

Sacred Ecoscapes: Ethics of Ecology From the Ramayana

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Abstract—The epic Valmiki Ramayana eloquently depicts awareness and preservation of the environment within Hinduism's nature-centric philosophy. Ramayana verses emphasize eco-awareness through concepts such as Panchabhutas, Dharma, and Rta, representing cosmic order. This novel interpretation of the ancient Sanskrit text highlights the interconnection between the ecological web and cultural traditions during the epic era, a connection that remains essential and relevant today. Humankind has exerted dominating control through excessive consumption of resources and energy. Such primacy has led to the dire ecological crisis. There is an urgent need to revisit religious and traditional practices, highlighting a harmonious balance between humanity and nature for a sustainable future. The paper emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary study by focusing on the literature through Hindu philosophical aspects to reorient humans towards ecological integration for global sustainability. 'Ecophilia' refers to a deep bond and harmonious interaction between humans and the natural landscape. These co-existing factors trace to the reading of the Ramayana.

Index Terms—Ecophilia, Hinduism, dharma, Rta, Ramayana

I. INTRODUCTION

[An Ode to Mother Earth] *Prithvi Suktam* says,

Truth, settled laws, sacred oblation, penance, the Supreme Reality, and sacrifice sustain this Earth, which is the presiding deity of all those who exist and are yet to be born. Let this Earth create enough space for all. (Joshi, 2012)

*“satyaṃ bṛhadṛtamugraṃ dīkṣā tapo brahma yajñāḥ pṛthivīm dhārayanti.
sā no bhūtasya bhavyasya patnyurum lokam pṛthivī naḥ kṛṇotu” [1]*

A practice of this 'eco-fullness' found in the 'walking meditation' is presented as a 'Love Letter to the Earth' by Thich Nhat Hanh, a renowned poet, peace activist of Zen Buddhism (Arcos, 2024), with the following words:

Dear Mother Earth,

“Every time I step upon the Earth, I will train myself to see that I am walking on you, my Mother. Every time I place my feet on the Earth, I have a chance to be in touch with you and all your wonders. With every step, I can touch that you are not just beneath me, dear Mother, and within me. Each mindful and gentle step can nourish, heal, and bring me into contact with myself and you in the present moment.

Walking in mindfulness, I can express my love, respect, and care for you, our precious Earth.”¹ (Arcos, 2024)

Nature—poets, environmentalists, and critics alike, echo a shared sentiment that we must protect the environment. Henry David Thoreau urged in *Walden*, “Live in each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influence of the earth.” Rachel Carson warned in *Silent Spring*, “The history of life on Earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings. Only within the moment represented by the present century has one species, man, acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world” (Verma, 2023c). These voices remind us to preserve the natural world.

Environmentalism emerged during the twentieth century as a response to environmental damage caused by industrial pollution and unsustainable methods of depleting natural resources, aiming to protect the ecology. Given the protection of the environment, environmental justice is defined as “the equitable distribution of ecological benefits and hazards in addition to meaningful engagement in environmental decision-making” (Hubble, 2021). Therefore, ecology as an academic discipline emerged to become important. “Ecology is the scientific study of natural interdependencies: it examines the interactions among different species as well as the movement of energy and cycling of matter such as nutrients through ecosystems” (Nadkarni, 2017).

¹ In *Philosophies*, “Elements of a First-Person Ecology: Historical Roots, Recognition and Ecospirituality” (Esteban Arcos et al., 2024), Thich Nhat Hanh's text agrees with all his ecological assertions to explore the type of experience that characterizes ecology. Particularly, the affective engagement and emotions of gratitude and respect may arise from such a metaphor, Mother Earth.

Environmental affinity in society and education pertains to 'biophilia' and 'ecophilia', stated as "nature-friendly". Biophilia refers to our inherent affinity for the living world, the love of life, or, as defined by Wilson (1984), "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes". To explain further, 'biophilia' relates to animate nature, whereas 'ecophilia' is connected to both animate and inanimate phenomena. "They share a holistic orientation with sustainability" (Horsthemke, 2018). Therefore, the principle of oneness of existence can serve as the basis for an ethos of a deep ecological approach, justified through the Ramayana that paves the way for equilibrium between the realms of human and non-human life forms.

"Ecophilia, derived from 'ekos' (home) and 'philia' (liking), refers to a deep satisfaction and affinity with one's immediate environment" (Horsthemke, 2018). This concept discusses environmental education, sustainability, and the human-nature relationship. In an ecosophical French perspective of Merleau-Ponty, "ecophilia suggests a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, challenging the negative perceptions of nature and promoting a more intimate connection" (Hung, 2008). Ecophilia, or the love of nature, is a concept that can be deeply rooted in cultural, social, and religious practices. In the Indian context, this relationship with nature is influenced by a rich tapestry of customs, stories, and philosophies that have evolved over centuries. Indian classical fables, such as the Panchatantra and Jataka tales, play a significant role in shaping ecological consciousness. These stories, suitable for children and adults, help develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of the natural world (Shanmugapriya, 2023). "Within the sacred realm of Hindu cosmology, Lord Vishnu, the preserver of the universe, manifests four incarnations – *Matsya* [The fish], *Kurma* [The tortoise], *Varaha* [The boar], and *Narasimha* [The man-lion] which symbolizes reverence for the diverse life forms that share earthy abode. In the cosmic ballet, Matsya's grace, Kurma's steadfast resilience, Varaha's mighty strength, and Narasimha's fierce valour collectively convey a profound message. Through these incarnations, the traditions impart the sanctity and intrinsic value of all beings that co-exist on this precious planet" (Neetu, 2024). "The exploration of ecology within Indian customs, cultures, religions, and literary texts like the Ramayana highlights the need for a comprehensive approach to address ecological issues. This approach can help mitigate the exploitation of natural resources and promote ecological equity" (Valmiki, 2021).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

"Eco-Dharma and Climate: An Ecospective Perspective" is discussed based on the Valmiki Ramayana and Hindu ways of preserving nature (Neethu, 2025). "Regestating Eco-Ethics of Ramayana critically investigates eco-ethics and eco-aesthetics," and its knowledge and practices in the society during the epoch of Ramayana (Verma et al., 2023). In 2023, Pal discussed "Tribal life and the environment" in Mahaswetha Devi's ecological rereading of select narratives. Her writings explored India's environmental history, drawing on the Mahabharata and the Ramayana incidents. Through this, she traced the tribes' journey from forest life to industrialization. The lost ecological histories of these tribes were reflected in 'The Book of the Hunter'. In a world increasingly driven by materialism, religion plays a vital role in influencing environmental behaviour by offering ethical and spiritual frameworks emphasizing care for nature. This idea is explored by comparing the idealistic outlook of the Ramayana, which promotes living in harmony with nature (Das et al., 2025). Recent scholarly works have explored the intersection of Hindu and Jain philosophies with environmental ethics, emphasizing concepts such as dharma, nonviolence (*ahimsā*), and ecological consciousness.

Pankaj Jain's study in 2024, "Sustaining Dharma, Sustainable Ecology: Dharma as Rural Environmental Ethics," featured in 'The Routledge Companion to Indian Ethics', examined how communities such as the Bishnois of Rajasthan and the Swadhyayis of Gujarat interpreted dharma not only as a religious doctrine but also as a guiding principle for environmental stewardship. Jain argued that the environmental practices of these communities are deeply rooted in their understanding of dharma, which encompasses ethical and spiritual dimensions that inform their ecological responsibilities. In a 2019 paper titled "Climate Engineering from Hindu-Jain Perspectives," published in 'Zygon: Journal of Religions and Science', Jain further investigated how Hindu and Jain concepts such as *karma*, *ahimsā*, humility (*vinaya*), and renunciation (*samnyāsa*) critique modern climate engineering approaches like solar radiation management and carbon dioxide removal. He suggested that these traditional ethical frameworks provide valuable insights into the moral implications of contemporary environmental interventions.

Ashutosh Awasthi's 2021 article, "A Reinterpretation of Hindu Spirituality for Addressing Environmental Problems," published in 'Religions', explored how Hinduism's openness to change and integration of new ideas can foster environmentally friendly practices. Awasthi emphasized the need to bridge the gap between Hindu philosophical ideals and actual environmental behaviours, advocating for synthesizing cultural and scientific approaches to address ecological challenges. The 2023 study by Mulyanto et al., on "Ethnobotanical Identification of Mango (*Mangifera indica* L.), and Other Fruit Trees Mentioned in Old Javanese Ramayana," published in 'Biodiversitas Journal of Biological Diversity', highlighted the religious and symbolic significance of fruit trees like the Mango in ancient texts. The study highlighted how these trees, depicted in various landscapes such as hermitages and royal gardens, reflect the intricate relationship between spirituality and environmental awareness in Hindu traditions. Verma's (2022) article, "Eco-Consciousness in Valmiki Ramayana: An Aesthetic Study of Ecological Integrity" published in 'The World of Orient', offers an eco-aesthetic reading of the Ramayana. Verma traced expressions of ecological consciousness in the epic, revealing how ancient narratives convey a deep awareness of biodiversity and environmental integrity. Julia Shaw's 2016 article, "Religion, 'Nature' and Environmental Ethics in Ancient India: Archaeological Perspectives on Human– Non–Human

Suffering and Well-Being in Early Buddhist and Hindu Traditions”, published in ‘Archaeology and Environment Ethics’, examined archaeological evidence of early Buddhist and Hindu practices related to land and water conservation. Shaw discussed how these practices reflect a holistic understanding of human and non-human well-being, challenging simplistic views of ancient India through models for collective responses to environmental stress in human and non-human frames. These studies present a rich tapestry of thought in Hindu society, integrating ethical principles with environmental consciousness, and offer valuable insights for contemporary ecological discourse. Thus, this study delves into the Ramayana as an epic that underscores ecological values, examining its portrayal of nature and its ethical implications. Through an eco-ethical lens, it explores how the narrative reflects human-nature relationships, offering insights into sustainable living and environmental stewardship. By analysing these themes, the paper highlights the relevance of the Ramayana in contemporary discussions on ecological ethics and conservation.

III. THEORETICAL APPROACH

“A coherent approach to solving complex problems effectively demands genuine dialogue across disciplines—each field must teach what it knows and learn to see from other disciplinary perspectives” (Hubble, 2021). The article approaches eco-expressions, which function as guiding principles and ‘eco views’ as presented in the text Ramayana, as a core subject to be explored. “While certain sacred texts may sound peculiar to contemporary ears, when interpreted within their specific historical and ecological contexts, they emerge as place-based practices designed to guide sustainable living” (Ryan & Hubble, 2021). “The purity rituals found in the Torah, the Bible, the Qur’an, the Confucian Five Classics, the Bhagavad Gita, and other sacred texts are not the root of our ecological crisis, but rather hold a reservoir of environmentally wise principles” (Tirosh-Samuels, 2006; cited by Hubble, 2021).

Textual reading of the Valmiki Ramayana² underscores the ecophilic aspects, and to derive the best out of such ancient texts and to contribute towards the environmental paradigm, it requires methods like ‘Reinterpretation, Recovery and Revision’ (Hubble, 2021). Zapf (2016) suggests that instead of being an “escapist fantasy”, literature forms a value in “imagining alternative, sustainable futures,” and therefore needs to be aligned with eco-perspectives to find solutions for ecological problems. This article examines the eco-critical elements in the Ramayana text, promoting the implementation of eco-praxis to foster sustainable development through its philosophical underpinnings.

Barry Commoner, a prominent biologist and environmentalist, is well-known for his “first law of ecology,” which states that “everything is connected to everything else” (Pojman, 2017). In his magnum opus work, “The Closing Circle, Nature, Man & Technology,” published in 1971, Commoner proposed the idea of four laws of ecology, principles that suggest the complexity and interdependence within ecosystems. “An ecosystem, akin to a symphony, can gracefully lose its contributing species and undergo transformative metamorphoses without succumbing to collapse”. This principle underscores “the interconnectedness of natural systems and the impact of human activities on the environment” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2012). Therefore, it is crucial to consider religious practices as “Religion guides us to perceive and engage with every part of the Earth” (Gottlieb, 2006). This view emerges as a robust and resilient oak in light of the environmental crisis, which casts significant uncertainty on humanity's continued existence on Earth.

IV. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

A. *Saga of Anthropocene*

Anil K. Tiwari noted, “Anthropocentrism considers human life superior to any other life form, and other life forms are significant only if they serve a purpose to humans. It is this human attitude that led to the emergence of the present era, the Anthropocene” (Verma, 2023). In the Anthropocene, “it is conspicuous that one species, Homosapiens, had attained dominance over nature, jeopardising its own existence and fellow species. As a result, the Earth is struggling against many influential incursions, from the depletion of natural resources and extinction of species to environmental pollution” (Verma, 2023c). Rachel Carson attacked the scientific establishments and the dominance of technology. She blamed modern society for the increasing exploitation of natural resources and the cultural orientation to see nature as a commodity rather than an interconnected living entity (Carson, 2002). These scholars' arguments paved the way for understanding the factors that contribute to environmental degradation. The most inclusive roots are one's religious and cultural beliefs, which have weakened with the adoption of a human-dominated approach. Religion played a vital role in human civilization. It needs to be reconsidered in light of sustainable development and human well-being. “Religion encompasses the cosmological narratives, symbolic systems, ritual customs, ethical frameworks, historical developments, and institutional structures that convey a vision of humans as integral to a world infused with meaning, responsibility, transformation, and celebration. Through these elements, religions have connected people to a divine presence or numinous force” (Tucker, 2009) to reorient human attitudes and curb the prevailing ecological crisis.

The Ramayana, an ancient text of Hinduism, embodies environmental awareness through its ancient eco-ethical wisdom and knowledge. In this regard, Jose Nandhikkara’s editorial remark supported the position, “Listening to great

² The Ramayana of Valmiki (VR), quotes and English translations are retrieved from (Online): <https://www.valmiki.iitk.ac/> and National Sanskrit University Publications (NSP), 2013, Tirupati, which follows Southern recension of Ramayana. There are four main recensions of The Valmiki Ramayana (VR) (to refer Critical edition of The Valmiki Ramayana, Baroda edition, 1960). Also, quotes are taken from Gita Press (GP) English translations of Ramayana.

experiences and insights of religious traditions of humanity is a source of knowledge and ignoring it would be an unacceptable policing by academia, economics, and politics” (Verma, 2023). Therefore, conventional ideas about nature must be revisited and re-evaluated. It is essential to redirect traditional ecological knowledge from the fundamental sources of such texts. The task of re-examining one of the classical epics, the Valmiki Ramayana, is not just a literary production but an embodiment of eco-cultural practices.

B. Research Questions

The study aims to answer,

- 1) How can sources in Hinduism help rebuild environmental ethics?
- 2) How do humans’ ecophilic tendencies support environmental guardianship through reinterpreting the ancient text, Valmiki Ramayana?

Therefore, looking at contemporary ecology-focused religious scholarship is imperative.

C. Religions and Discourse on Ecology

The environmental crisis is a pivotal concern of our era. It is a holistic understanding, recognizing the delicate dance between human life, ethical imperatives, and the well-being of our planet's ecosystems. This profound concept emerged as a discourse, addressing the pressing environmental challenges of the time, striving for a future where humanity and the natural world co-exist in a symphony of sustainability. “Religion substantially impacts how we approach the complex issue of environmental distress”. However, “the complex relationship between religious institutions, practices, beliefs, and environmental change is still an area that warrants further investigation” (Neethu, 2025). A multifaceted tapestry comprised the relationship between religion and environmental catastrophe. The extent to which religion contributes to or exacerbates eco order is contingent upon the specific tenets and rituals observed within each religious tradition. To fully understand the complex dynamics between human societies and the environment, it is vital to develop an understanding of the spiritual aspects that arise from the convergence of ecology and culture. An interdisciplinary field has blossomed, dedicated to unravelling the intricate threads connecting religion to environmental matters and understanding how ecological concepts resonate within religious tenets. “The ongoing degradation of natural resources, the alarming rise in the frequency and intensity of natural disasters, the pervasive threat of pollution, the global health crisis, and the looming spectre of irreversible climate change have convinced many that the very existence of communities, cultures, and indeed, the planet itself, teeters on the precipice of jeopardy” stated Tucker.

“Buddhism thinks disasters are artificial. For example, climate change results from our greed and selfishness. We overspend because we are ungrateful” (Lou, 2023). “Buddhist teachings in the Vinaya Pitaka focused on maintaining harmony with nature” (Bayuseto, 2023). Biocentric perspective in Jainism believes that every living entity whether plant, animal, or human, possesses a soul and deserves to be respected (Hall, 2009). Jainism “upholds the kindness and sympathy towards all life forms, including animals, plants, earth, water, and every other form of animate and inanimate being, promoting an ethical approach to conservation founded on the belief that nature holds intrinsic value” (Mitra, 2019). “Jainism, a religion of nature, emphasizes understanding the practical roles and intrinsic significance of plants, worms, and animals, each vital in preserving ecological balance” (Mitra, 2019). Jain doctrines and principles, such as *ahimsa* [non-violence towards all living beings], *aparigraha* [minimal attachment to possessions], *anekantavada* [recognition of multiple perspectives], and *parasparopagraho jivanam* [interconnectedness of all life], are relevant to environmental conservation. These tenets emphasize respect for all life forms, encourage sustainable living, and promote a harmonious relationship with nature. In particular, the reverence for trees, often associated with Jain Tirthankaras, underscores the ecological importance of protecting natural resources as an integral part of spiritual practice. Hinduism is classified as a dharmic religion because it emphasizes dharma as the overarching organizing principle that governs all reality. Hindu adherents maintain a sense of duty, virtue, and moral righteousness. Kautilya’s Arthashastra, for instance, meticulously delineates the repercussions of the felling of trees. The doctrines of various religions regarding the environment emphasize principles of environmental conservation. Hinduism, a highly influential faith with a significant adherent base, is emblematic of India's religious diversity. UNESCO’s 2000 Earth Charter urges modern individuals to acknowledge and safeguard the traditional knowledge and spiritual wisdom found across cultures, as these practices play a vital role in environmental stewardship, enhancing human well-being (Pojman, 2017).

D. Descriptions of Forest Ecology in Ramayana

The eco-landscape in Book Three, *Aranyakanda* of Valmiki Ramayana (where *aranya* means forest) in general, is described as “*Shanta* (calm), *Madhura* (sweet), *Rudra* (angry) and *Vibhatsa* (fearful), together defining the dominant sentiment of the forest” (Lutgendorf, 2001; Sinha, 1998). Ecology in the Ramayana is an interweaving of culture, human-nature relations, divinity, and worship. As Rama journeys from Ayodhya to Lanka through the forests of Chitrakoot, Daṇḍaka-aranya, Panchavati, and Kishkindhā, the epic vividly depicts a rich diversity of plant species along his route (Amirthalingam, 2013). Geographically located in Karnataka, in Southern India, the Pampa Sarovar is a site of significance. Rama’s travel to Lanka and the Himalayan Mountains, situated beyond Kailasa, reflected the supremacy of nature. The epic portrays multiple ecosystems, such as tropical deciduous forests, dry and moist deciduous woodlands, the evergreen tropical forests of Lanka, and Himalayan alpine semi-forests, each vividly contributing to the landscape (Roy, 2005). Roy described the flora and fauna, water elements, land surface, vegetation, and degrees of wilderness in

detail. Lingam discussed two types of forests portrayed in the Ramayana: Chitrakoot and Dandakaranya, the principal forests, and Panchavati, the subforest. “Continuous streams from waterfalls and forest springs maintain soil moisture, while the dense forest canopy plays a crucial role in conserving water within the hydrological cycle” (Amirthalingam, 2013).

Rama’s first halt was in Chitrakoot. He built his ashram in Dandakaranya, described as “abounding in tall, sacred, and sweet, fruit-bearing trees,” demonstrating his awareness and importance to the environment. The choice of residence prioritizes an eco-hamlet. Ecological integrity and interconnected biodiversity were prominent themes in Ramayana, often reflected in its depictions of rivers, mountains, and trees. These natural elements were first introduced when Rama arrived at Sringerapur, located on the banks of the Ganga River, during his journey into the forest (Verma, 2022b). He told his charioteer, “Let us halt under this tree, o charioteer! I shall behold the benign Ganga, the foremost river, whose water deserves to be respected by gods, gandharvas (celestial beings), beasts, reptiles, and birds alike” (Valmiki Ramayana, 2006:1.358, GP). The episode revealed his close interaction with nature and deep reverence for water bodies. Hence, reminds us of the ecosophy principle of Arne Naess, a Norwegian philosopher who introduced the concept of ‘Deep Ecology’. Ecosophy T, the version of Deep Ecology proposed by Naess, is named after the Tvergastein Mountains where Naess experienced nature. He describes the experience as ‘spontaneous’: “the lush green leaves just outside my office window and the sudden joy I feel upon seeing them are a pure and spontaneous delight” (Acros, 2022). Rama experienced a similar natural ambience throughout his forest journey.

Sage Bharadwaj advised Rama to stay in Chitrakoot, a tropical deciduous forest, situated at a distance of ten krosas (measuring distance) from Prayaga. Chitrakoot is a hill to the north of the river Mandakini. Chitrakoot³ is home to a variety of medicinal plant species. Medicinal plants⁴, mentioned in Ramayana, found today in Chitrakoot hills are- [Solanum virginianum] *Svetakanthakar*, called yellow fruit nightshade, which is used in treating epilepsy and bronchial asthma, *Bacopa monnieri*, also known as *Brahmi*. This perennial creeping herb helps improve memory and alleviate insomnia.

The Dandaka Forest named ‘Danda’ for its dense rows of trees is richly abundant throughout the region. Trees including *Madhukavana* [Indian Butter tree], *Sala* [Axle wood], *Ashvakarna* [Gurjan balsam], *Kakubha* [White marudah], *Bilva* [the Bengal quince], *Tinduka* [the Indian persimmon], *Patala* [the Trumpet tree], and *Badari* [Indian Jujube], are found today. Amirthalingam (2013) describes the following animals, which include *Jhilika* [cricket] a leaping orthopteran insect, *Mahisha* [buffalo], *Prishtha* [Spotted Deer], *Sarasa* [Indian crane], *Vrka* [Wolf], *Vyaghra* [Tiger] and *Bhrngaraja* [Fork-tailed shrike]. Seeing Vali and Dhundubi⁵, demons who destroy the forest, Sage Matanga cursed them, stating, “If the wicked one who desecrated my forest by discarding a demon's corpse, thereby trampling my trees, which I have nurtured as my children, remains here, I shall curse him. I will also curse anyone causing further harm to my sacred grove's leaves, shoots, fruits, and roots” (Valmiki Ramayana, 2006:1.778, GP). Malcolm Miles affirmed, “Viewing the world as mere objects paves the way for exploitation, whereas perceiving and engaging with it as a reflection of ourselves fosters care and interconnection towards ecology rather than domination.” Seeing the world as a mere object implies its exploitation, seeing it, feeling it, as a mirror of the self, which is more or less an ecological position, may imply a sense of caring and living with rather than exerting power over the world (Miles, 2014).

Hanuman crossed the Himalayas to reach the medicinal mountains of *Kailasa*, *Rishabha*, and *Oushadhi*. The mountain's southern side was covered with dense forests and home to plants known for their healing properties. *Rudravanti* [Cressa cretica], *Bhooti Sanjeevani* [Selaginella bryopteris], and *Jeevanti Jeevaka* [Flickingeria fimbriata] are three Sanjeevani herbs. *Mrita Sanjeevani* is renowned for its ability to revive the dead. *Vishalyakarani* can remove weapons and heal injuries caused by them, *Swarnakarani* can restore the body to its natural complexion, and *Sandhani* can reconnect severed limbs or heal broken bones (Sivakumar, 2023). A study published in *Current Science*⁶ identified seventeen species named *Sanjeevani*. The researchers determined that Selaginella bryopteris, Cressa cretica, and Desmotrichum fimbriatum [*Sanjeevani*, *Rudravanthi*, and *Jeevaka*, respectively] shared equivalent identity with the *Sanjeevani* plant. Indian traditions emphasize that all forms of life— plants, animals, and humans are deeply interconnected and dependent on each other, and any disruption in one form can endanger the entire ecological balance. “Ecological consciousness is created and developed in collaboration with the environment, and that allows people to feel and experience directly the unity with nature and the world around them” (Verma, 2022b).

E. Dharma, Rta, and the Panchabhutas in Ecological Perspectives

Vedic nature worship is undeniable, considering the “Vedic civilization of India, people worshipped nature and celestial bodies as deities. Vedic people worshipped the *Panchabhutas* which includes *Agni* [fire], *Ap* [water], *Vayu* [air], Maruts [storm wind], *Soma* [moon], *Dyaus* [the sky], *Prithvi* [the Earth], *Usas* [dawn], to seek blessing and to uphold celestial event regularly” (Radhakrishnan, 1923). It is evident through the Aitareya Upanisads that the five fundamental elements of the universe are Ether, Water, Light, Earth, and Air (Verma, 2020a). “Any imbalance or disharmony among these five elements affects the lives of living creatures” (Radhakrishnan, 2006; Verma, 2020a:3). Ramayana is a text that speaks on

³ Information from Deendayal Upadhyay Research Institute, Chitrakoot, India. Online: <https://www.dri.org.in/>

⁴ Information on Medicinal plants retrieved from Plant Diversity in Ramayana, research by Amirthalingam. M, CPR Environment Education Centre, Chennai, India.

⁵ A Demon in the form of a Buffalo in Valmiki Ramayana

⁶ Online: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/health/mountains-of-sanjeevani>, 2016

harmony between all creatures and gives reverence for *Panchabhutas* for ecological balance. Thus, a harmonious symphony is the seamless interplay between Hindu practices and nature revealed in these narratives. This practice is a resounding appeal to all members of society, compelling them to fulfil their sacred eco-dharmic obligation to preserve and safeguard the abundant bounty of the natural World, thus establishing the groundwork for a sustainable and prosperous future.

Throughout the long history of Hindu civilisation, there have been many written scriptures (mainly in Sanskrit) in different periods, such as the Vedas (approximately 1500-1000 BCE), the Upaniṣads (approximately 800-400 BCE), and the Puraṇas (approximately 500-200 BCE). We also find the Sanskrit epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, among many others. These epics are vast compendia of rituals, practices, and eco-ethical conceptions of *dharma* [righteousness] and *rta* [cosmic order]. In the Ramayana, the fifth book, namely the *Sundarakanda*, which narrates Hanuman's journey to Lanka, describes him praying to the Sun God, *Agni* [fire], *Vayu* [wind], *Mahendra* [the mountain], and *Samudra* [the Ocean] before departing for Lanka. The illustration shows reverence for *Panchabhutas* and *Rta*, through Hanuman's worship of the cosmic order.

“Offering salutations with folded palms to the Sun god, to Mahendra, lord of the gods, to the wind god, to the Creator Brahma, and all the attendants of lord Siva, he (Hanuman) made up his mind to proceed (to Lanka)” (Valmiki Ramayana 5.1.8- 5.1.9, NSU).

Rta is synonymous with "natural laws, universal peace, and cosmic order as defined in *Rgveda*". "Research on the word *rta* has led to a consensus that it means law, order, and truth. The faith in an order—a law makes for regularity and moral order" (Verma, 2023c). *Rta* is "a law of nature holding cosmic order, guided by dharma, a system of activity that directs the world so that *rta* is not violated" (Londhe, 2018). Dharma, rooted in the Sanskrit word *dhr* [sustaining], purports a "holistic ecological perspective against a nature subjugating and idiosyncratic environment within which we conceptualise ethics" (Bilimoria, 2016). Humans uphold this relationship between "*dharma* and *rta* through right orientation, responsibility, and action towards the world by developing values of self-restraint, assistance, and love, which are cornerstones of eco-ethics" (Verma, 2023c). Thus, incorporating the value of the cosmic order, the conscience of righteousness towards the environmental ethos, a fundamental Hindu ecological ethos articulates the conceptions of *dharma* and *rta* through Hanuman's worship.

In the Anthropocene, the conception of *dharma* and *rta* consciousness is delineated for the material exploitation of natural resources. Therefore, re-implication of ecological values of *dharma* and *rta* helps reorient people's attitudes towards the Symbiocene, "a new era with a sustainable human-nature relationship that fosters symbiotic ways of thinking for the mutual benefit of all living beings" (Piotr, 2023). Mahatma Gandhi said, "The Earth has ample resources to fulfill everyone's needs, but falls short when satisfying greed." The *Hiranyagarbha suktam*⁷ (Rig-Veda) talked about the cosmic egg and the golden womb from which creation or the soul originated. Bilimoria (2016) remarked, "Dharma denotes a universal principle or natural law that binds an individual in two ways: by upholding cosmic, social, and personal orders, and by grounding duties that arise from those dimensions." From this statement, it is conspicuous that the Hindu view of ethics, as laid down in *dharma*, incorporates different social and religious norms meant for upholding ecological integrity. This integrity is evident through the narratives in the Ramayana.

Environmental protection is regarded by some as an embodiment of dharma within the framework of the human-nature relationship. In environmental ethics, a profound set of responsibilities, akin to a sacred code of conduct, beckons every human being, a set of duties known as *eco-dharma*. This exquisite term seamlessly intertwines ecological stewardship with the timeless principles of *dharma*, found at the core of Indian philosophy and the text *Ramayana*. It is a guiding light, urging individuals and communities to consider the environmental footprint. The fulcrum of eco-dharma lies in aligning actions with principles that transcend mere sustainability, advocating for ecological equilibrium, preservation, and a seamless accord with nature. Within the tapestry of environmental ethics, many practices weave together a harmonious existence with the environment. It extends beyond a call for sustainable living, venturing into environmental stewardship and ethical decision-making.

V. CONCLUSION

Ramayana is a text that encourages individuals to explore their interconnection with the natural web of life as active participants rather than being passive onlookers. Ramayana's ecophilic teachings are based on interconnection with nature. In ancient India, trees were associated with divine beliefs, values, and religious importance. Well-maintained sacred groves serve as reservoirs of valuable medicinal plants with significant economic worth and provide refuge for endangered species. "Socio-cultural aspects like social beliefs and taboos play a key role in protecting the sacred grove" (Khumbongmayum, 2008).

⁷ Rig-Veda, CXXI, Book X, (566) *hiranyagarbhah samavartataagrey bhootasya jaatah patireka aaseet | sa daadhaara prithiveem dyaamutemaam kasmai devaaya havishaa vidhema.*

Rig-Veda.

Online: <https://archive.org/details/rigvedacomplete/mode/1up?q=hiranyagarbha+suktam>

"In the beginning, Hiranyagarbha was born only of created beings.

He fixed and holdeth up this Earth and heaven, shall we adore with our oblation? The hymn describes Hiranyagarbha as the primeval source of all creations".

“The Kalpavrksha, a wish-fulfilling tree symbolises how ancient Hindus viewed trees not merely as sources of wealth but as the foundation of communities growth and prosperity” (Jain, 2024). David Lee stressed that “readings of the ancient text Ramayana might prove to be a compelling 'cultural force' to humanity, upholding ecological balance” (Verma, 2022b). This fact is examined by Dr Radhakrishnan, highlighting the interdependence among various ecological entities from the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad- “The bees make honey and the honey support the bees”⁸, which resonates with the idea of Deep Ecology.

Deep Ecology ideas reflected in the Ramayana are the inherent worth of all human beings, regardless of their instrumental utility to human needs. Arne Naess, the founder of the modern theory of Deep Ecology in the Philosophy Department at the University of Oslo, proposed that “Deep Ecology, also known as ecosophy or 'ecological wisdom', is a movement that advocates profound inquiry and thoughtful set of solutions to our environmental challenges. It challenges some of the fundamental assumptions in our societies regarding consumerism and materialism, and promotes simple living”. Its motto, “Simple in means, Rich in Ends”, suggested a kind of self-realization through oneness with all things. “The ‘ending-sophy’ underscores that our goal is wisdom not mere scientific facts. Philosophy, as articulated wisdom, has to be a synthesis of theory and practice. It must not shun concrete policy recommendations but rather root them in core values and fundamental perspectives on societal development” (Pojman, 2017). The substantial impact of Hinduism and Philosophy on Arne Naess’s ecosophy was introduced in *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*⁹, published in 1989.

A shift from an anthropocentric world to an 'ecocentric' world is possible through *Bandhu* (Malhotra, 2013), which is “a concept used to explain how the whole and the parts are held together in integral unity”. As rightly said by Pojman, “a kind of self-realization through oneness with all things”. Ramayana is a narrative that deals with *bandhu* factors of the integral whole. *Bandhu*¹⁰ (Olivelle, 1996; Skof, 2021) describes the mutual relationship between the microcosm and the macrocosm. It is not simply a case of separate parts forming a unified structure. Instead, the parts exist only temporarily connected to the whole, never as isolated entities. Despite this, they have distinct roles within the unity, contributing their unique light and beauty to the greater process. Thich Nhat Hanh dealt with this shift by directly addressing the Earth, “Your nature is my nature, and both are woven into the fabric of the cosmos” (Acros, 2024). The following phrase from the Vedas- “*prithvim dharmana dhrtam* (dharma as sustainer of Earth)”, means dharma is the backbone of Earth’s ecosystem, its moral and cosmic law that sustains life, is similar to *rta* (Jain, 2011; Verma, 2022b). Jain asserts, “Both Rta and Dharma reflect the same cosmic order that sustains the universe, reinforcing the harmony and structure of the cosmos”.

The Upanisadic philosophers knew the five elements, the Panchabhutas that make the World: the Earth, water, fire, air, and the ether (Skof, 2021). The teachings from Jaiminiya Upanisads¹¹ (3.2.2) exemplify an analogy between macrocosmic wind, *Vayu*, and microcosmic *Prana* [wind and breathing doctrines]. An example of the relation between the microcosm and the macrocosm is that Hanuman, during his departure to Lanka, prayed to the Panchabhutas for divine and natural guidance. *Vayuputra* [Son of the Windgod], Hanuman took the macrocosm's help, taking a deep breath before He flew. In Panchabhutas, the wind is always active. At the same time, in the human body, through breathing, it is the only element that is continuously seen alive (during sleep, living beings breathe) (Skof, 2021). Hanuman successfully takes his leap in the macrocosm through his internal breath control process.

“Having cast his eyes upward to view the distance and direction in which he had to leap, he restrained his breath in his chest while looking at the sky” (Valmiki Ramayana 5.1.37, NSU).

This standpoint nurtures a deep sense of unity, mutual reliance with the natural world, and interconnectedness with nature. In this interconnectedness, the traditional boundary between inside and outside fades, leading to mindfulness of continuous, reciprocal relationships between humans and nature. Thich Nhat Hanh used the idea of ‘interbeing’ to explain this view. “To experience interbeing is to recognize the inherent other within our ecological self. This shift in orientation awakens us to a deeper reality beyond the ego and connects us to the cosmic dimension”.

“Nature, however, unveiled a grandeur that transcends the metaphorical constraints of individual evolution, showcasing unparalleled complexity, variability, and remarkable resilience. An ecosystem, akin to a symphony, can gracefully lose its contributing species and undergo transformative metamorphoses without succumbing to collapse. However, as Commoner stated, the delicate dance of interconnectedness in nature also unveils a vulnerability, for ecological systems, when subjected to severe stress, may witness sudden, awe-inducing catastrophes” (Neetu, 2025). The ecological system, Commoner wrote, “remains stable through self-compensating mechanisms but if these mechanisms are pushed beyond their limits, a sudden and dramatic collapse can occur.” He further said, “An ecological system acts as an amplifier so that a small perturbation in one place can trigger a significant, distant, and delayed impact elsewhere” (Commoner, 1971).

⁸ See Radhakrishnan, S. (2006). "Principal Upanisads" and "Reconceiving the Ecological Wisdoms of Vedānta in Anthropocene: An Eco-aesthetical Perspective" (Verma & Dwivedi, 2020)—Rupkatha—*parasparam upakaraka- bhava phalitamaha*

⁹ Chapter Ecosophy T: unity and diversity of life, on Gita, (194). “Ecology, Community and lifestyle: outline of an ecosophy”, Arne Naess, Trans. and Ed. By David Rothenberg, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁰ P. Olivelle, Upanishads, trans. and Introd. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. iii). The central concern of all Vedic thinkers, including the authors of the Upanisads, is to discover the connections that bind elements of spheres, macrocosm to microcosm. The assumption is that the universe constitutes a web of relations (of cosmic relations, like bandhu).

¹¹ The Jaiminiya Pg 9 on Vayu

Online: <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.38101/page/n123/mode/2up?q=vayu>

Both of these concepts indicate the presence of a vast network of interconnections in the ecosphere, where various forms of life are intricately intertwined like branches in a lush forest, where individual organisms and their physicochemical environments are metaphorically the verses of a cosmic poem. Therefore, the following verse seeks universal peace through nature,

We seek peace for Universal welfare in the form of appeasing cosmic elements – Earth, peace; atmosphere, peace; space, peace; directions, peace; fire, peace; sun, peace; water, peace; plants, peace; and human, peace. (Lakra, 2024)

Om̐dyauḥśāntir antarikṣagum̐sāntiḥpṛthvī śāntir āpaḥśāntir oṣadhayaḥśāntiḥ/ vanaspatayaḥśāntir viśve devāḥśāntir brahma śāntiḥsarvagum̐sāntiḥśāntir eva śāntiḥsā mā śāntir edhi// om̐sāntiḥśāntiḥśāntiḥ// (Yajurveda, 36.17)

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