



Research Article

Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics: Toward an Indigenous Framework of Ecological Consciousness in The Valmiki Ramayana: A Qualitative Ecocritical Study Based on Bibek Debroy's 2017 Translation

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Abstract

Ecological crises have multiple dimensions including technological and political, but they also involve values, social relations, and ethical imagination. This research considers the cultural and ethical aspects of the ecological problems of our time, within the framework of the Valmiki Ramayana, by exploring Sacred Ecology, Dharmic Ethics, and Ecological Consciousness. The main text is Bibek Debroy's 2017 English translation of the Baroda Critical Edition. I carried out a purposeful selection of passages from the Bāla, Ayodhyā, Aranya, Kiṣkindhā, and Sundara Kāṇḍas, and subjected them to close reading, thematic analysis, cross-episode comparison, and conceptual synthesis. The analysis was restricted to four ecological domains: forests and woodlands, rivers and waterways, non-human beings, and sacred landscapes. This research indicates that Sacred Ecology assigns moral and spiritual value to non-human beings, and Dharmic Ethics provides a framework of restraint, reciprocity, compassion, care, and protection, and provides an accountable social-political order. Ecological Consciousness is the integration of the two. This research provides a unique contribution to the Environmental Humanities by offering an indigenous framework that negotiates context specific ethical notions with ecocriticism without assuming that sacredness by itself is sufficient evidence of conservation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ecological Crisis and the Environmental Humanities

Climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, pollution, and extractive development have produced interlocking ecological pressures that cannot be addressed by technical intervention alone. The IPCC identifies human activity as the dominant cause of recent warming, while the IPBES global assessment shows that land-use change, direct exploitation, climate change, pollution, and invasive species interact to accelerate biodiversity decline (IPCC, 2023; IPBES, 2019). The Food and Agriculture Organization likewise reports continuing pressure on the world's forests despite a slower rate of net forest loss (FAO, 2025). These assessments establish the material urgency of ecological crisis, but they also expose a crisis of valuation: which beings and places are considered worthy of care, what forms of use are treated as legitimate, and what narratives make restraint or domination appear reasonable.

Environmental Humanities addresses precisely this cultural and ethical dimension by bringing literature, history, religion, philosophy, and the arts into conversation with environmental problems. Rather than treating the more-than-human world as scenery, the field asks how narratives distribute agency, value, vulnerability, and responsibility. Recent work on Environmental Humanities in India has strengthened the case for approaches that place globally influential theories in dialogue with culturally located archives and knowledge traditions instead of assuming that one theoretical vocabulary is universally sufficient (Biswas, 2025). The Valmiki Ramayana is especially productive for such inquiry because its forests, rivers, animals, mountains, and hermitages repeatedly shape movement, refuge, grief, obligation, and political authority. The ecological question therefore arises from the narrative itself: how does the epic make the more-than-human world morally meaningful, and how does that valuation affect conduct?

1.2 Positioning the Valmiki Ramayana

The Valmiki Ramayana covers a number of important topics such as dharma, kingship, exile, and devotion. However, the ecological settings of the Valmiki Ramayana are structurally important and should not be overlooked. Different types of ecosystems can be seen to provide different types of environments and vulnerabilities. Rivers show people depending on and crossing things that provide a passage. Continuity of things can be preserved by mountains despite changes in politics. The ethical discipline of different types of people and societies can be seen through different types of hermitages. Nonhuman beings can be seen expressing their feelings of grief and protection of people. The movement from Ayodhya to the wilderness is more than the relocation of space. It takes the protagonists away from the royal courts and places them among ecosystems whose demands cannot be restricted to the palace and kingship. The environmental relation becomes part of the narrative's moral testing and places the environments as an ethical teacher.

The abbreviation 'VR' is used in this study for the Valmiki Ramayana. Episodes are referenced by 'kāṇḍa' and 'sarga' and ranges are provided when necessary. This makes references constant in different versions and media of Debroy's

translation. Debroy's translation of 2017 was adopted because it follows the Baroda Critical Edition and retains the same chapter structure that aids comparison of episodes. This also ensures that the limits of evidence provided by the selected translation are not exceeded. This means that important Sanskrit words were retained in the translation. However, this study does not examine Debroy's translation of the Sanskrit passages of the Valmiki Ramayana with the intent of providing a philological analysis.

1.3 Research Gap, Question, and Objectives

Ecological interpretations of the Ramayana are becoming more common. Earlier analyses recognized the role of environmental descriptions and ecological knowledge (Roy, 2005; Pokharel, 2019), and later analyses described aesthetic and moral interpretations of ecological integrity, eco-ethics, eco-dharma, and sacred ecoscapes (Dwivedi & Verma, 2022; Verma & Dwivedi, 2023; Kunnathu & Bhuvaneswari, 2025; Prabhakaran & Mukherjee, 2025). All these analyses show that ecological values can be found in the epic. They tend to focus more on particular motifs or general ecological theological claims than on the process by which a sacred value is transformed into a local ethical practice within a spatiotemporal framework. The actual problem that remains unanswered is less whether the epic can be read ecologically and more how different approaches and frameworks for valuation, ethics, and obligation that are embodied in the epic can be differentiated and demonstrated to interrelate.

This gap leads to the central research question: How do Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics combine in the Valmiki Ramayana to create a culturally bound Ecological Consciousness? This analysis will show how, first, forests, rivers, nonhuman beings, and sacred lands are assigned relational, ethical, and spiritual values; second, how restraint, reciprocity, compassion, responsibility, hospitality, protection, and restrained power govern behavior in those relationships; and third, how recurring conjunctions and tensions between values and actions result in different ecological outlooks. These analytical goals are incorporated into the close reading as opposed to being handled as proposal-type goals detached from the main line of reasoning.

1.4 Thesis, Scope, and Contribution

According to the article, Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics share a relationship where they are independent but also interdependent. Sacred Ecology consists of the ontological and value aspects. It describes a plane where rivers, forests, animals, mountains, and other places can have a relational, intrinsic, cultural, or spiritual significance that goes beyond a world that is useful. Dharmic Ethics consists of the normative and practical aspects. It describes the responsibilities that agents have regarding the valued world, which include restraint, reciprocity, compassion, hospitality, protection, and the responsible use of power. Ecological Consciousness is the integration of these two aspects. In this regard, a river is not ecologically important simply because it is appreciated. Importance is achieved when appreciation changes the attitude and the manner in which the river is approached, used, passed,

or appreciated. In the same way, a forest is ethically important when the appreciation is combined with restraint, and a nonhuman being is important when the narrative has the appreciation, obligation, and the presence of a reciprocal relationship.

The contribution is both interpretive and theoretical. Interpretively, the study looks at an intentional episode corpus from the Bāla, Ayodhyā, Aranya, Kiṣkindhā, and Sundara Kāṇḍas, and treats ecological imagery as more than just an illustration. Theoretically, it provides a model that differentiates ontology, normativity, and lived orientation while keeping them connected. The use of 'indigenous' is limited and situated: the model is built from the categories and narrative relationships found in the South Asian textual tradition and not from the idea that Indian culture is environmentally uniform, ahistorical, or free from ecological inconsistencies. In this regard, the model seeks to contribute to the Environmental Humanities by placing culturally specific ethical discourses in confrontation with ecocriticism, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, Material Ecocriticism, and Sacred Ecology, while staying within the historical and interpretive constraints of a literary approach.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities

Ecocriticism gives a set of keywords to address how literary texts represent environments and what ethical weight to give these representations. Buell (1995) gave criteria for identifying the non-human environment beyond a frame and Garrard (2012) demonstrated how wilderness, dwelling, and apocalypse tropes govern environmental discourse. When the Valmiki Ramayana is approached through these methods, the forest can be understood not as a singular symbol, but as a narrative that is flexible, such as refuge and danger, abundance and discipline, ascetic space and political conflict. Where these methods excel is in showing that environmental meaning is created through narrative; where they fall short for this study is that they do not explain the epic's culturally specific lexicon of sacred value and dharmic obligation on their own.

Multispecies Studies and Material Ecocriticism extend these ideas by rejecting the notion that agency is solely the preserve of human characters. Iovino and Oppermann (2012) consider bodies, substances, and landscapes as part of a material-semiotic loop, while van Dooren et al. (2016) prioritize forms of care that are aligned to the diverse lives and capacities of nonhuman beings. These methods make it clear why Jatayu, Hanuman, rivers, and forests should not be viewed as allegories. Agency, however, should not be the sole basis for an ethical framework; a narrative can give an entity agency without describing why it should be esteemed or what is entailed by this esteem.

The marginal Environmental Humanities emphasizes the problems of inequality and environmental justice that are obscured by celebratory readings of nature and complicates the celebrated understanding of nature even further. Heise (2008) provides examples to support the need to relate local attachment to the framework of the planet, while Nixon (2011) supports the idea of environmental harm being gradual and suffering and environmental violence being politically and legally concealed.

For South Asian studies, both Rahman (2021) and Biswas (2025) aim for theoretical plurality and culturally relative analysis in preference to the unquestioning acceptance of Euro-American models. Taken as one coherent whole, this corpus of literature provides some crucial elementary tools of analysis with regards to representation and agency, along with scale and justice, and also poses the challenge of how the classical South Asian narrative would relate ontological valuation to actual practice. This is the gap this framework attempts to fill.

2.2 Limits of External Theoretical Application

External environmental theories enhance understanding of the epic but are not covered as exhaustive interpretive keys, unlike other theories presented. Deep Ecology emphasizes intrinsic value, interdependence and an expansive ecological self (Næss, 1973) which corresponds to the study's rejection of the more-than-human world being relegated to mere instrumental use. However, this theory's broader philosophical language does not provide for the contextual and role-based nature of dharma. Ecofeminism, particularly Plumwood's critique of mastery, is helpful in bringing to light the structures that link the domination of nature with other forms of social domination (Plumwood, 2002). This study, however, does not build a gendered ecological ethics where the text provides no evidence, and rather, treats gender, power, and violence as the limits of the framework rather than being resolved within it.

Material Ecocriticism is closer to the current model in the recognition of non-human agency and of the narrative power of matter, but mostly accounts for the participation in meaning rather than tracing the specific movement from sacred valuation to ethical obligation. Berkes's Sacred Ecology, on the other hand, incorporates ecological knowledge, practice, belief and ecological institutions (Berkes, 2012). This integration is a conceptually helpful framework. Unfortunately, Berkes formulated this notion in relation to living knowledge systems of resource management, whereas the present study deals with literature. Consequently, the relational approach is taken from this theory, without claiming that the Ramayana describes a complete historical system of environmental management.

This comparative lesson is both methodological and theoretical. Deep Ecology helps test claims about intrinsic value; Ecofeminism reveals the risk of romanticizing hierarchy and mastery; Material Ecocriticism focuses more sharply on more-than-human agency; and Berkes clarifies the connection between value, practice, knowledge, and place. Their combined contribution is most effective when used in dialogue. So, the current research keeps these theories in place as comparative frames while allowing the epic's own ethical and cosmological categories to structure the main point.

2.3 Sacred Ecology, Religion and Ecology, and Ramayana Studies

Berkes (2012) notes that Sacred Ecology integrates ecological knowledge, practice, and spirituality, as well as social and institutional systems and relationships with place. For the purposes of this literary analysis, the most flexible component is that ecological knowledge has a cognitive aspect that is embedded within attitudes and practices. This study refines that

lens to a value and ontological category that can be illustrated through literary analysis of reverence toward rivers, the moral relevance of forests, the perseverance of mountains and hermitages, and the activities of non-human entities. This refinement is purposely narrow. Sacredness may produce affection, memory, or accountability, but sacredness cannot function as a demonstrated case of sustainable use or a safeguard against the degradation of the environment.

This is supported by the religion-and-ecology scholarship. For example, Sherma (2021) relational ecological perspectives in early Hinduism and Jenkins et al. (2018) argue that religious perspectives of the world can inform the value of and concern for the environment, though not necessarily dictate the outcome. This is particularly relevant to the study and the attachment to the Yamuna (Haberman, 2006), which demonstrates that a deeply held sacred attachment is possible, even in the presence of high levels of pollution. This body of work is genuinely valuable for its focus on the interrelatedness of cosmology and ritual, and value. However, it often assumes that reverence and practice form an uninterrupted ethical continuum, which is not warranted, and must be tested in the context of the narrative.

Scholars engaged in the study of the ecological dimensions of the Ramayana have transitioned from the description of the environment to the analysis of eco-ethics. Roy (2005) and Pokharel (2019) have contributed to this body of research by

identifying ecological dimensions and ecological awareness, respectively. Dwivedi and Verma (2022) have drawn the connection between ecological integrity and biodiversity, and Verma and Dwivedi (2023) have provided a theory of eco-aesthetics of ethical care in the Anthropocene. Finally, Kunnathu and Bhuvaneswari (2025) and Prabhakaran and Mukherjee (2025) have employed eco-dharma and Hindu eco-praxis and sacred ecoscapes, respectively, to offer insights on the ecological dimensions of the Ramayana. Scholars of the Ramayana have established ecological awareness and presented eco-ethical elements. The contribution of this school of thought has been puzzling construction. However, their breadth has the potential to lose discrimination among the value of the sacred, ethics, culture, and sustainability. This study proposes a solution to this problem by separating the layers and defining them before assessing the relationships that exist between them. In the three streams of literature referenced in this article, a consistent pattern can be observed. The presence of a particular ecology of representation and imagination in ecocritical literatures, distributed agency in the multispecies and materials literatures, sacred valuation and practice within religion and ecology, and eco-awareness and eco-ethics in the Ramayana, is explained. Ecological Consciousness is the lived or interpreted orientation that occurs when the ontological question (what is valued) and the normative question (what ought the agents to respond) are answered. This synthesis demonstrates the need addressed by this article. It is summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: Critical synthesis of literature streams and the research gap

Literature stream	Established contribution	Limitation/gap addressed by this study
Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities	Explains representation, place, scale, environmental imagination, and justice.	Requires a culturally situated account of how value becomes obligation in the epic.
Material Ecocriticism and multispecies studies	Extends agency and ethical attention beyond exclusively human subjects.	Agency alone does not explain sacred valuation or the norms governing response.
Deep Ecology and Ecofeminism	Foreground intrinsic value, interdependence, anti-dualism, and critiques of mastery.	Universal or external categories can flatten dharmic contextuality and internal tensions.
Sacred Ecology and religion-and-ecology scholarship	Links ecology with spirituality, knowledge, practice, institutions, and place.	Sacredness must not be equated automatically with conservation or sustainable practice.
Ramayana and eco-dharma scholarship	Establishes ecological awareness, eco-aesthetics, eco-ethics, eco-dharma, and sacred ecoscapes in the epic.	Needs an episode-bounded mechanism that separates sacred valuation, ethical practice, and resulting Ecological Consciousness.

The synthesis shows how the article adds to existing scholarship without overwriting it. The framework relies on ecocriticism for matters of representation, on Material Ecocriticism and multispecies studies for matters of agency, on comparative environmental theory for critical scrutiny, and on Sacred Ecology and religion-and-ecology scholarship for the relation of value to practice. Its main innovation is more limited: in the case of certain episodes of the Valmiki Ramayana, Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics can be analyzed apart and then seen as an interrelated pair that can, at times, generate, define, or even fail to generate Ecological Consciousness.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Sacred Ecology

The ontological and value dimension of the framework considers the world depicted in a narrative and the types of

values the world can bear prior to considerations of proper behavior. In this respect, Sacred Ecology is interested in the treatment of rivers as recipients of invocations or expressions of gratitude; the moral space of forests as opposed to empty wilderness; the memory and obligation carried by mountains and hermitages; and the treatment of nonhuman entities as beings capable of judgment, suffering, care, and/or loyalty. Sacred Ecology uses the term 'sacred' in a more substantive way as a mode of appreciation of a being or place that is related to, or has, value that goes beyond cultural and utilitarian uses, and extends beyond the realm of human relations.

The usage of Sacred Ecology here is slightly different and perhaps even more restricted than that of Berkes (2012). Berkes connects knowledge, practice, belief, and institutions in living socio-ecological systems to place; the current study takes the relational value and applies it to literature. Therefore, the Valmiki Ramayana is not posited to illustrate a complete

traditional ecological knowledge framework of a historical system. Rather, it offers a restrained way to trace the ontological limitations of ecological responsibility that can be articulated within the confines of literature.

3.2 Dharmic Ethics

Dharmic Ethics focuses on the prescriptive and practice-related dimension. It essentially asks, how should participants act once they are positioned within a world of relationships and obligations? The events under review involve the norms of restraint, reciprocity, compassion, responsibility, hospitality, protection, fidelity to legitimate obligations, and judicious use of power. Dharma is a relational and contextual concept. It does not represent a single environmental norm. It is defined by role, promise, vulnerability, consequence and responsibility. This differentiation is valid since the epic is replete with examples of care and violence. A framework based on Dharmic Ethics cannot be limited to Dharma and ahimsa (non-violence) since it focuses on the justification, limits, consequences, and accountability of action.

Normativity, therefore, lies between perception and conclusion. Although sacred valuation may extend the realm of moral concern, it becomes meaningful and ecologically important only when it constrains or steers actions. Restraint is the limit of consumption and coercion. Dependence and exchange constitute reciprocity. The extension of concern to vulnerable lives is compassion. Protection links power and responsibility. Proportional use of power and firm action are judged. These categories do not eliminate conflict. They make conflict visible. Conflict, therefore, should be judged to see if value is sustained, qualified, or contradicted.

3.3 Ecological Consciousness

Ecological Consciousness begins at the intersection of Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics. Because of this, it's neither a synonym for sacredness nor a third list of environmental values. It begins at the cognitive level with the recognition that life in the human sphere is a relationship woven across space, time, and interdependent ecological networks. From an ethical standpoint, it is the responsibility to restrain and sustain the relationship. At the narrative level, there are practices such as disciplined dwelling, depending on rivers, acknowledging a multispecies duty, establishing reciprocal alliances, and preserving memory of nonhuman suffering.

Why does this matter? The movement from value to consequence is not always clear. A place can be revered, yet still be harmed. There are agents who recognize the vulnerability of a situation, yet still act in a way that is disproportionate to the given circumstances. Memories of sacred landscapes do not always ensure ecological protection. Ecological Consciousness is strongest when we are able to integrate all three components [value, act, result] into a coherent whole and weakest when the three fail to support one another. This approach to the framework means that it accounts for counter-examples rather than automatically viewing all sacred things as environmental virtues.

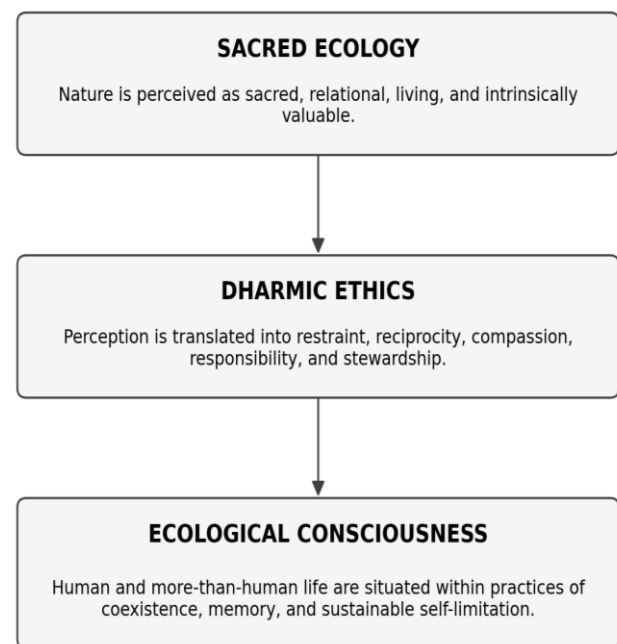


Figure 1: Integrated hierarchical model of Ecological Consciousness

Explanation. Figure 1 illustrates a directional, but non-automatic relationship among the three levels. Sacred Ecology represents the ontological, value level, and identifies a morally appreciative, relational, and more-than-human world. Dharmic Ethics represents the normative, practical level, and articulates the recognition within the levels through restraint and reciprocity, compassion and responsibility, and protection and hospitality, as well as the exercise and restraint of power. Ecological Consciousness is the lived and interpretive orientation that is the outcome of valuation and practice, and is characterized by coexistence and self-limitation, as well as memory and accountable action. The arrows represent translation rather than the necessity of the relationship among the levels. Analytically important gaps, or tensions, in the framework, such as protection becoming excessive force, or restraint becoming a complete lack of protection, denote the limitations within the system. The originality of this framework is that rather than treating Sacred Ecology, Dharmic Ethics, and Ecological Consciousness as synonymous concepts, it makes this definition and relationship hierarchy an explicit and testable feature of the system.

3.4 Comparative Positioning and Analytical Propositions

The framework enters a critical dialogue with four established approaches. Deep Ecology shares its concern with intrinsic value and interdependence, but the present model avoids assuming biospheric egalitarianism as a universal principle and instead derives normative obligations from the epic's contextual dharmic relations (Næss, 1973). Ecofeminism contributes a critique of dualism and mastery that is essential for testing whether appeals to order or protection conceal hierarchy or domination (Plumwood, 2002); however, the model does not claim to resolve gendered power relations that require separate analysis. Material Ecocriticism helps identify the agency of

bodies, animals, rivers, and landscapes, yet the present framework adds the question of how agency is valued and what ethical response follows (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012). Berkes (2012) offers the closest structural parallel by joining knowledge, belief, practice, and place, but the current study is a literary model rather than an ethnographic account of a living resource-management system.

These comparisons generated four analytical propositions for the close reading. First, sacred valuation expands the moral salience of a place or being but is insufficient by itself. Second, Dharmic Ethics mediates valuation through practices that can restrain, redirect, or justify action. Third, Ecological Consciousness appears where the same relation between value and responsible conduct recurs across different ecological domains without erasing their differences. Fourth, counter-examples—violence, disturbance, failed restraint, or the gap between reverence and protection—are necessary tests of the model rather than exceptions to be ignored. These propositions convert the conceptual hierarchy into a transparent analytical framework for the episode-based method described below.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design and Primary Text

Qualitative interpretive textual analysis was used in this study combining close reading, thematic coding, comparison across episodes, and conceptual synthesis. The primary text was Bibek Debroy's 2017 English translation of the Valmiki Ramayana. The Valmiki Ramayana contains stable structure in its episodes, and this translation has reference to kāṇḍa-sarga structure. The

unit of analysis was a complete episode, wherein an ecological entity or place is represented or given value; and acted upon or made consequential. Close reading was performed while analyzing the order of episodes, descriptions, agency, speech, setting, responses, and consequences. During Close reading, care was taken while using Sanskrit-derived concepts (i.e. dharma or ahimsā) to make sure they were used as Debroy had translated them and with scholarship, and no philological emendation was made.

4.2 Episode Selection and Corpus

Episode selection was purposive instead of exhaustive. A passage was included in the corpus when it met at least two out of the three criteria. The first criterion was the presence of a forest, river, nonhuman being, mountain, hermitage, or other ecological elements where there was a salient narrative. The next criterion was the episode strategically attributed value, agency, vulnerability, dependence, or obligation to that entity or place. Last, the episode includes an action, response, or a violation that creates a consequence where one or both principles of Sacred Ecology or Dharmic Ethics are challenged. In order to avoid deriving the framework from a single motif, the corpus was balanced across different ecological domains. However, more emphasis was given to exile episodes because they more extensively place political and ethical identity within the domain of forest, riverine, and hermitage settings. The Jatayu and Hanuman episodes offered nonhuman agency in a more disciplined and disruptive fashion, respectively.

Table 2: Purposive episode corpus and analytical function

Textual domain	Principal episodes	Analytical purpose
Forests	Chitrakuta; Dandakaranya (VR 2.54–56; 3.1, 3.6, 3.8–9)	Tests disciplined dwelling, guardianship, biodiversity, conflict, and the limits of protective power.
Rivers	Krauñcha/Tamasa; Sarayu; Ganga; Yamuna (VR 1.2; 1.5–6; 2.45–46; 2.50–52; 2.55; 2.60)	Tests reverence, grief, dependence, transition, reciprocity, and the distinction between sacredness and use.
Nonhuman beings	Krauñcha birds; Jatayu; Hanuman; vanaras (VR 1.2; 3.13, 3.48–50, 3.63–64; 4.3–5, 4.65–67; 5.1–2, 5.12–15)	Tests agency, dignity, duty, grief, cooperation, disciplined power, and multispecies obligation.
Landscapes	Chitrakuta; mountains; hermitages (VR 2.54; 2.117–119; 3.11–13)	Tests ecological memory, continuity, hospitality, place-based practice, and institutionalized restraint.
Synthesis	Cross-domain comparison	Tests whether ontological valuation and normative practice recur without collapsing domain-specific differences.

Explanation. The corpus is purposive rather than exhaustive. The episodes chosen were because they show ecological value and ethical response together, and, overall, provide variation in location, species, action, vulnerability, and power. This setup supports comparison while avoiding making the claim that the selected passages stand for every ecological relation in the Valmiki Ramayana.

4.3 Close Reading, Coding, and Thematic Categorisation

The analytical procedure was divided into six steps. The first step was to read the selected episodes in their immediate context, identify the environmental setting, represented entity, and articulate the agency of the narrative as well as the expressed human or non-human response. The second step was

to assign first-cycle descriptive codes to the recurrent features of respect, sacrality, relationality, dwelling, grief, hospitality, protection, restraint, violence, gratitude, cooperation, memory, and consequence. The third step was to create two higher-order categories: Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics. The fourth step was to code the problematic passages that challenged the theory including violence, disturbance, lack of restraint, and the absence of protective action, among others, as counter-evidence, rather than discard them. The fifth step was to systematically compare the episodes within and across the four ecological domains to bring out recurrent patterns and the differences that were unique to the domains. The sixth and final step was to use the conceptual framework to articulate the emergence of Ecological Consciousness as a narrative and lived

reality, and to explain when the gap between value and practice remained.

4.4 Analytical Framework, Trustworthiness, and Limitations

Cross-episode comparisons utilized the same sequence for every domain: representation → assigned value → demanded or chosen action → consequence → ecological implication. Using this design allowed the framework to be ‘auditable’ and avoided treating ‘sacred descriptions’ automatically as ‘ethical evidence.’ Trustworthiness strengthened through VR episode references, multiple readings of passages in context, a stable definition for the three conceptual levels, comparison with existing scholarship, and attention to cases involving negative or friction-producing values. Given the nature of the study as an interpretation rather than a statistical approach, reliability was understood as a clear and consistent procedure rather than as literal copying or agreement of interpreters.

There are four main problems with the method. First, it is limited to Debroy’s English translation and thus lacks philological analysis of the Sanskrit original. Second, purposive selection of episodes gives depth but cannot justify claims of completeness. Third, the analytical categories of Sacred Ecology, Dharmic Ethics, and Ecological Consciousness used in this study are limited to describing the text and can not be presumed to be relevant to all Hindu traditions and past environmental interventions. Literary evidence describes an imagination of values and ethics, but cannot demonstrate real outcomes of conservation among ancient and contemporary people. For these reasons, the method is a good fit for the research question, since it avoids the conversion of literary interpretation to historical or empirical facts of environmental care.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Sacred Forests: Dwelling and Contested Guardianship

5.1.1 Chitrakuta: Disciplined Dwelling

Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana remain immersed in culture, rather than being placed in an empty or morally neutral wilderness, when they are exiled. Chitrakuta is a populated landscape of sages, animals, and trees, along with the paths and the practices of Chitrakuta. The narrative adjusts the aspects of political identity rather than eliminating politics. Royal privilege is replaced by the disciplined routines and local knowledge of the forest (VR 2.54–56). As perceived in this study, the Ecology of the Sacred is evident in Chitrakuta’s pre-existing value. Chitrakuta is significant in its own right, and the exiles come to be understood by their behavior as they arrive where there is always more than the immediate need.

In this regard, the construction of a hermitage is of great value. As with shelter, the construction of a hermitage changes the land, and therefore the construction of the hermitage cannot be seen as “leaving nature untouched.” Rather, the construction of the hermitage is of great value because of its size and purpose, along with the adaptation of the case. Lakshmana constructs a hermitage suitable for exile, rather than duplicate the city of Ayodhya. Therefore, Dharmic Ethics are evident in the self-

restraint inherent in inhabiting: dwelling is allowed, but possession is not treated as a limitless right. Ecological Consciousness is evident in the convergence of a valued forest and a practice of inhabiting that entails reduced consumption and bodily vulnerability.

It is necessary to consider a counter-reading. The hermitage could be seen primarily as an ascetic and storytelling convention, rather than a deliberate ecological practice. That does not disprove the ecocritical claim. The analysis does not regard the shelter as an example of historical sustainability. It considers the episode as a literary test of how authority is rebalanced when human life needs to fit into a more-than-human world. This distinction maintains the interpretation in the Environmental Humanities: the text offers an ethical imagination of dwelling, not an archaeological account of low-impact living.

5.1.2 Dandakaranya: Biodiversity and Contested Guardianship

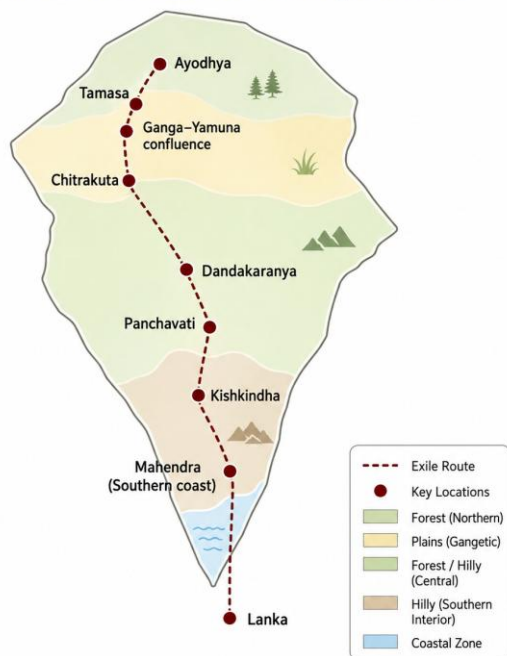
Dandakaranya adds layers of complexity to the morals of forest dwelling. Its hermitages along with animals, ponds, groves, and dangers offer a diverse and complex moral world, rather than a singular symbol of purity or danger (VR 3.1, 3.6). When the sages ask for help, the request places Rama in that world as a guardian responding to a need, and not as a ruler granting possession to a territory. Sacred Ecology treats the forest as a field of relations that is already inhabited, while Dharmic Ethics asks how protective measures should be taken within that field. Sita raises the question in her warning. In Debroy’s Critical Edition, her utterance is in VR 3.8, and Rama’s response is in VR 3.9. Sita says being near weapons will corrupt one’s morals (Debroy, 2017b, VR 3.8), and the meaning is not a prohibition of all violence. Sita identifies the danger as being the habituation of violence. An instrument that was at first carried for protection can be transformed into an instrument of aggressive behavior and can enlarge the realm of tolerated violence. Thus, Dharmic Ethics is a means of regulating and balancing the exercise of violence rather than a synonym for ahimsā (non-violence).

Rama’s answer is also significant since he evokes his pledge to those who begged for aid. The two alternatives present a genuine ethical dilemma: if force is refused, the vulnerable petitioners may be abandoned, and if force is accepted, the protector may be distorted. Here, Ecological Consciousness commands not when the dispute is resolved, but when the costs of protection are kept in the story. This makes readings that treat the Ramayana chiefly as a repository of ecological balance more problematic. Verma and Dwivedi (2023) constructively place ecological ethics at the center of the epic. The care ethic is further qualified in the Dandakaranya section as being ethically problematic when mediated by coercive power.

Thus, the rakshasas should not be redefined by modern ecological classifications as “invasive species” or ecological outsiders. They are representatives of morals and politics in the epic’s conflict system. Literally to ecologize an enemy group would be to turn war into conservation, to collapse the three categories. The more justifiable judgment is more limited: the forest gives contested custodianship, and the Sacred Ecology-

Dharmic Ethics framework is helpful exactly for that it can trace a deficiency or surfeit in the passage from worth to deed.

Schematic Exile Route and Ecological Zones



Original schematic; locations are interpretive and not to scale.

Figure 2. Schematic exile route and ecological zones

Explanation. The route visualizes the narrative sequence used in the analysis and the changing ecological settings through which exile, dependence, guardianship, alliance, and search are interpreted. The transitions from Ayodhya and river crossings to Chitrakuta, Dandakaranya, Panchavati, Kishkindhā, the southern coast, and Lanka are analytical waypoints, not coordinates offered as proof of a historically recoverable route. Source note. Original schematic prepared for this manuscript from the sequence of selected episodes. Locations and ecological zones are interpretive, not to scale, and should not be read as archaeological, cartographic, or historical verification.

Read in this limited way, Figure 2 supports the argument that ecological setting is structurally consequential. Ethical demands change with place: river crossings foreground dependence and reciprocity, forest residence foregrounds restraint and guardianship, and the southern movement foregrounds alliance, mobility, and strategic power. The figure therefore maps changes in the problem of conduct rather than claiming geographical certainty.

5.2 Sacred Rivers: Toward a Relational Water Ethic

5.2.1 Tamasa and the Origin of Ethical-Poetic Consciousness

The Tamasa episode demonstrates ethical attention when water, animal life, grief, and poetic form intersect. At the riverbank, Valmiki sees bonded krauñchatas (Debroy's curlews), who, upon the male being killed, and the female's lamentation,

Valmiki is said to recognize this as adharma (Debroy, 2017a, VR 1.2). The sequence is significant. The observer becomes aware of the place by the suffering of the non-human. The non-human's suffering is kind of knitted to the observer by the effect of suffering, and a moral judgment is born. The riverbank is not just a landscape, but where the narrative ties environmental attention to the genesis of poetic form.

Within this framework, Sacred Ecology doesn't mandate that every natural being be elevated to divine status. The importance of the Tamasa scene lies in relational attentiveness. It incorporates the water, the forest, and the birds along with the human observer in a field of perception. Dharmic Ethics comes into play when grief is recognized as a proper response to adharma, and Ecological Consciousness is seen in the gesture of not treating the bird's suffering as ethically negligible. So, it widens the sphere of moral concern without saying the epic actually propounds the contemporary view of animal rights.

A different approach might prioritize the passage as an etiological account of the origins of Sanskrit epic poetry. This reading is not contradictory to the current argument and avoids overstating the case. The ecocritical importance of the passage is not about transforming the scene into an environmentalist position. It is about recognizing that the poetic origin story places nonhuman suffering as the event that fuses the moral and the aesthetic. More recent eco-aesthetic readings have also focused on the connection between literary structure and ecological concern (Verma & Dwivedi, 2023), while the current framework identifies the process as a shift from a relational perspective to an ethical standpoint.

5.2.2 Sarayu, Ganga, and Yamuna: Passage, Dependence, and Reciprocity

The other river episodes show how mechanism of grief extends to civic order, mobility, and dependence. The Sarayu is represented as Ayodhya's settlement and prosperity (VR 1.5-6). Instead of placing political order above all other considerations, it situates it in a water-dependent landscape. Later on, the Tamasa marks the threshold of the first night of exile (VR 2.45-46). Here, the riverine threshold is transformed into a narrative boundary of royal infrastructure and a more exposed way of life. So that is why Sacred Ecology is not just the name of some river and respect for it; it is the narrative acknowledgement of the co-location of politics and bodily life.

The Ganga crossing makes that dependence even more evident. Royal power cannot simply be crossed over the river. In order to cross, Guha's local knowledge, hospitality, a boat, and an appreciation of the river are required (VR 2.50-52). So that means the episode re-balances agency over relationship and material conditions. Dharmic Ethics appears as courteous dependence and reciprocity, rather than command, and Ecological Consciousness resides in the temporary suspension of personal rights, so that the prince is able to travel with movement that is possible only through a network he cannot control.

The Yamuna crossing adds practical vulnerability to sacred address. Exiles build a raft and paddle through the current (VR 2.55). Sita, meanwhile, addresses the river in a speech of hope and gratitude (VR 2.60). It is an anachronism to consider such

respect as evidence of ancient water quality management. Rather, its ethical relevance is more important. The river is viewed as more than a passageway, and the passage is not made solely as a means to an end. Rather, expectations of Dharmic Ethics are met through the humble and grateful respect of Sacred Ecology.

This qualification is particularly important when the conclusions are compared to more recent studies. Kunnathu and Bhuvaneswari (2025) emphasize eco-dharma and the contemporary importance of the Hindu ecological approach; while Prabhakaran and Mukherjee (2025), on the other hand, emphasize sacred ecoscapes and ecophilia and dharma. Our study shares their attention to relational value, but concepts sacredness as a moral importance hypothesis, rather than proof that an outcome will be sustained. Haberman's (2006) study of the Yamuna makes this distinction important; the presence of deep religious devotion combined with ecological degradation is a real possibility. It is only in such a context that a relational water ethic is meaningful, reverence will curb entitlement and be combined with a responsible practice.

5.3 Nonhuman Agency and Multispecies Duty

5.3.1 Jatayu: Interspecies Moral Duty, Grief, and Recognition

Jatayu is the clearest evidence of whether moral agency in the selected corpus is limited to human characters. When Rama meets him prior to Sita's abduction, Jatayu says he has a relation through friendship with Dasharatha and would defend Sita, if the brothers were not present (Debroy, 2017b, VR 3.13). Thus, his importance is not limited to the combat that follows; the bird is introduced in the narrative participating in a system of promises, hospitalities, and cares. Sacred Ecology is present in the willingness of the narrative to bestow upon a nonhuman being memory, deliberation, loyalty, and vulnerability, as well as a sense of responsibility.

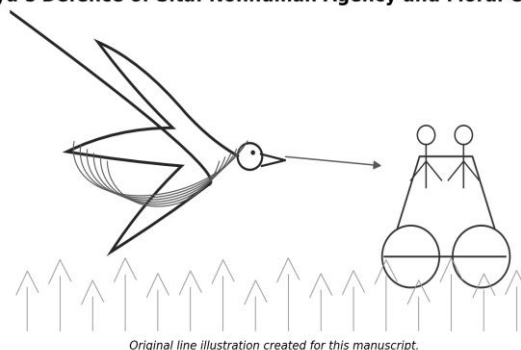
During the abduction, Jatayu fights with and argues against Ravana (VR 3.48-50). Here, we have not just an opinion on the wrongness of abducting Sita, but also an act of interfering with Ravana's abduction even though Jatayu knows he would likely lose the fight. This undoubtedly draws our attention to the same abducting of Sita. From the viewpoint of Material Ecocriticism, non-human bodies can participate in the causality of the narrative, and there are many attentive forms of engagement with differentiated lives, especially from the standpoint of multispecies studies (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012; van Dooren et al. 2016). This framework asks, what does the recognition of this agency imply in terms of moral obligations? For Jatayu, this is evident in his protective role rather than serving as a symbol.

Rama's answer finishes the reciprocal pattern. In VR 3.63-64, Rama moves from his initial mistaken identity of the wounded eagle to embrace, grief, recognition of Jatayu's sacrifice, and the funerary rites. Although this reciprocity is asymmetrical, when Rama mourns and performs funeral rites for Jatayu, he honors his social obligation. This shows that when Rama recognizes Jatayu's sacrifice, he extends his sense of community beyond his social obligation. This also demonstrates Rama's recognition to mourn. Ecological Consciousness is not

the sentimental identification of Rama with an animal. Instead, this narrative expansion of Rama's community demonstrates where Rama has a sense of obligation and grief.

A counterargument must be kept in mind. Although Jatayu is a speaking epic character with lineage and politics, he cannot be viewed as a zoologically realistic bird or as a direct example of historical interspecies ethics. The episode's ecology is more about literature. The story critiques a species-exclusive approach to moral personhood by making a non-human necessary for justice and memory, and grief. This narrower point acknowledges the context of the episode while still preserving the episode's capacity to contribute to Environmental Humanities.

Jatayu's Defence of Sita: Nonhuman Agency and Moral Courage



Original line illustration created for this manuscript.

Figure 3. Jatayu's defense of Sita: Nonhuman agency and moral courage

Explanation. The image depicts the concept that is the main concern of the Jatayu episode, which is a non-human agent confronts coercive human-like agency. In the image, this is expressed as a test of obligation rather than a domain of moral concern. The image is not intended to be a reconstruction of the episode or to reflect on the history of the image.

Source note. Original line illustration created for this manuscript.

5.3.2 Hanuman and Disciplined, Situational Power

Hanuman provides us with a unique case of nonhuman agency because his defining trait is not vulnerability, but capacity. In the first instance of his encounter with Rama and Lakshmana in Kişkindhā, his strategy involves interpretation, speech, concealment, and diplomacy before the deployment of force (VR 4.3-5). In the memory of the vanara group, when they were about to cross the ocean, they exhibited capacity and strength at the individual level, and now that was incorporated in the group's memory and mission (VR 4.65-67). In this context, sacred ecology does not equate physical strength with the sacred. It means that a more-than-human agent is represented with differentiated capacities, which can be employed with discretion.

The crossing of the ocean to Lanka describes the self-disciplining of capacity. Before intervening with physical strength, Hanuman maintains restraint and decides "let me see first Janaka's daughter" (Debroy, 2017b, VR 5.2). His strength is not converted to attack. Dharmic ethics means here that

intelligence is the governor of strength, and force is employed upon the objectives of the mission in a timely manner. Ecological consciousness does not mean that Hanuman is harmless to the environment; it rather means that power is accountable to the purpose and related to the consequences.

This distinction also makes sure that the category of "nonhuman agency" won't be celebrated by default. Hanuman's agency matters ethically because it is both planned and appropriate. The ability to cover distances, shift shape, pull out, burn, trick, or battle doesn't have any inherent moral value. So, the framework checks if ability is limited by a proper duty and if its effects still match that duty. From this point of view, Hanuman offers a better measure of Dharmic Ethics than just a symbol of ecological balance would permit.

5.3.3 Disturbance, War, and the Vanara Alliance

The Sundara Kāṇḍa does not oversimplify Hanuman. It shows how reconnaissance became deliberate destruction of vegetation, combat, and eventually burning parts of Lanka. An ecocritical reading has to both acknowledge and not overlook these actions. It cannot place every act of wartime disruption in Lanka as an example of a generalized hatred of nature. The focus is on how the narrative distinguishes between observation, strategic restraint, retaliation, and escalation of destruction. This creates a paradox of Ecological Consciousness where disciplined power can exist along with episodes that have violent and destructive effects on the environment.

The alliance of vanaras is also best interpreted as a network of distinct capabilities rather than as a utopian "community of nature." The vanaras deliberate, compete, form political loyalties, collect and distribute information, explore and search the land, and participate in war. The vanaras are instrumental to the framework in that restoring Sita, who was abducted, necessitates agents whom a human-centered moral order would place outside the main political community. There is no wholesale peace or absence of conflict through multispecies participation as the alliance and mutual protection are rooted in war.

The twofold outcome of the theory is as follows. First, the epic places pyramidal agency across dimensions of the non-human realm. Second, this agency acquires moral value through discipline and purpose rather than through their non-human realm. This is evidenced through the characters Jatayu and Hanuman who prevent Sacred Ecology from becoming Romantic Naturalism: the more-than-human realm is characterized by judgment, intelligence, force, and conflict. It is also characterized by Dharmic Ethics.

5.4 Sacred Landscapes, Hermitages, and Ecological Memory

Ecological memory is used here in a literary and cultural sense. Places accumulate significance because meaning is anchored to them. Chitrakuta, for example, is associated with exile, renunciation, family relationships, grief, and temporary abode. Literal memory is not attributed to the mountains. The landscape has been transformed by persistent narratives and structures that adapt and preserve memory beyond the immediate context of the political crisis. Sacred Ecology

focuses on the importance afforded to places, while Dharmic Ethics focuses on the practices that affirm or challenge that value.

Hermitages provide an institutional framework for the relationship. Within particular landscapes, hospitality, learning, and austerity are intertwined with water and vegetation within the hermitages of Bharadvaja and Atri and Anasuya, as well as Agastya (VR 2.54; 2.117-119; 3.11-13). The ecological value of the hermitages is not dependent on the assumption that asceticism is, in itself, sustainable. It is dependent on the practice of repeated placement. Place-based practices create expectations of how travelers will be received and how needs will be circumscribed and located in the water and plant community. Ecological memory is expressed through social forms that are repeated, rather than preserved through a fixed sacred form.

Mountains further extend this argument by providing a temporal scale that is longer than human history. Chitrakuta, Rishyamuka, and Mahendra persist while political alliances change and individual lives pass through them. This contrast relativizes human authority. Landscapes are not backdrops onto which politics is played, but rather enduring conditions that offer movement, refuge, and memory. This does not provide literal legal or moral personhood to mountains. It identifies a strategy of placing human pursuits into larger spatial and temporal frameworks.

At this stage, the term indigenous needs to be used with care. Beggiora's (2025) recent work on ādivāsī epistemologies and the Indian Environmental Humanities is rooted in living communities, ethnographic realms, and specific indigenous ontologies. This paper does not associate the Valmiki Ramayana with these traditions or claim a ādivāsī authority for the classical literary tradition. "Indigenous" is employed to indicate a culturally embedded, text-derived lexicon that refuses to view Euro-American theory as the sole interpretive standard. This distinction is essential to keep sacred landscapes from devolving into a romanticizing or homogenizing framework.

5.5 Cross-Domain Synthesis and the Limits of the Indigenous Framework

The same three-level movement recurs in the forests, rivers and other nonhuman beings, and sacred landscapes around the world. This movement does not create identical outcomes, and it is noted in Sacred Ecology as having relationship, moral, cultural or spiritual value with a world beyond humans. Dharmic Ethics looks at how agents respond to this world with restraint, reciprocity, compassion, hospitality, and protection as well as disciplined power. Ecological Consciousness occurs when valuation changes behavior, and it is sustained through consequences, memory, or practice. The movement is directional, but not necessarily linear; sacred value can coexist with harm. Protective intention can become excessive.

This formulation outlines the place of this study in the current Ramayana scholarship. Verma and Dwivedi (2023) describe eco-aesthetics as a way of seeing ethical care. Kunnathu and Bhuvaneshwari (2025) connect eco-dharma directly with conservation and sustainable living. Prabhakaran and Mukherjee (2025) focus on sacred ecoscapes, dharma, and

ecophilia. This study does not deny any of these contributions. However, it sets more limits and separates valuation and obligation. This allows the framework to describe both the ecological recognition and the cases where respect, protection, and power do not maintain restraint.

The concept of indigenous is limited in this manner as well. It does not reflect a single, eternal Hindu view of the environment, nor does it simplify the diversity of Ramayana traditions that Richman (1991) has documented. It identifies a

specific theoretical construction located in a particular time and place, created from the chosen relationships in the text, and addressed to ecocriticism, multispecies studies, Sacred Ecology, and the Indian Environmental Humanities. What makes this concept interesting is that it allows us to translate ideas without replacing theories: external theories stay essential parts of the conversation, but the main categories of importance and duty are shaped by the ethical issues present in the narrative itself.

Table 3: Episode-to-framework analytical matrix

Domain	Sacred value / ontology	Restraint	Reciprocity	Compassion / duty	Ecological orientation
Forests	Inhabited moral space	Limited and adaptive dwelling; limits on force	Dependence on forest communities and local conditions	Protection under accountability	Disciplined dwelling / contested guardianship
Rivers	Life-giving and sacred-relational presence	Non-entitlement in use and passage	Gratitude, hospitality, acknowledged dependence	Attention to vulnerability and loss	Relational water ethic
Nonhuman beings	Moral salience and differentiated agency	Disciplined capacity	Alliance and exchanged protection	Grief, sacrifice, duty, and rites	Multispecies obligation
Landscapes and hermitages	Continuity, sacred association, and ecological memory	Self-limitation and continuity rather than erasure	Hospitality and transmission of practice	Care for place and inherited obligation	Place-based ethical memory

Explanation. This matrix is about interpretation, not statistics. It illustrates that the same conceptual structure can manifest differently in different ecological sectors. Sacred value identifies what is morally or culturally important; the middle columns provide examples of the practices through which that value may be institutionalized; and the last column names the ecological orientation that is manifest when that value is expressed and that practice is undertaken. The matrix also allows for failure: contested guardianship, destructive force, or reverence without responsible practice disrupts the progress toward Ecological Consciousness.

Source note. The author's analytical synthesis based on the purposive episode corpus described in Table 2.

5.6 Reading the Matrix

Matrix comparisons do not make domains interchangeable. Restraint, with respect to the non-human, requires the prudent use of capability. Restraint, in the case of woodland and hermitage, means preservation of the lineage and the inheritance of places. It means not retaining a blank slate to which each successive generation can do as it wishes. Restraint, as it relates to the psychology of the actors, also allows for the co-existence of ethics and the conditions in which they apply. Similar transformations occur in other domains. At Chitrakuta, we see reciprocity in the form of adaptation and hospitality. At the rivers, we find reciprocity in acknowledged dependence and grateful assistance. Among non-human actors, reciprocity manifests as alliance, information, and protection. In sacred landscapes, reciprocity manifests as obligation and the transmission of tradition. Duty and compassion are the bridges uniting affect and action. Jatayu's sacrifice is a transformation of duty into grief, Rama transformed grief into ritual, Hanuman's loyalty was transformed into strategy, and hospitality was transformed into practice at the hermitages.

The matrix helps address the principal theoretical challenge the literature review poses. Ecological Consciousness is not the appreciation of nature. It is strongest when perception, obligation, and consequence converge. It is weakest where sacredness is only rhetorical, the overabundance of power is unbound by responsibility, or where the ecological cost of a conflict is prioritized. The Matrix demonstrates the weight of the epic's narrative, and the breaks where it is not "environmentalist" without the need for evidence of a consistent or unequivocal concern for the environment.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

6.1 Contribution to Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities

The study develops a version of ecocriticism by linking environmental representation to ethical consequence. Ecocritical studies have emphasized the role of literature in constructing the environment, place, wilderness, dwelling, and crisis for readers. (Buell, 1995; Garrard, 2012). This study attempts to fill the gap by introducing a culturally relative hierarchy wherein representation assumes ethical import when Sacred Ecology expands the field of value, Dharmic Ethics determines that value, and Ecological Consciousness is the lived or interpretive focus of their conjunction. This limits the approach where description, sacredness, and sustainability become equivalent categories.

This approach also provides an advancement in both Material Ecocriticism and multispecies research by connecting distributed agency with evaluative standard. In this approach, Jatayu, Hanuman, rivers, forests, and other landscapes are important because they have the potential to change the narratives, but in and by themselves, agency alone does not answer the question of what is to be done about their relevance. The categories of reciprocity, restraint, compassion and

accountability answer this question. The approach is able to put a South Asian text in conversation with South Asian theory, and allocate each enough importance to sustain the dialogue (Iovino & Oppermann, 2012; van Dooren et al., 2016).

Contributions to Environmental Humanities from India span methodology and interpretation. Biswas (2025) advocates for a culturally contextualized and interdisciplinary approach, while Beggiora (2025) underscores the sophistication of indigenous epistemologies in the discourse on environment and India. To this, the present study keeps its usage of "indigenous" circumscribed. It neither posits that a classical Sanskrit epic bears knowledge of living *ādivāsī* systems nor endorses a singular Indian ecological ontology. Rather, it demonstrates how a localized lexicon can engage in a critical exchange with ecocriticism, while avoiding the risk of overgeneralization of civilizational values.

6.2 Contribution to Ramayana Studies

Studies of the Ramayana have advanced by going beyond the recognition of ecological themes to the cross-episodic analysis of how the environmental frame is, or is not, transformed into ethical practice. Exile is understood as a form of forest dwelling and re-education because one's political self is materially bound by the forests, rivers, and hermitages that host one. Jatayu broadens the community of duty and mourning. The restoration of dharma is dependent on the non-human agency of the vanaras, yet the involvement of the vanaras in the array of non-human agents also demonstrates the ecological enigma of war. Ethical memory is preserved in sacred landscapes, though there is no assurance of the same for ecological justice.

This method of interpretation does not replace previous ecologically based interpretations. Roy (2005) and Pokharel (2019) have emphasized the need for environmental dimensions and awareness; Dwivedi and Verma (2022) and Verma and Dwivedi (2023) have focused on aesthetic and eco-ethical interpretations; and recent works have emphasized eco-dharma and sacred ecoscapes (Kunnathu and Bhuvaneswari, 2025; Prabhakaran and Mukherjee, 2025). The major contribution of this paper is to separate the three concepts of sacred value, ethical imperative, and ecological frame as distinct yet related levels. This means that the presence of contradictory evidence is seen as part of the argument, rather than as a defect of the argument.

The study presents a clear outline of what it does not claim. It does not suggest that there is a single 'original' environmentalism in the epic, nor does it suggest that literary praise of ecological events means there was actual ancient ecological conservation; nor does it attempt to answer the problems of gender, caste, violence and plurality of Ramayana traditions. The main claim is that a limited reading of the epic illustrates that in some episodes, more-than-human value and responsibility are narratively significant.

6.3 Ethical and Sustainability Relevance with Safeguards

While there is not a lot of opportunity for framework transfer directly to policy, contemporary relevance lies in ethical imagination instead. Four particular orientations have interpretive value: non-entitlement to life-sustaining places and

waters; restraint with material and political power; reciprocity to human and more-than-human dependencies; and using force to provide protection or restoration when necessary. These orientations provide value to the discourse of sustainability by presenting the responsibility that accompanies the various technical decisions. They do not take the place of environmental science, law, public institutions, finance, or environmental justice.

The distinction between sacredness and sustainability provides the greatest protection. A community may revere a river and still pollute it; a landscape may carry sacred memory and still be the site of extraction; a protector may invoke sacred duty while acting with disproportionate force. Haberman's (2006) study of the Yamuna and the scholarship on religion and environment show that belief does not automatically create a particular environmental outcome (Jenkins et al., 2018). This study therefore refuses to grant sacred ecology the status of an effective conservation strategy. Sacred value is ecologically relevant only when it is purposefully integrated within the practices and processes of restraint and responsibility.

This measure also ensures the framework doesn't idealize the past. The Ramayana can be employed to address contemporary quandaries regarding dwelling, vulnerability, nonhuman agency, and accountable power because morally challenging situations are often memorably documented within the narrative. Contemporary governance, though, functions within varied ecological scales, legal frameworks, technologies, inequities, and scientific knowledge. Environmental decision making can be strengthened when technical knowledge is complemented by cultural frameworks that clarify dependence, limits, responsibility, and human exposure to more than human vulnerability.

7. CONCLUSION

7.1 Answer to the Research Question

The research question posed how Sacred Ecology and Dharmic Ethics combine in the Valmiki Ramayana to construct a culturally contextualized Ecological Consciousness. The analysis shows that the combination is neither identical nor instantaneous. Sacred Ecology broadens the domain of value by placing forests, rivers, nonhuman beings, hermitages, and mountains within relational, moral, cultural, and spiritual significances. Dharmic Ethics allows the moderation of behavior within that designated domain of value through restraint, reciprocity, compassion, hospitality, and protection, along with responsibility and restrained use of power. Ecological Consciousness manifests itself in the mutual integration of both these dimensions of valuing and behavior.

The principal result is that the framework captures tension as well. Chitrakuta suggests the practice of inhabitation with moderation, yet that kind of inhabitation still alters the place. Dandakaranya turns the protection of the land into a question of the corrupting influence of weapons. Rivers combine the sacred call with a material need that may or may not include concern for the ecosystem. Jatayu extends the sphere of moral obligation beyond the human, and Hanuman illustrates that nonhuman beings can be both disciplined and destructive. Sacred places retain memory, and although sacredness may accompany a

place, it may not ensure protection. Ecological Consciousness, therefore, is a relational and adaptable practice, more akin to the connection between value and practice than to permanent and holy characteristics of sacred text or civilizations.

7.2 Theoretical Contribution and Environmental Humanities Significance

The main theoretical contribution of the study is the clear distinction of ontology, normativity, and lived or interpretive orientation. Sacred Ecology determines what is valuable; Dharmic Ethics determines how we are to respond; and Ecological Consciousness determines the kind of orientation that is produced when we respond to the call to act in a responsible manner. This arrangement allows for the comparison of ecological domains and does not eliminate difference; and it incorporates a built-in test of the framework: if we have reverence without restraint, agency without responsibility, or protection without proportionality, the ecological claim is weakened.

Environmental Humanities appreciates the current model's use of culturally-grounded theory. It avoids the use of the cultural shield as a form of criticism. In the Valmiki Ramayana, despite its extensive engagement with ecocriticism, Material Ecocriticism, Multispecies Studies, Deep Ecology, Ecofeminism, and Sacred Ecology, the interpretive core remains the epic's perennial issues of relation and commitment. With this kind of thought, we have not only entered the world of sustainable pluralism, but also South Asian textual theory in the field of Environmental Studies, where we can raise questions pertaining to power and violence, and the relation between sacred notions of value and the world.

It's sustainability relevance stems from the article's more critical, not celebratory, stance. The article doesn't suggest the epic can be used to replace contemporary environmental governance. It points to ethical issues that still matter in sustainability debates: What is valued before it is used? What implications come from being dependent on something? How should guardianship be restrained? What nonhuman beings and places come under our moral concern? How do obligations extend over time? These questions can help to supplement scientific and institutional approaches by making clear the cultural values that determine when environmental action is deemed appropriate.

7.3 Limitations, Practical Implications, and Future Research

Constraints of the study's design limit the conclusions. First, the study relies on Bibek Debroy's translation of the Critical Edition. The study does not support Sanskrit Philology on its own. Second, when it comes to the purposive corpus, a trade-off is made between selectivity and in-depth interpretation. It is not meant to capture every possible interaction and relationship in the ecosystem described in the epic. Third, Sacred Ecology, Dharmic Ethics, and Ecological Consciousness are the constructs created by the study for its analysis. They should not be attributed to all Hindu, South Asian, and indigenous traditions without critiquing them. Finally, the imagination of ethics as described in literature may not demonstrate historical

commitment to environmental protection, conservation, or practiced behavior.

The limitations of this study are likely to be creative opportunities for future studies. Philological research may explore the distribution of certain lexemes and other textual passages that are central to the study. Comparative research is likely to be fruitful in assessing the study in other traditions of the Ramayana such as Tamil, Awadhi, Bengali, Telugu, Thai, and Javanese. Further research may engage with gender and caste and other indigenous perspectives such as *ādivāsī*, environmental justice, sacred geography, violence, and the politics of the sacred. Another research area may be the interpretation of the contemporary performance, teaching, and publishing of the Ramayana, both inside and outside India, in various progressive environmental advocacy movements.

The framework only has a practical implication at the level of ethical reflection, so it can be used as a structured set of questions for literature, environmental education, and interdisciplinary humanities research, not as a pre-made conservation policy. Its most important contribution is, in fact, its criticism. The ecological importance of the Ramayana does not lie in showing that sacredness ensures sustainability; it lies in showing how value has ethical consequences only when it restrains power, maintains reciprocity, recognizes vulnerability, and expands the circle of responsibility.

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