

A Comparative Study of the Environment Protection Values as Depicted in the Ramayana and the Modern World

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Abstract: United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in a resolution 2030 Agenda (September 2015), formulated and adopted seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as Global Goals, which are roadmaps for the well-

being of the people and the planet. In today's world, we face many environmental issues which have put human and planet's life sustainability in danger. Major pollution issues include air, water, soil, marine life and soon drifting us away from environmental concerns. A proper balance between development and environment protection is need of the hour, which the UNGA rightly addresses. In this paper, we attempt to evaluate and compare today's environment protection values with that of the Ramayana period. Ramayana period was a perfect period with beautiful portrayals of different aspects of nature, life in *vanas*, animal characters, flora and fauna, rivers, mountains, etc. reflecting the integral relationship of human life and its interdependence with the environment. Almost all the events in Ramayana happened in the forest during the 14 years of *vanvasa* of Lord Rama. He stayed in *ashramas* in deep forests with tribals and at places such as Panchvati which was located near unpolluted river and fruit bearing trees, medicinal plants, herbs etc. and moreover very fresh and pure air all around. There is also a mention of wild animals, squirrels, birds etc. Famous story of Lord Hanuman lifting and bringing Dronagiri Mountain having Sanjivani to save the life of Lord Laxmana depicts that knowledge of such miracle plants existed during that period. The references to rivers such as Ganga, Yamuna, Sharayu, Alaknanda etc. is found and stories were related to animals and birds such as Jatayu, Bali, Sugriva, Hanuman, Angada and so on. It teaches us how we must protect our nature and go close to the environment and ecology. There existed a system of *Devrai* (sacred groves) meaning God's forest and protection of the same benefited people with the fresh air from the groves, flora and fauna. The paper also aims to depict the bonding of human life with nature during the Ramayana period and attempts to address modern-day environment protection issues.

Keywords: Environment Protection, Ramayana Period, Modern World

1. Introduction:

Sustainability has become a serious issue across the globe due to serious environmental problems and threats like climate change, global warming, depletion of natural resources, etc., which are putting life on this planet in danger. The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), in a resolution 2030 Agenda (September 2015), developed and endorsed seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also referred to as Global Goals, which serve as a blueprint for ensuring the welfare of both people and the planet [1]. In today's world, we face many environmental issues that have endangered human and planet life's sustainability. Major pollution issues include air, water, soil, and marine life, soon drifting us away from environmental concerns. A proper balance between development and environmental protection is the need of the hour.

A general belief prevails in our society that concern for the environment is a recent phenomenon, and this belief emanates from the lack of a focused study of our past. A sizeable Indian population today has either not had the opportunity to read our epics and other ancient literature or has restricted their focus to the events and dry facts chronicled in them.

A focused attention to the inherent values and traditions depicted undeniably reveals the intrinsic enrichment of life produced by them, which can be extrapolated to all times, places, and people. However, even the serious reader of our epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata would perhaps focus on self-transformation by learning spirituality, ethics, family and social living, strategy, etc., and the concern for environmental protection depicted therein would perhaps go unnoticed. This is because we generally do not associate these texts with environmental protection and thus fail to notice that what we learn from them in this regard is relevant to the present times as well.

In the modern world, we face a lot of environmental issues. A few to name are pollution, deforestation, climate change, etc. These issues impact humans and face an existential threat to human life on earth in the future.

This paper attempts to bring out a few environment-related depictions in the form of verses from the Ramayana period/literature. It aims to describe the bonding of human life with nature during the Ramayana period and attempts to address a few modern-day environment protection issues and efforts undertaken to protect the environment.

The paper is organized as follows: initially, selective verses/shlokas from Ramayana with reference to air, water, forest, mountain, rivers, plants and animals are presented focusing on importance accorded to the various environmental elements in the past. This is followed by two sections on present day Indian scenario and need and efforts for environment protection in modern era. Paper ends with conclusion describing environment protection values during Ramayana period and the modern times.

2.0 Selective Nature-related Verses from Ramayana Study Design:

In this section, an effort has been made to cite the references to environmental protection from the Ramayana period. These have been suitably categorized and placed under the headings

– Air and Water, Forests, Mountains and Rivers, and Plants and Animals for the convenience of reading.

The analysis is to the point, illustrative and not exhaustive. Brevity has been maintained to suit the prescribed length of the research paper. Specific shlokas from the Ramayana and random illustrative events from the current times have been selected for discussion for the specific purpose of this presentation. The subject is vast and has immense scope for further in-depth research. Also, to maintain parity with the geo-social settings of the Ramayana period, the comparison with the modern-day scenario has been restricted to the Indian context in the subsequent section.

To maintain correctness and uniformity, all the shlokas from *Valmiki Ramayana* quoted in this work and their English translations have been taken from valmikiramayan.net [2].

In the Ramayana, a sense of identity with nature and the subtle human values in this respect are portrayed through the intricate everyday interaction with its elements, such as forests, trees, animals, mountains, rivers and the sea and the symbiotic relationship with these, is seen throughout the narration as a natural part of life. The very inspiration of the epic arising out of a *Nishada* killing the *Krouncha* is legendary in this context.

मा निषाद प्रतिष्ठां त्वमगमः शाश्वतीः समाः।

यत्क्रौञ्चमिथुनादेकम् अवधीः काममोहितम्॥

“Hunter, may you repent for life and suffer, find no rest or fame, for you have killed one of the unsuspecting, devoted and loving krauñcha couple.”

Only then will we constitute task forces on climate change and carbon footprint and start working on environmental protection on a war footing.

In contrast, our ancient epics like the Ramayana have depicted environmental protection and the knowledge of its importance, even in that era when there were no large-scale man-made damages to the environment. Their view was that consistent care for the environment, consciously and subconsciously, done as a part of life, is protecting the environment. The ecological balance already existing in nature must be respected and maintained:

पृथिवी वायुराकाशम् आपो ज्योतिश्च राघवः ।

स्वभावे सौम्य तिष्ठन्ति शाश्वतं मार्गमाश्रिताः ॥^[1]

“Dear Rama! Earth, wind ether, water and light remain fixed in their own nature, resorting to their eternal path.”

The inherent values and traditions in the Ramayana period ensured environmental protection. There is a specific mention in the Ramayana that when Bharata and Rishi Vasistha visit Rishi Bharadvaja’s ashrama, and Bharata’s army accompanies them, Bharata leaves the army at a distance in order not to disturb the environment of the ashram:

ते वृक्षान् उदकं भूमिम् आश्रमेष्वुदजास्तथा ।

न हिंस्युरिति तेनाहं एक एव समागतः ॥

“Let them not damage the trees, huts and ground and defile the waters of hermitages’ – in this thought, I came alone.”

In the Kishkindha Kanda [3], Rama explains the beauty of forest and surrounding nature to his younger brother Laxmana. Few verses from it describing nature are as follows:

सौमित्रे शोभते पम्पा वैदूर्यविमलोदका

फुल्लपद्मोत्पलवती शोभिता विविधैर्द्रुमैः ॥^[2]

“Pampa Lake is wonderful, with its waters resembling a cat’s eye gem. She is radiating happiness with her completely

blossomed lotuses, variety of flowers and the surrounding trees.”

सौमित्रे पश्य पम्पायाः काननं शुभदर्शनम्।

यत्र राजन्ति शैला वा द्रुमाः सशिखरा इव॥ [3]

“See, the Pampa forest, which is auspicious in appearance and where the trees and mountains shine with their tall peaks.”

नलिनैरपि संछन्ना ह्यत्यर्थशुभदर्शना।

सर्पव्यालानुचरिता मृगद्विजसमाकुला॥

“This is remarkably sacred in its aspect, even with its lotuses covering it. The deer and bird flocks are restless and there are rambling snakes and elephants.”

अधिकं प्रविभात्येतत् नीलपीतं तु शाद्वलम्।

द्रुमाणां विविधैः पुष्पैः परिस्तोमैः इव अर्पितम्॥

“This whole area is dazzling, featuring a range of trees and bluish and golden grasslands, all covered in flowers that like multicolored bed sheets.”

पुष्पभारसमृद्धानि शिखराणि समन्ततः।

लताभिः पुष्पिताग्राभिः उपगूढानि सर्वतः॥

“The blossoms on the treetops are fully flowered and blossoming everywhere as is they have climbed at the highest point of mountain.”

विमिश्रा विहगाः पुंभिरात्मव्यूहाभिनन्दिताः।

भृङ्गराज प्रमुदिताः सौमित्रे मधुरस्वराः॥

“These female birds are happily calling together with the melodious humming of the king-bees, and they are highly regarded by their own flock for being well-mixed with their male friends.”

All above verses and shlokas depict the human bonding with the nature. These verses emphasizes on earth, wind, light mountains, lakes, blossoming of flora, natural fragrances, trees, bees, birds, animals and so on. All these elements of nature described in Ramayana epic articulates that nature is a sole, central essence for living and sustenance of human and animal race during the ancient period.

3.0 Air and Water:

The following verses [2] from the Ramayana illustrate the importance of protection of air and water during the Ramayana period:

पानीयदूषके पापं तथैव विषदायके ।

यत्तदेकः स लभतां यस्मार्योऽनुमते गतः ॥

“May he with whose counsel my elder brother has gone to exile, incur the sin that is attached to a person polluting the drinking water and likewise to a person who administers poison.”

लीनपुष्कर पत्राश्च नरेन्द्र कलुषोदकाः ।

संतप्तपद्माः पद्मिन्यो लीनमीन विहङ्गमाः ॥

“Emperor! Lotus-lakes were with lotus-leaves hiding under water pressing themselves closely together, with muddy waters, with parched lotus-flowers and in which fish and water fowls have completely disappeared.”

जलजानि च पुष्पाणि माल्यानि स्थलजानि च ।

नाद्य भान्त्यल्पगन्धीनि फलानि च यथा पुरम् ॥

“Water-born flowers and flowers living on dry lands now give very little fragrance and fruits do not have a luscious look as before.”

Importance of clean drinking water is focused in the above stanzas. Polluted, muddy water is also referred here. Water is the key for existence of flowers, fruits and aquatic life etc. on this planet.

4.0 Forests, Mountains, and Rivers:

In the following verses of the Valmiki Ramayana [2], we see the description of forests and rivers and a depiction of their protection:

विवृद्धं बहुभिर्वृक्षैश्श्यामं सिद्धोपसेवितम् ।

तस्मै सीताञ्जलिं कृत्वा प्रयुञ्जीताशिषश्शिवाः ॥

“After crossing the river Yamuna and approaching a large banyan tree named Syama (dark-green) having green leaves surrounded by many tress and visited by Siddhas, Sita should, joining her palms, recite her auspicious prayers to the tree.”

इदमेवामृतं प्राह राज्ञो राजर्षयः परे ।

वनवासं भवार्थाय प्रेत्य मे प्रपितामहाः ॥

“My paternal great grandfathers the ancient royal sages have said that for a king to obtain liberation after death, such a residence in the forest is nectar like.”

सालैस्तालैस्तमालैश्च खजूरैः पनसैर्द्रुमैः ।

नीवारैस्तिनिशैश्चैव पुन्नागैश् चोपशोभिताः ॥

चूतैरशोकैस्तिलकैः केतकैरपि चम्पकैः ।

पुष्पगुल्मलतोपेतैस्तैस् तरुभिरावृताः ॥

स्यन्दनैश्चन्दनैर्नपिः पणसैर् लकुचैरपि ।

धवाश्वकर्णखदिरैश्शमी किंशुकपाटलैः ॥

“These mountains are brightening with trees of Saala, Palmyra, Tamaala, Date Palms, Jackfruit and also thus with Punnaagaa. With Chuuta – Sweet Mango; Ashoka, Tialaka, even with Ketaka, Champaka trees, and even with Syandana, Sandalwood, Niipa, Paarnasa, Lakuch, dhava, Ashwakarna, Khadira, Shamii, Kimshuka, Paatala trees, and entwined are those and those trees with flowered shrubs, and along with climbers, and thus they brighten the mountains.”

दिव्या पुण्योदका रम्या हिमवन्तमुपाश्रिता ।

लोकस्य हितकार्यार्थं प्रवृत्ता भगिनी मम ॥

“Desiring to yield benefit for the welfare of world, my sister has emerged with her divinely pious and delightful waters, taking recourse to Himalayan Mountains.”

इयं च दृश्यते गङ्गा पुण्या त्रिपथगा नदी ।

नानाद्विजगणाकीर्णा संप्रपुष्पितकानना ॥

“Here is seen the holy River Ganga, which wends its way through the three worlds (viz. heaven, the earth and the subterranean world), whose banks are crowded with flocks of birds and which is lined with trees in full-flowering.”

The shlokas in this section [2] refer to the significance of Ganga and Yamuna rivers, Chitrakuta and Himalaya mountains, variety of fruits and trees in the forests. Harmonious living of human and animal life on earth is only possible due to all these important essentials of nature. The fact that most shlokas describe nature and its musings clearly provides us the message of all-encompassing living in those years. This era may be regarded as golden period of life on the earth.

5.0 Plants:

The following verses from the Ramayana [2] illustrate the importance of plants during the Ramayana period:

तदा स्म दानवा देवान् शरसंस्पर्शकोविदाः ।

निजघ्नुः शस्त्रविदुषश्चादयन्तो मुहुर्मुहुः ॥

“By making themselves invisible again and again, the demons skilled in the use of arrows overcame the celestials despite their skill in bearing arms.”

गत्वा परममध्वानमुपर्युपरि सागरम् ।

हिमवन्तं नगश्रेष्ठं हनूमनान्तुमर्हसि ॥

“Hanuman! You ought to go to Himalaya, the foremost of mountains, by traveling higher and higher over the large ocean.”

ततः काञ्चनमत्युग्रमृषभं पर्वतोत्तमम् ।

कैलासशिखरं चापि द्रक्ष्यस्यरिनिषूदन ॥

“O annihilator of enemies! Thereafter, you will see there the Mount Rishabha, the excellent mountain and the very much powerful peak of Kailasa, with a golden hue.”

तयोः शिखरयोर्मध्ये प्रदीप्तमतुलप्रभम् ।

सर्वौषधियुतं वीर द्रक्ष्यस्यौषधिपर्वतम् ॥

“Hanuman! In the midst of these two peaks, you will see a blazing and unequally brilliant herbal mountain, containing all kinds of herbs.”

मृतसञ्जीवनीं चैव विशल्यकरणीमपि ।

सौवर्णकरणीं चैव सन्धानीं च महौषधीम् ॥^[4]

“You can see there, Mrita Sanjivani (capable of restoring the dead to life), Vishalyakarani (capable of extracting weapons and

healing all wounds inflicted by weapons), Suvarnakarani (restoring the body to its original complexion) and Sandhani, the great herb (capable of joining severed limbs or fractured bone).”

Plants provide not only the food for human consumption, but also the medicinal herbs required for curing from diseases. Such scarce herbs are available in the deep forests of various mountains in our country Bharat. The knowledge of the medicinal herbs having no side-effects on human health was the epitome during those past years.

6.0 Animals:

The following verses from the Ramayana [2] illustrate the related to animals during the Ramayana period:

वराहवृकसिंहाश्च महिषाः सर्पवानराः ।

व्याघ्रगोकर्णगवयाः वित्रेसुः पृषतैस्सह ॥

“Boars, wolves and lions, buffaloes, snakes, monkeys, tigers, Gokarnas and Gavayas (two distinctive species of deer) along with spotted deer felt frightened.”

रथाङ्गसाह्वानयूह हंसाः कारण्डवाः प्लवाः ।

तथा पुंस्कोकिलाः क्रौञ्चा विसंज्ञा भेजिरे दिशः ॥

“The ruddy geese, water-fowls, swans, Karandavas (a sort of duck), herons, male cuckoos and cranes, utterly confused made it to various directions.”

The reference to the animals such as deer, snakes, buffaloes, moneys etc. and various bird species portrays that significant importance was accorded to them during the Ramayana period. Environment comprises of atmosphere, lakes, rivers, mountains, trees, birds, animals, human etc. Reference to each

and every component can be found in verses of Ramayana. The beauty of life of earth during those days is unimaginable.

7.0 Few Present-Day Scenarios:

In the present times, there is no dearth of contemporary literature on eco-criticism to review. The current view of environmental protection is that, for the human race to progress, we need to exploit nature to the extent possible; however, since we over-exploit nature in this pursuit of progress, we must 'conserve' it. Everything is affected, from soil to the ozone layer, but the panic button is pressed only when it starts hurting us through adversities like global warming and rising sea levels.

An attempt to compare it with the air we breathe today presents the findings that air quality today is good only in 10 out of 34 states and union territories and the situation is particularly bad in the cities [4]. Air pollution due to industries and its reasons are well known. In most cases, greed and corruption in society are the main culprits. We have lost our basic values and there lies the fundamental difference between the two periods under comparison. We also encounter the recurring problem of air pollution due to burning agricultural residue [5]. Even though the remedies are well-recommended, they are implemented only on paper, while the pollutants impact millions of people's health. With the present state of technology, if we are not able to manage farm residue gainfully, it is again our morality and ethics as a society, and we, therefore, have to once again look up to our ancient texts for the solutions to a modern societal problem.

A comparison with the drinking water situation in modern times apprises the researchers of the grave situation in rural areas

and low-income groups regarding the mere availability of drinking water [6]. Clean, safe, readily available drinking water is still a dream to many.

In modern times, shocking news items appear like: “Nearly 31 lakh trees were cut down for construction and development of public infrastructure projects across India in 2020-21, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said in the Lok Sabha” [7].

Although suitable compensatory afforestation is always undertaken, it has its own problems. To quote from a public report: It “harms rural and indigenous people who depend on these ecosystems for grazing and produce” [8].

Concerning the rivers, India has a lot of ground to cover to achieve pollution-free rivers, according to the statistics available. As per one report, the Central Pollution Control Board monitored 279 out of 603 rivers in 2022 and identified 46% of them as polluted, as against 270 rivers monitored out of 390 in 2015, of which 70% were identified as polluted [9].

As far as forests and rivers are concerned, though the major action rests with the government the common citizen can too contribute. Polluting the rivers with domestic sewage or industrial affluent must be stopped by awareness and legal action.

The cultivation of medicinal plants is one area which has seen revival in the recent years. The awareness towards plant-based medicine also has increased. The Ministry of AYUSH, the Government of India and several state governments have schemes that promote herbal cultivation in the country [10].

The relationship with stray and wild animals is still highlighted by frequently reported cruelty towards them, whereas the animals have been helpful and have shown great restraint, except when pushed to the extreme. In modern times, humans have encroached into the forests, made houses, cultivated the

forest land, but have not followed the basic tenets of co-habitation that are amply depicted in our ancient texts. There are recent instances of death and several instances of injuries to wild animals due to the use of explosives, poisons, electric fences, etc. by humans, who in the true sense are encroachers in this case. A case in point is the killing of an elephant with a pineapple filled with explosives in Kerala in 2000 [11].

This again is a result of diminished human values, greed and having no respect for, or not having learnt from, the teachings of our ancestors. If these Sanskaras are built into someone, the very thought of doing such things would not arise. The Vikriti here is: 'If I am capable, I will do it without using the Viveka'. This again is a social failure.

In stark contrast to this, there are recent media reports from Wayanad of a pet parrot saving the lives of several families by its pre-dawn warnings of the imminent landslide [12].

8.0 Environment Protection of Modern Times – Need and Efforts:

In modern times, environmental ethics and morals are focused on raising awareness of the facts, information, and aspects concerning the environment. The environment comprises our surrounds, how people live their lives and the natural resources. The magnificence of nature must be conserved for our future generations. Climate change is a critical global issue. Our environment is continually changing rapidly. There is a pressing need to make everyone conscious of the ecological problems that are creating these shifts. People on this beautiful planet

need to be much more careful with how they live their lives dealing with the various environmental hazards. A thorough awareness of the environment, nature, changes in the climate, natural resources, etc., should be the foundation of any instruction on environmental protection. The young generation has the ability to be change-makers if they commit to change and begin conserving the environment. Preserving nature is essential to our economic well-being and the success of generations to come.

9.0 Conclusion:

It is said that “Nature is the art of god”. Human-nature relationships existed right from the creation of the earth. Ramayana and all other epics describe the strong human bonding with nature; all day-to-day activities were focused and centered by giving much importance to nature. The Ramayana time mantra was worshipping and taking utmost care of nature for the existence of life on this planet. After the industrial revolutions in the last few decades, people, organizations, and governments have realized the importance of environmental protection and, moreover, strict implementation of the policies that were created for this purpose. The protection of the environment has become a pressing concern in recent times, with the world facing numerous ecological challenges. Compassion and empathy are fundamental moral values that drive environmental protection. The judicious and equitable use of resources are also critical moral values in environmental protection. Care, concern and responsibility are additional moral values that support environmental protection. We start to conserve and safeguard our environment when we have a profound concern for it. Environmental protection is indeed a worldwide drive and students, colleges, universities, society, etc. are partnering in such holy endeavors.

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