutual love and understanding. This kind of mutual love and caring involving both flora and fauna is an expression of ecological integrity and beauty, appealing to our aesthetic faculty as Cheng’s fourth keystone conception states that biodiversity and ecosystem health are two guiding principles for ecological and aesthetic appreciation [Cheng 2013, 231]. Thereby, the above description in the text can be marked as an embodiment of an aesthetically rich ecosystem and biodiversity. Such ecological integrity needs to be maintained in the ecosystem with eco-centric aesthetic preferences abided by human beings. Then only one can ensure a prosperous community life in conformity with harmonious nature.

In another episode, we see Ayodhyāvāsī (the inhabitants of Ayodhyā) cutting the boughs of trees, creepers, and shrubs that were obstructing the road construction work to welcome Rāma back home. They uprooted the trees and shrubs that were falling on the way which shows the shadowy side of the then society where the people of Ayodhyā went careless and eco-unfriendly in their behaviour out of their love for Rāma. Although they tried to compensate the loss caused to ecology by planting trees in the treeless areas and alongside the path, but it cannot approbate their actions. The way the construction of the road is led by the people of Ayodhyā reflects their negligence towards nature, “Nay, some men raised trees in treeless areas (for providing shade); while other hewed the existing one here and there by means of axes, hatchets and sickles. Others who were stronger than the rest, tore by the roots (with their own hands) tufts of Vīraṇa grass (a fragrant grass), that had got firmly rooted, and levelled uneven stretches of land at different places”⁷⁸ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 450]. However, the discernible point here is that the activities happened in absence of the protagonist of the epic (Rāma) who never subscribed to such eco-unfriendly actions and attitudes throughout the epic. It is indicated in the epic that his character and actions were penned down with an intention to lead such people of reckless behaviours to a righteous path. Rāma’s character predominantly reflects an eco-conscious attitude while following *dharma* (righteousness) in its true spirit. This can be seen clearly in varied episodes of the epic, for instance, Rāma’s query to Bharata when the latter meets the former in Citrakūṭa shows the similar concern. Rāma, enquiring about the well-being of those whom he had to leave while leaving Ayodhyā, asks, “Are the forests which are the home of elephants preserved by you?”⁷⁹ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 503]. Also, while returning to Ayodhyā, he does not ask anything for himself when he gets a chance to ask for a boon from sage Bharadvāja, instead, he asks the sage: “Let all the trees on the way as I fly to Ayodhyā bear fruits and flow with honey and let abundant fruits of various kinds and emitting the fragrance of nectar appear (on them), O venerable sir!”⁸⁰ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 2, 666]. Thus, the focus of our analysis primarily is bringing forth the eco-friendly attitude and practices prevalent during the time of *Rāmāyaṇa* to suggest adopting such attitude and approach in the contemporary world where harmonious co-existence is becoming a dire need to maintain balance in the ecosystem. That is, the health of the ecosystem (the primary concern of contemporary eco-aesthetical discourse) needs to be given priority in all the developmental programs.

In *Aranyakāṇḍa* (the third book of the epic), we encounter briefly the warrior side of forest-dwelling Rāma’s character when he is portrayed to have been indulged in killing ogres and other violent beasts who, in his opinion, disturb the peace in the forest. But he is soon interfered by Sītā, his wife. Sītā states that the killing of an animal or any living being without enmity is *adharmā* (unrighteous act). Therefore, she stops Rāma from killing any creature without the danger of any harm. Having seen his behaviour in the Daṇḍaka, she worries about his ethical value towards the highest well-being and worldly interests. She stresses that she does not like him going towards the Daṇḍaka in the way

he is proceeding. She says, “The bow and the fuel when staying near the warrior and a fire respectively by greatly enhance their strength in this world”¹¹ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 574]. In other words, Sītā teaches Rāma the harm of keeping a weapon in the forest with him which could lead to the unnecessary killing of animals or ogres. The same goes for other people. If one is associated with foul things or dwells in the company of vicious elements, their mind may fall into sinful activities and can lead to harming nature and fellow beings. Therefore, Sītā states, “From Dharma follows wealth, from Dharma comes happiness, by recourse to Dharma one gets everything [...] With a pious mind, O gentle Rāma, always practise righteousness in the forest suited for austerities”¹² [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 574]. Rāma praises his wife for being aware of the principles of *dharma* (righteous action). But in response to the objections raised by Sītā, Rāma gives her the following justification in support of his act of violence. He tells Sītā that she herself stated that a bow is borne by a Kṣatriya (one of the four *varṇas* of Hinduism) to save humans or fellow creatures from any suffering. The sages practising austerity in the Daṇḍaka themselves came to him seeking protection of the forest lives from the evil forces [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 575]. Having been directed by the *Dharmajña* (Sītā, one who has expertise in Dharma), Rāma promises Sītā that he won't kill any living being who is harmless but to protect the lives in the Daṇḍaka forest, he has to kill those ogres who have been taking the lives of the forest dwellers. Thus, Rāma justifies his act and tells Sītā that he is not practising *adharma* (unethical acts) but doing work that is crucial for ecological integrity. The above discussion between Rāma and Sītā is a reflection of their ecological sensitivity, expressing their knowledge and values of ecological balance. This shows that their attitudes and behaviours were shown to have been driven by eco-ethical values.

Moving ahead, Rāma meets sage Agastya in his hermitage during his journey into the forest. Having met the sage, Rāma enquires him about the best place to stay and make his abode. The sage advises them, saying that two yojanas (sixteen miles) away from them lies a splendid region rich in roots, fruits, and water and is enriched with many deer. He advised them, “Go to Pañcavati... here is seen the great forest of Madhūka trees; from there you have to proceed along the northern route leading to a banyan tree. Then, moving up a plateau, will be reached (by you) not far away from a mountain, a region full of woodlands ever laden with blossom and known by the name of Pañcavati”¹³ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 585–586]. Here, the sage gives a very informative description of the route to reach the place for which he chooses trees and plants as landmarks to show the path to the place, i.e., expressing the importance of trees and other flora of an ecosystem. The knowledge of different kinds of flora and fauna and their usefulness in human lives is also crucial for our understanding of nature that helps us experience aesthetic sentiment for ecological appreciation, as remarked in the Cheng's third keystone conception which promotes the idea that basic ecological knowledge enables us for an ecological aesthetic appreciation [Cheng 2013, 228]. In other words, reconsidering the unexplored source of ecological knowledge (e.g. *Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa*) could be a miraculous feat for the present generation. Then after, Rāma reaches Pañcavati and asks his brother Lakṣmaṇa to choose a place that is best suited to their life. He advises him to look for a place with a pool nearby, a beauty of forest and water, and also in the vicinity of which there are firewood, flowers, and the holy Kuśa grass. Rāma says to Lakṣmaṇa as follows:

“This plot is even, grand and surrounded by trees in blossom. Here you ought duly to setup a beautiful hermitage. Here is seen near by a lake looking delightful with fragrant sun-like lotuses and (further) beautified by Caravāka birds and stirred by herds of deer, it is neither very far nor very near [...] The mountains are graced with sal, palmyra, Tamāla, date, jack-fruit, Nīvāra (watery Kadamba), Tiniśa and Punnāga trees [...] trees laden with blossoms and surrounded with shrubs and climbers [...] We will stay here with this bird (Jaṭāyu)”¹⁴ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 589].

Lakṣmaṇa sets up a cottage using bamboo and grass at a place rich with biodiversity and natural beauty. They dwell in the cottage afterward for some period in close proximity to nature. Here, one should keep in mind that contemporary society completely relied on natural resources for their habitation and survival. The epic considers forests, Lutgendorf remarks, as a zone of competing forces often interacting in a binary of “consumers” and “conservers” [Lutgendorf 2000, 284]. In other words, the forest is a natural environment where the consumption and conservation of its natural resources go hand in hand. Therefore, the narrative portrays Rāma as a “sage-king” (consumer-protector) who governs himself by following *dharma* (righteousness or social duty) into the Ḍandaka forest where he and his companions stayed depending on natural resources for their inhabitation and survival and, also, protected them from the ogres’ (allusive of modern capitalocentric minds) vicious and eco-unfriendly ambitions. This is suggestive of using natural resources for one’s need but not greed, i.e., the epic forbids indulgence in nature. People in the *Rāmāyaṇa-kāla* (age of Rāmāyaṇa) lived harmoniously with other fellow beings in natural surroundings. This relationship between humans and nature could be maintained if one has an aesthetic sentiment that Rāma expresses throughout his journey. Also, the quoted words of Rāma indicated the importance of ecological knowledge in selecting a geographical location for human inhabitation. As discussed in the previous episode, ecological knowledge helps us understand using natural resources sustainably without disturbing ecological harmony.

At the beginning of *Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa* (the fourth part of the book), Rāma meets Sūgriva with the help of Hanumāna (a monkey). Rāma seeks the help of Sūgriva in finding out Sītā’s place, and Sūgriva promises the same. Sūgriva tells Rāma about sage Mataṅga’s curse on Vālī (Sūgriva’s elder brother). In a battle between Vālī and Dundubhi (a demon disguised as buffalo), Vālī kills the buffalo and throws it seizing it by the horn in the vicinity of sage Mataṅga’s hermitage destroying several trees and plants (by the corpse of the buffalo). Having seen the destruction of natural vegetation and splashing of blood around, the sage curses him stating, “If the perverted fellow by whom these trees have been smashed while throwing away the corpse of a demon... remain in this forest, of mine – which has been nurtured (by me) like my own offspring – for the destruction of its leaves and shoots as well as for the extinction of its fruits and roots, I shall assuredly curse them too”¹⁵ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 778]. Here, from the words of sage Mataṅga, one can easily sense the pain that he feels on the destruction of natural vegetation. It feels like he himself has been severely harmed. This episode, thus, ascribes to the principle of *advaita* (non-dualism – sharing common feelings with fellow beings) as the sage shares fellow feelings with the trees and plants. Here, sage Mataṅga condemns Vālī for the destruction of the trees which he reared up as his own sons. Thus, Vālī is cursed by the sage to turn into a rock if it enters the forest ever, reflecting an eco-aesthetical sentiment as the idea of “non-dualism” can be inferred from Cheng’s second keystone model [Cheng 2013, 224]. It directs the ethics of treating other fellow beings as a reflection of one’s own self as shown in the sage’s character.

Moving ahead, Rāma, with the help of Sugrīva, embarks on the journey in search of Sītā. Sugrīva is appointed as chief of the mission among Vānaras (monkeys). He gathers the whole army of monkeys from all corners of the continent with their chiefs such as Śatbali, Kesarī (father of Hanumān), Vinata, Nīla, Gaja, Jāmbavān, Rumaṇa, Gandhamādana, Aṅgada, Rambha, Nala, and many others. Sugrīva disperses the chiefs of monkeys in the search mission for Sītā in different directions, instructing them on the whole geographical details of the region and survival strategy for a month. Having listened to Sugrīva’s instruction to different chiefs about the geography and physical features, Rāma inquires of him how he had acquired such an excellent and accurate knowledge of geography, physical features, and biodiversity of different regions. In response, he told Rāma

that he had roamed around all corners of the continents and acquired first-hand knowledge of all parts of the globe. His knowledge of ecology could be well understood in the following excerpt, in which he instructs Śatabali about northern regions,

“The trees there are thronged with birds and are ever full of flowers and fruits, possess an ethereal fragrance, taste and touch and yield all one’s desires. Other excellent trees yield costumes of every shape and size and even so ornaments set with pearls and cat’s-eye jewels – costumes and ornaments which are fit for women and even so for men. Other excellent trees bear fruit which can be gladly partaken of in all seasons; while still other excellent trees bring forth wonderful fruits looking like precious gems. Other trees in this land yield beds provided with variegated coverlets and garlands...”¹⁶ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 894].

As discussed in previous episodes, an ecoaesthetical appreciation largely rests on ecological knowledge. This is noted by several scholars including Cheng who acknowledges the relevance of ecological knowledge to refine taste and enjoy the ordinary’s hidden rich aesthetic properties in his third keystone idea [Cheng 2013, 228]. Besides him, Holmes Rolston asserts that ecological knowledge provided by natural sciences fosters ample rationale for aesthetic appreciation of nature and renders an eco-ethical attitude in us. Rolston says that beauty, in nature, does not exist in isolation but always has value in relation. That means a sense of aesthetics arises in the case of good understanding and interaction between different beings of an ecosystem. The aesthetic ignites with the interaction between, at least, two different subjects or species. In other words, what one aspires to protect, and conserve is the healthy relationships between living species, i.e., human-nature relationships [Rolston 2002, 131]. Here, Rolston intends to say that the beauty in nature lies in the interspecies behaviours of the ecosystem. Regarding the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the interspecies behaviours or interrelations between different living beings are evident throughout the text, exemplified in the above-quoted excerpt. Besides, the relevance of ecological knowledge, understanding of natural history, the importance of rich biodiversity, and the beauty of integrated ecosystems are also prevalent throughout the text, which can be read, exemplified in the given excerpt, in the discussion between Rāma and Sugrīva.

In the *Sundarakāṇḍa* (the fifth book of the epic), Hanumāna visited the city of Laṅkā in search of Sītā, wife of Rāma. On the mission, he was caught by Rāvaṇa’s soldiers who set fire to his tail. Enraged by this act of Rāvaṇa and his army, he decided to burn the whole city of Laṅkā. With his tail set ablaze, Hanumāna began to flit over the tops of the houses in Laṅkā, surveying the mansions of the ogres and putting fire in them except Vibhiṣaṇa’s house. Passing over the houses, he reaches the palace of Rāvaṇa, the lord of ogres, the city of Laṅkā was set to fire by the gigantic Hanumāna. The city was burnt with its multitudes of living beings (inhabiting it), houses, and trees. Thereupon, terrific and violent chaos and unrest prevailed in Laṅkā, “Having destroyed the (Aśoka) grove, thick with the best of trees, killed eminent ogres in combat and burnt city containing rows of excellent buildings... the mighty monkey (Hanumāna) then quenched the fire of his tail in the sea”¹⁷ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 2, 185]. Having set the city of Laṅkā ablaze and alarmed, Hanumāna became thoughtful, and a feeling of self-contempt arose in him. He said to himself, “What an abominable act has evidently been done by me in burning Laṅkā consummately! Blessed are those broad-minded great souls who in their wisdom curb the anger born within them (even) as they quench a blazing fire with water. What angry man would not perpetrate a sinful act?”¹⁸ [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 2, 186]. Thereby, it is explicit that Hanumāna’s intention was not to destroy the groves or to harm any innocent person but to take revenge on the Rāvaṇa and ogres, submitting him to anger. This is why he sets fire to all houses that belong to the ogres and leaves Vibhiṣaṇa’s home as he was innocent, but in due process, when even trees and groves caught fire in the city, he immediately realised his sinful act and repented what he did to

the city of Lankā and the grove. Albeit he regretted it, this act of Hanumāna cannot be approbated. Therefore, the episode cannot be appreciated from an ecoaesthetical perspective but reading through it strengthens the contention that an act done under a spell of anger largely harms the health of ecosystems. Again, it should be noted that Rāma's temperament was never ascribed to such an inhumane act. As discussed earlier, Rāma's eco-conscious mind always reflected concerns for eco-caring throughout the narrative of the epic. To exemplify, as discussed earlier, at the end of the epic, in return for the blessing, he asked to revive the lives of trees that were not bearing fruits and flowers, for the monkeys and others who live on fruits and roots. Also, it can be seen as a blessing to gratify his aesthetic sense. Thus, the hero of this epic is such that his concern is not limited only to humans but to all flora and fauna living with him on the earth.

Conclusion

Thus, we see that the *Rāmāyaṇa* projects enumerable characters, including the protagonists who are highly sensitive to their ecology and environment, while the society in which we live is still struggling hard to peep out of the capital-centric setup, where only financial profit and loss matters. This anthropo-capital-centric world is causing indelible harm to our very existence and the existence of the planet, and the only way out is to learn to live in harmony with nature. As Lee has rightly penned, excluding people from natural habitats to preserve these lands is a recent modern idea. Ancient civilisations, as depicted in the epic, were integral parts of nature for exclusive human society never existed in the primaeval lifestyle. Therefore, it is a lesson for the current generation to relearn and redevelop the attitude to live with nature and fellow creatures. In other words, dismiss anthropocentric worldviews and accept ecocentrism. Further, the eco-conscious reading of the *Rāmāyaṇa* shows the eco-care by the principal characters of the epic to develop a way of life that nurtures symbiocene. Though the narrative of the epic also illustrates some eco-unfriendly activities led by some supporting characters, my assessment of the epic strictly opposes any inhumane move towards natural surroundings and fellow creatures. There can be many aspects to look into the text, my analysis mainly attempted to highlight the underlined eco-consciousness interwoven into the narrative of the epic, led by the protagonist, Rāma. Thus, the eco-conscious reading of the text of *Rāmāyaṇa* marks various modes of aesthetic expressions in the epic from the discussions on ecological knowledge, ecological integrity, and biodiversity as depicted in the epic to aiming at inducing fellow feelings with the environment. It is human beings who contribute to climate change, and, in fact, only they are capable of resolving the prevailing climate issue through a sustainable approach confirming the law of ecological integrity. Therefore, protect the planet from ecological degradation through sustainable means to utilise natural resources. This accomplishment is not possible without restructuring, reinterpreting, and reconsidering the various cultural and traditional knowledge and wisdom informed by religions and their resources. Though our paper does not present an exhaustive ecoaesthetical study of the text, it unequivocally suggests that the *Rāmāyaṇa* can be used as a tool for the dissemination of ecological knowledge and understanding as the epic is still widely influential in the Hindu community. Therefore, reinforcing an ecologically motivated version of the text could help people experience aesthetic impulses and spread ecological awareness for the conservation of ecology.

¹ The conception of *dharma* connotes different virtue, duty and ethics. In the present context, *dharma* stands for acts of righteousness i.e., right action towards environment and fellow beings which makes a move from aesthetics to ethics. In modern times, the concept of ethics is associated with ideas of “right” or “good” or “obligation” [Bilimoria *et al.* 2016, 19]. It is clear; the idea of *dharma* has undercurrent implication of eco-consciousness.

² The word *ṛta* stands for law or sacred custom or divine truth. It is believed that there are *ṛṇa* (debt) to gods, ancestors and to the teachers. Therefore, one should perform different rites like *yagñā* to be freed from such *ṛṇa* to gods and *śrāddha* to be freed from the *ṛṇa* to ancestors. During *śrāddha*, a Hindu ritual is performed by members of the deceased family, one gives water to the trees and plants and food to the birds and animals around his abode. All these are kept to maintain the cosmic order among living beings in ecosystem [Tiwari 2010, 160].

³ The Hindu principle of *advaita* (nondualism) believes that the world has its origin in *brahman*, the indivisible and infinite reality, and all living beings on this planet are the constituents of that infinite soul. The relationship between *brahman* and the world is best described as not-two (*advaita*). That means all fellow species are part of our life and duality is merely an illusion. The Advaita identity with all beings includes the world of nature. It enables us to overcome from alienation and objectification of the natural world. It fosters world-embrace and not world-rejection. Based on this doctrine of *Vedānta*, Hinduism reveres numerous entities of nature and considers them sacred [Rambachan 2006, 67–80; Nelson 2012, 664].

⁴ Avidūrādayaṃ nadyā bahupuṣpapravālavān/ sumahāniṅgudīvrkṣo vaśāmoatraiva sārathē//
prekṣāmi saritāṃ śreṣṭhāṃ sammānyasālilāṃ śvām/ devamānavagandharvamṛgapannagapakṣi
nām// (Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 2.50.28–29).

⁵ Describing the character of the protagonist (Rāma), Nārada illustrates that he (Rāma) has control over his senses; he has knowledge of right conduct (dharma) and virtue; he is true to his promise and intent for the welfare of the fellow beings (Advaita); he possesses a self-controlled and concentrated mind; he is supporter of the creation, and disregards unrighteous and evil beings/forces [Vālmīki-Rāmāyaṇa 2006, part 1, 2].

⁶ Araṇyabhuteva purī sārathē pratibhāti mām/
nadhyantra yānairdṛṣyante na gajairna ca vājibhiḥ/ niryānto vābhiyānto va naramukhyā yathā
purā//

udhyānāni purā bhānti mattapramuditāni ca/ janānām ratisāmyogeṣvatyantagūṇavanti ca// (Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 2.71.24–25).

⁷ hayān gajān kharānuṣṭāstathaiva surabheḥ sut/ abhojayav vāhanapāsteṣāṃ bhojyaṃ yathā-
vidhi//

ikṣuśca madhulājāṃśca bhojayanti sma vāhanān/ ikṣvākuvaryodhānām codayanto mahābalāḥ//
(Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 2.91.55–56).

⁸ avṛkṣeṣu ca deṣeṣu kecīd vṛkṣaropayan/ kecitkuñṭhāraiṣṭāingnkśca dātraisichandankvacitk-
vacit//

Apare vīraṇarastambān balino balavattāḥ/ vidharmanti sma durgāṇi sthālāni ca tatataḥ//
(Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 2.80.7–8).

⁹ kaccitrāgavanam guptaṃ kaccit te santi dhenukāḥ/ kaccitra gaṇikāśvānām kuñjarāṇām ca
tṛpyasi// (Ayodhyākāṇḍa, 2.100.50).

¹⁰ Akālafalino vṛkṣāḥ sarve cāpi madhustravāḥ/ falānyamṛtagandhīni bahūni vividhāni ca//
(Yudhhakāṇḍa 6.124.19).

¹¹ tvam hi vānadhanuṣpānirbhrātrā saha vanam gataḥ/ dṛṣṭāvanacarānsarvānakaccita kuryāḥ
śaravyayam// (Aranyakāṇḍa, 3.9.14).

¹² dharmādarthaḥ prabhavati dharmāt prabhavate sukham/ dharmeṇa labhate sarvaṃ dharm-
sāramidaṃ jagat// ((Aranyakāṇḍa, 3.9.30).

¹³ etadālakṣyate vīra madhūkānām mahāvanam/ uttareṇāsya gantavyam nyagrodhamapi gacc-
hataḥ//

tataḥ sthalamupāruhrā parvatasyāvidūrataḥ/ khyātaḥ pañcavatītyeva nityapuṣpitakānanah//
(Aranyakāṇḍa, 3.13.21–22).

¹⁴ ayam deśaḥ samaḥ śrīmān puṣpitaistarubhirvṛtaḥ/ ihāśramapadaṃ samyam yathāvat kartu-
marhasi//

iyamādityasankāśaiḥ padmaiḥ surabhiḡandhibhiḥ/ adūre dṛṣyate ramyā padmīni padśobhitā//
hānsakāraṇdvākīrṇā cakravākopaśobhitā/ nātidūre na cāsanne mṛgayūthanipīditā//

mayurnāditā ramyāḥ prāṇśavo bahukandarāḥ/ dṛṣyante girayaḥ saumya fullaistarubhirāvṛtāḥ//
(Aranyakāṇḍa, 3.15.10–15).

¹⁵ na ca tairiha vastavyam śrutvā yāntu yathāsukham/ teapi vā yadi tiṣṭhanti śapiṣye tānapi
dhruvam//

Vaneasmin māmake nityam putravat parirakṣite/ patrāngaravināśaya falamulābhavāya ca//
(Kiṣkindhākāṇḍa, 4.11.56–57).

¹⁶ nityapuṣṭapafalāstatra nagāḥ patrarathākulāḥ/ divyagandharasasparśāḥ sarvakāmān stravantica//

Nānākārāṇi vāsānsi falantyanye nagottamāḥ// (Kīṣkindhākāṇḍa, 4.43.14–15).

¹⁷ Tato devāḥ sagandharvā siddhāśca paramarṣayaḥ/ dṛṣṭā laṅkā pragdhām tām vismayam paramam gatāḥ// (Sundarakāṇḍa, 5.54.49).

¹⁸ Tasyābhūt sumahānswāsaḥ kutsā cātmanjyajāyata/ laṅkā pradahatā karmaṃ kṛtamidaṃ mayā//

Dhanyāḥ khalu mahātmāno ye buddhyā kopamutthitam/ nirundhanti mahātmāno dīptamafnī-mivāmbhasā// (Sundarakāṇḍa, 5.55.2–3).

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Екоєвідомість у Рамаїні Валмікі:

естетичне дослідження екологічної цілісності та біорізноманіття

За допомогою екоестетичного прочитання тексту "Рамаїні", найдавнішого санскритського епосу, автори статті простежують вияви екологічної свідомості. Завдяки аналізу еко-релігійних/культурних практик, поширених у часи "Рамаїні" (rāmāyana-kāla), на передній план публікації виведено уявлення про екологічну цілісність, красу біорізноманіття, взаємозв'язки між різними організмами екосистеми та знання про довкілля. У нашу епоху антропоцену у свідомості людей відчуття екологічної турботливості відійшло вбік, що призвело до серйозної екологічної кризи. Люди стали панувати над природним середовищем, і це ставить під загрозу життя не лише самих людей, а й інших істот. Щоб підтримувати симбіотичні стосунки з природою, необхідно відродити в людині естетичні прагнення. Естетика є важливим знаряддям сприйняття природи в різноманітті її повсякдення; сприйняття, що налагоджує зв'язок між екологічною естетикою та етикою. До того ж ідея екологічної гармонії є одним із ключових понять екоестетики, яку в "Рамаїні" (легендарним автором якої вважається Валмікі) можна побачити нерідко. Хоча з екологічного погляду епос вже розглядали різні вчені, досі не було жодної значної розвідки, де б досліджувався екоестетичний вимір тексту. Зважаючи на наявність цієї прогалини, автори намагаються дослідити актуальність екоестетичного методу вирішення проблем, з одночасним залученням дискурсу екоестетики сьогодення. Також у статті на основі різних епізодів епосу аналізуються почуття, пов'язані з піклуванням про екологію. Насамкінець підкреслюється важливість екоестетичного чуття для переорієнтації людей у бік екологічної гармонії.

Ключові слова: "Рамаїна", Валмікі, екоестетика, етика, гармонія, антропоцен, релігія, культура

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