



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.6.Issue.1.2019 (Jan-March)

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

NATURE IN THE RAMAYANA: INTERPRETING THE KATHA-RAMAYANA

Dr. NIBEDITA PHUKAN

Department of English, Namrup College, Namrup, Dibrugarh, P. O. Parbatpur, PIN-786623 (Assam)

Email: nibeditap18@gmail.com

doi: <https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.6119.113>



ABSTRACT

Environmentalists are conventionally seen as defenders of nature. Again, it can be argued that all human behaviour derives from natural impulses. 'Unnatural' is often a term of abuse used to oppress people; yet to identify a group of people with nature is historically, an oppressive strategy. There is a need to value natural ecosystems and acknowledge human dependence on them. 'Nature' is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame. In its most familiar meaning, nature is what the earth is and does without human intervention. Natural wilderness is land that has never been altered by human activity.

The genre pastoral has expressed the vision since antiquity. It is a desire to return to nature. Flight from urban peril is followed by a pastoral intervention is to be found in ancient Indian literature. Pastoral assumption is that the rural or the natural world is a safe refuge.

The high and profound respect of ancient Indian civilization towards nature and environment is reflected through the great epic of the *Ramayana*. The paper is an attempt to study nature's effect on human life in the epic the *Ramayana* based on Pradeep Saikia's Assamese translation of the *Katha-Ramayana* of Chakravarty Raja Gopalachari. This was first written in Tamil by Gopalachari and later re-written in English. Balmiki's *Ramayana* was the *ur-text* of *Katha-Ramayana*. As the book is written from children's perspective it is found that the suitability to make children aware and to teach them about the utility of nature and nature's strands in human life is an element in the *Katha-Ramayana*.

Key Words: Environmentalists, defender, nature, pastoral, antiquity, nature's strands.

'The term environment is used to describe, in the aggregate, all the external forces, influences and conditions, which affect the life, nature, behavior and the growth, development and maturity of living organisms'.

-Douglass and Holland

Introduction

The meaning of the word environment is a surrounding: the external conditions influencing the development or growth of people, animals and plants and their living or working conditions. Here the living objects in general and man in particular are surrounded. The physical attributes surround man and living objects in the space or habitat. Environment refers to the sum total of conditions which surround man at a given point in space and time. Environment is the collective whole of physical, chemical, organic and non-organic components of the atmosphere, lithosphere and oceans. It is the sum total of external conditions that influence the life of man and it determines the quality of survival of life.

Environmental education is a new concept but its basic nature is as old as human civilization since early days. There is a need to value natural ecosystems and acknowledge human dependence on them. The relationship between man and environment is two-directional as the environment affects and influences man and in turn man also influences and modifies the environment. These interaction and relationship are symbiotic in nature rather than suppressive and oppressive.

The high and profound respect of ancient Indian civilization towards nature and environment is reflected through the great epic of the *Ramayana*. The paper makes an attempt to study nature's effect on human life in the epic the *Ramayana* based on Pradeep Saikia's Assamese translation of the *Katha-Ramayana* of Chakravarty Raja Gopalachari. This was first written in Tamil by Gopalachari and later re-written in English. Balmiki's *Ramayana* was the *ur-text* of *Katha-Ramayana*.

Discussion

'Nature' rather than the term 'environment' is much more suitable to discuss the ancient Indian awareness of the world or universe. 'Nature' is a series of changing cultural constructions that can be used to praise and blame. In its most familiar meaning, nature is what the earth is and does without human intervention. Hence, natural wilderness is land that has never been altered by human activity. The knowledge, culture and practices of people regarding the world and the universe had very important role in Indian civilization. Thus the meaning of forest has a deeper root in ancient Indian culture and civilization. The environmental role in one's life necessitates cultural realignments.

The 'Banaprashtha' or 'Sannyash' is the cultural necessities in ancient Indian civilization. It was the practice of every individual to follow after his or her every fulfillment in life. The pastoral vision was a desire to return to nature in ancient Indian culture. When Rama was ready to go for exile to oblige his father's promise to Kaikeyi, Laxmana and later Bharata reminded him that it was not the time to go to 'Banaprashtha' because at that very moment it was his duty to look after his subjects as the king of Ayodhya.

In ancient Indian civilization there the relationship between the human life and the forest life was a symbiotic one. The forest life was the part of every individual at the end of their lives as it helped to lead to salvation. The forest life was the culmination of peace, solace and happiness after living the life in full extent. For the ancient Indian civilization forest was a normal part of human life. This is different from the western thought about forest as in Robert Pogue Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992). The book is a study of the meaning of the forests in Western culture from antiquity to postmodernity, and it shows wild nature in a dialectical relationship with civilization. In contrast to the western concept about forest the ancient Indian concept about nature was always complementary.

In western concept wild places provide solace for exiles, release for repressed and outlawed feelings, and space for adventurous forays beyond the law and domesticity which is contrast to the Indian concept. In ancient Indian civilization the solace of living in forest comes only after performing the domestic and regal duties. In antique Indian civilization forest was a place for achieving supreme knowledge for the 'Rhishi-Munis' the knowledgeable people, the saints being aloof from the urban life. It was the place as part of human duty to perform sincerely lest space for adventurous forays beyond the law and domesticity. It was a place for hiding for Ahalya the wife of Rhishi Gautam as he cursed his wife for her disloyalty. Her soul was hiding in the

'Ashrama' surrounded by beautiful forest land until Rama came to save her soul by stepping her 'Ashrama' to make her alive. Nature was the protector of her soul.

As all human behaviour derives from natural impulses it is found in the *Katha-Ramayana* how Kaikeyi was decisive to send Rama to the forest. After getting the promise from Raja Dasharath of Bharata's 'abhishek' Kaikeyi could have stopped Rama going to the forest. But the 'unnatural' behavior of Kaikeyi was to oppress Rama or to deprive him from his regal rights. Kaikeyi's action was a kind of oppression of both nature and man as she wanted to send Rama to be destroyed by nature in the forest. Hence, forest in ancient India was a place for exile too.

The importance of river and water in human civilization was to be found in the mythological story of King Sogor's sixty-thousand sons' salvation. They were burnt alive by Kapil Muni as they suspected him for stealing the horse. This mythological story reflects the cultural affiliation regarding the importance of river and water not only in life, but even after one's death.

In the story about 'Dandakaranya' told by Rhishi Vishwamitra to Rama, the importance of water and river to be found for developing human civilization. The knowledge of biodegradable objects was known to people as it was found from the conversation between Rhishi Vishwamitra and Rama as the former was describing how land got fertile for production from the compost of dead and rotten natural objects. Rhishi Vishwamitra said to Rama, "This is the chemistry of the mother earth". Nature was always useful as its objects had utility for human beings. The medicinal value of 'Vishalyakarani' which was used to heal injured Laxmana was known to the ancient Indian people. It acknowledges human dependence on nature.

The symbiotic relationship between nature and man is reflected through the Taraka episode. The exploitative and suppressive mode on nature was represented through the destructive work of the rakshasha, the demon. Nature was dear to the heart of people as the death of torturer Taraka in Rama's hand had brought life to the forest. The significance is that the people who tortured other people brought death not only to people, but to the nature too. The ideology is that happiness of human beings is related to the existence of nature. This philosophy draws that there was a cordial relationship between inhabitants of a place and nearby nature in ancient Indian civilization.

Nature and animals were treated very kindly by people. Rhishi Viswamitra had many birds and animals in his ashrama which always followed him where he had moved. When Viswamitra took Rama and Laxmana to Mithila for Sita's Sayambar the animals in the ashrama wanted to follow them which were forbidden by the former with sweet words. Even animals were treated with love, care and kindness.

It was described by Valmiki that the beauty of nature was incomparable to enjoy with human eyes. The supremacy of nature is that only a limited portion can be enjoyed by human beings. The description of beauty of a flowing river is a part of Valmiki's *Ramayana*. The beauty of the falling of the Ganga on earth was even enjoyed by the 'devotas', the demigods.

The landscape all along the river Ganga course is sanctified through the holy cities with ancient temples in the Himalayan zone and Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains. The sacred zones form a set of interconnected socio-ecological system connecting the Himalayan zone cities Gongotri, Badrinath, Kedarnath, Rishikesh, Haridwar and in the plain Varanasi, Allahabad etc. of the Indo-Gangetic alluvial plains. The sanctity of the river Ganga is believed in the sacred dip in the river increasing both mental and physical strength of people.

In the *Ramayana* the description of origin of the river Ganga, given by Rhishi Vishwamitra to young Rama and Laxmana was a part of cultural accommodation with nature which had helped human beings for sustainable development. Providing education to pupils of that time through preaching and giving knowledge about nature and its usage was a kind of acknowledgement on human dependence on nature.

When Rama was exiled Sita wanted to accompany him to jungle expressing her thought that she had had a desire to enjoy the beauty of high mountains and flowing river. She assured Rama that she would live

happily amongst birds, flowers, trees and creepers and would enjoy taking bath in the river. Nature was a safe refuge for Sita in the company of Rama. Pastoral assumption was that the rural or the natural world was a safe refuge for humankind. Appreciation of natural beauty was the part of Indian civilization. This ideology differs from the western belief in 'pagan' and 'heathen' world as these two terms refer to the rural folk and dwellers of the wild respectively.

There are many instances where organized religious belief systems while moving across the globe have often completely destroyed traditional values. There are instances of religious change or conflict leading to the destruction of sacred groves. Many groves are suggested to have been destroyed by the Israelites during their occupation of Cannan. The local inhabitants were instructed to cut down and burn the groves. When Christianity moved into Europe groves and the sacred sites of the pagan and the heathen were eliminated. But in the Indian context, right through the Vedic times human beings lived in harmony with their rich and varied cultural traditions and nature and natural resources around. People of the Vedic time talked of the 'Cosmic tree' which was believed as the 'Tree of Life' and embraces the entire Universe. It was the symbolic power of unification of the whole Universe. Hence, environmental awareness is related to human values and knowledge. Human values are related to the value education. The meaning of value education has several implications such as to live life well, to find happiness and to make others happy. Knowledge is the fruit of experience which is the sensation of the individual and individual experience is an internal happening and is the function of awareness. This awareness identifies and clarifies human values to keep a relationship and order with nature and environment which is very much necessary for human sustainability.

Conclusion

The incidents and descriptions to be found in Katha-Ramayana by Chakravarty Raja Gopalachari lead to the conclusion that nature was a part of Indian life and living. The relationship between man and nature was symbiotic and not exploitative and suppressive. Ancient Indian literature and culture had respect for nature, forest, birds, animals and thus to the whole surrounding. The chemistry of nature was known to people. The river and water had an important part in ancient Indian civilization which was reflected in literature. Nature was the place for living to get solace, peace and to acquire knowledge. The torture on mankind by ashurashs was reflected on the death and lifelessness of nature as man and nature are complementary to each other. Human interaction and relationships with nature are symbiotic rather than dialectical and oppressive. Ancient Indian literature is a reflection of human relation with nature for human sustainability as a whole. The ancient Indian literature acknowledges the nature and natural objects.

References

- Harrison Robert Pogue, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Purohit, S. S. et al., *Environmental Sciences*, India: Agrobios, 2004.
- Ramakrishnan, P.S. *The Cultural Cradle of Biodiversity*, New Delhi: National book Trust, India, 2008.
- Saikia, Pradeep, (Trans.) *Katha-Ramayana* (origin: *Ramayana*, by Chakravarty Raja Gopalachari) Dibrugarh: Banalata, 2002.
- Shrivastava, K.K. *Environmental Education*, New Delhi: Kanishka Publishers, Distributors, 2004.
- Waugh, Patricia (Ed.), *Literary Theory and Criticism*, New Delhi: OUP, 2006.