

EXPLORING ETHICS AND AESTHETICS OF ECO-CARING IN *UTTARARĀMACARITA*

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Abstract: This article analyses and appreciates the skilful use of ethics and aesthetics as tools for prompting the care and concern in humans for non-humans and their surrounding environment in an eighth-century Sanskrit play *Uttararāmacarita* composed by Bhavabhūti. The play is a theatrical representation of the later phase of the theological narrative of *Rāmāyaṇa* with minor changes towards giving a happy ending to the Uttarakānda of *Rāmāyaṇa*. The playwright, having known the fact that Rāma and Sītā are immensely revered, deftly appeals to the ethos of the reader and audience for respecting the ecosystems. Bhavabhūti portrays Rāma and Sītā worshipping various phenomena of nature with a motive of creating equal reverence in the heart of people worshipping Rāma and Sītā towards nature so that a sustainable society could be created where nature remains revered and consequently unharmed. This paper shows the interdependence of social and ecological systems through the analysis of the play undertaken for study and claims that to achieve the sustainable development goals, the maintenance of healthy ecosystems is indispensable. This paper draws its contemporary relevance from its aim of exploring the ways of protecting environment to achieve various sustainable development goals set by the United Nations.

Keywords: Eco-aesthetics, Eco-ethics, Eco-theology, Sītā, Sustainable Society, *Uttararāmacarita*.

1. Introduction

The concept of beauty itself is not independent of nature. The aesthetic sense in humans evolved with the appreciation of the beauty lying in their surroundings. Richard Shusterman, referring to Dewey, writes, "all art is the product of an interaction between the living organism

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and its environment" (Shusterman 6). What Dewey observes here serves as a foundational notion of aesthetic perception. Environmental aesthetics emerged as an offshoot of analytical aesthetics, and it is seen as a new branch of an interdisciplinary study of aesthetics and environmental studies. Motor nerves that sense beauty have always been responsive to nature's beauty. The aesthetics of nature has always been central to human understanding. Material beauty changes with the observers' spatio-cultural variations, while the beauty of nature remains constant across the globe. Cultural or architectural artefacts may not appeal to the aesthetic sense of a person from different cultural backgrounds, however the beauty of nature appeals to all irrespective of their cultural or regional differences.

My argument in this paper on the relation of ethics with aesthetics is not in consonance with Immanuel Kant (1928[1790]) who advocates the separation of aesthetics from ethics for a disinterested contemplation on beauty, nor do I agree with Wittgenstein (1961) who considers aesthetics and ethics as one. I feel that both are inherently related with each other being two different branches of philosophy, and ethics necessarily preoccupies its place in all aesthetic judgements. It can better be understood with an instance from a theatrical representation of a story where a woman of a villainous character possesses immense physical beauty but ethical conscience of humankind does not appreciate her beauty for the unethical deeds that she is indulged with while the same woman turns to be immensely beautiful when she plays a positive role.

Aesthetic qualities induce ethical norms of preservation and conservation of a 'thing of beauty' in the observer's mind. Any human being who has the sense of beauty would like to preserve that beauty. Ned Hettinger also emphasises on the significance of environmental aesthetics in the conservation of nature saying that if environmental aesthetics is taken more solemnly by environmental ethics, it will lead to the better protection of the environment (76). If attention be paid to the classical Indian writings, we can very well perceive this approach of using an aesthetic tool for environmental ethics to retain the pristineness of nature. The present paper analyses *Uttararāmacarita*, a play based on the great Indian epic called *Rāmāyaṇa* by Vālmīki. Bhavabhūti, the playwright, effecting some changes in the end of the story adds an anthropomorphic angle to the story and makes it more universal in appeal. Aesthetic appreciation of nature and its treatment

are shown to be inherently related in the theological narrative of *Rāmāyaṇa*. Allen Carlson notes, “A number of environmental philosophers suggest that there is an important relationship between environmental aesthetics and environmental ethics—between how we aesthetically appreciate our environments and how we should treat them” (399). Supporting his argument in this context, Carlson cites J. Baird Callicott, “[W]hat kinds of country we consider to be exceptionally beautiful makes a huge difference when we come to decide which places to save, which to restore or enhance, and which to allocate to other uses. Therefore, a sound natural aesthetics is crucial to sound conservation policy and land management” (399).

Bhavabhūti’s anthropomorphising of forest, rivers, birds, animals, and so on in the play aptly exemplifies this relation of aesthetics and ethics, love and care for the loving being or object of nature. It is clearly mentioned in the play that Sītā’s love for the forest and woodland was immense for which she was longing to revisit the forest and dwell there for some time after her return to Ayodhyā. It was her love for forest and its inhabitants that made Rāma to protect the Daṇḍaka forest by freeing it from demons who were disturbing the harmonious coexistence there. This type of human-nature relation is promoted in the sustainable development goals.

In *Uttararāmacarita*, the playwright, has skilfully personified various elements of nature that were cohabiting the forest with humans. Their symbiotic relationship with humans, depicted in the play, shows a model to the contemporary anthropocentric societal setup where coexistence is the only option for maintaining healthy ecosystems. Through an anthropomorphic portrayal of the objects of nature, Bhavabhūti offers humans a sustainable way of life. The conservation of biodiversity is at the core of at least four of the sustainable development goals, and this play overtly advocates biodiversity conversation through ample instances. Even in the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki, Sītā forbids Rāma from killing of any forest inhabitants who were not harmful to them. She narrates him the norms of living in a forest, and requests him not to kill even demon occupants of forest (Vālmīki Vol. I, 570). She reminds him about the duty of an armed Kshatriya in the forest saying that those chivalrous Kshatriyas, who practice restraint over their emotions and senses, and carry bow and arrows with them in the forest, are bound by their duty to protect the beings living in forest (Vālmīki Vol. I, 572).

Hinduism, a religion where various manifestations of nature are worshipped in different forms, is primarily rooted in the symbiocene and has always been aware of the fact that creation, preservation, and destruction are fostered in the lap of nature, and, therefore, all the scriptures and the basic Hindu philosophical treatises, whether they are *Vedas*, *Upaniṣads*, *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Purāṇas*, *Smṛtis*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, or *Mahābhārata*, have high regards for nature and various natural phenomena. They all teach humans to live in harmony with nature by inspiring a feeling of awe in their hearts for nature, as nature is the source of life and a support for sustenance to humans on the earth. Harold G. Coward, talking about Hindu views of nature and environment, says,

In contrast to some attitudes toward nature as an "It" that is separate from humans, Hindus see the surrounding world as a "Thou" of which they are an interdependent part. Humans and their society are imbedded in nature and dependent upon cosmic forces. Individual human life is experienced as a microcosm of the universe. Human life is in continuity with the cosmos. Hindu religion has a strong ethical direction aimed at keeping this relational continuity in balance (411).

Hinduism, in most of the religious texts, offers a higher pedestal to nature, and illustrates the importance of nature by narrating several stories relating to the role of nature as saviour. Several episodes of the *Rāmāyaṇa* itself can be seen as an instance. The play undertaken here for analysis serves to be an apt example as nature in its entirety protects Sītā. In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Sītā and Rāma received all kinds of assistance from non-humans due to their symbiocentric approach during their stay in the forest where humans and non-humans coexist peacefully. Here, forest has always been depicted as a sacred place which is suitable for the acquisition of knowledge, and practising austerity.

2. Aesthetics as a Tool of Eco-Caring

Having derived the main story from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Bhavabhūti adorns his play with different literary tools concerning the beauty of nature that stimulate the aesthetic sense of the reader or spectator. A significant part of this play is dedicated to the discussion of/with the beings of nature. Act II and III are the best examples of this proposition where almost all the dialogues are between human beings and non-human beings about the beauty, benignity, and blessings of

nature. For example, Act II begins with the conversation of a female ascetic and a sylvan deity, and the conversation proceeds alike with other phenomena of nature and humanity.

From Act II onwards, the personified beings of nature keep on taking a very active part in the play. They, by giving solace to Sītā and Rāma, help them lessening their pains caused by their separation from each other. In an episode of the play, we come across a scene where Rāma searching for Śambūka, an ascetic from lower caste, reaches in a beautiful forest area that he was not sure about. There, the soul of Śambūka informs him that the place is Daṇḍaka forest, where he with his consort had lived. This forest used to be the residing place of fourteen thousand and fourteen demons along with Khara, Dūṣaṇa, and Trimurdhana who had ravaged the beauty of Daṇḍaka; it was Rāma's killing of these demons that made Daṇḍaka free to bloom and a place of fulfilment, where Ṛṣis are living inside and around it.¹ The detailed description of Daṇḍaka and its beauty in the play suggests the importance of nature for the playwright and his contemporary society. The demons whom Śambūka refers to here, were inharmonious people who were disturbing the ecosystems, and were not allowing others to coexist peacefully. The visit to that beautiful place reminds Rāma of Sītā's love to the place, river, animals, and all other elements of nature.

At various places the playwright mentions the love and respect that Rāma and Sītā possess for the forest and its occupants. Rāma finds it painful to be in that woodland/forest which Sītā always loved.² The conversation between the soul of Śambūka and Rāma, perfectly reflects the eco-aesthetical perspective of Bhavabhūti, where the harmonious coexistence is appreciated to promote eco-care in the minds of the readers/spectators of the play. When Rāma finds the beautiful woodland of Daṇḍaka distressing due to the haunting memories of his beloved who has been separated from him, Śambūka suggests him to go to the central forests that are completely tranquil,

¹ *Daṇḍakaivaishā. Atra kil pūrvam nivasatā deven – caturdaśa sahastrāṇi caturdaśa saḥ rākṣasāḥ. Trayaśca Dūṣaṇa KharaTrimurdhāno raṇe hatāḥ. Yena siddhakṣetreasminmādrśāmapi jānapadānāmakuto-bhayaḥ sañcāraḥ samvṛtaḥ*" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 60).

² *"priyā Rāmā hi vaidelhyāsita. Etāni nāma kāntārāṇi. Kimataḥ param bhayānakam syāta"* (Bhavabhūti 1903, 61).

and are spread over the hills possessing passionately singing peacocks. These forests are adorned with densely planted young trees that offer ample shade, and are inhabited by various animals that wander fearlessly.³

When the soul of Śambūka informs Rāma that sage Agastya's wife Lopāmudrā has invited Rāma and has readied ceremonial preparations to welcome him in their hermitage situated in Pañcavaṭī. Rāma apologizes to Pañcavaṭī for the transgression (as Pañcavaṭī was a place where Rāma spent his love-filled days with his wife during the initial period of his forest dwelling, and therefore, he is supposed to visit Pañcavaṭī only with his consort) due to inevitable visit to the āśrama (hermitage) of sage Agastya and his wife Lopāmudrā on their call.⁴ This episode also suggests that not only particular rivers or trees were having the status of being gods and goddesses or their representatives, but the whole forest had this status in the eyes of Rāma. One who has such respect for nature can never think of harming it. The playwright skilfully uses this ethical side of Rāma to offer the didactic suggestions to the reader. The personification of the entire being of forest as Sylvan Deity is also used tactfully to support the same idea.

This play combines three elements – theological, aesthetical, and ethical – where the aesthetical reminds Rāma continuously of his blissful days spent with Sītā. Rāma, and even the soul of Śambūka, consider the killing of Khara, Dūṣaṇa, and Trimurdhana as freeing of forest and forest-dwellers from the perpetrators who were destroying the ecosystem. Allen Carlson referring to Holmes Rolston's question, "Can aesthetics be an adequate foundation for an environmental ethic?" cites his answer that throws light on the deep rooted relation of environmental aesthetics and ethics, "Yes, increasingly, where aesthetics itself comes to find and to be founded on natural history, with humans emplacing themselves appropriately on such landscapes. Does environmental ethics need such aesthetics to be adequately founded? Yes, indeed" (140). In *Uttararāmacarita*,

³ "Iha samadaśakuntākrāntavānīrmuktaprasavasurabhiśītaswacchatoyā vahanti. Phalabharapariṇāmaśyāmajambūni kuṅjaskhalanamukhar-abhūrisrotaso nirjharīṇyaḥ" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 62)

⁴ "Bhagawati Pañcavaṭī, gurujanādeśoparodhātkaṣaṇam kṣamyatāmati kramo Rāmasya" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 65).

Bhavabhūti's depiction of the various elements of nature in personified form and their constant participation with the human affairs deem fit to be an ideal example of eco-aesthetics as 'ecological aesthetic experience' that is considered to be the core of eco-aesthetics by Cheng Xiangzhan who sees it as a way of seeking to "harmonise" human actions and the world of nature (786).

Act III of the play begins with the conversation between two rivers – Murlā and Tamasā – where the reader or spectator can easily perceive and feel the concern and care of these beings of nature towards Rāma. Talking about the concerns of Sun god (Rāma comes from his lineage) for his daughter-in-law, Tamasā says that she has been asked to be close to Sītā as she has special love for her.⁵ Harmonious coexistence of humans and nature portrayed in the play serves to be an excellent example of eco-aesthetics where both feel the pain of each other, and come forth to support one another in all kinds of crises. The concerns of nature for humans can well be seen in the episode of the play where river Murlā tells Tamasā that she has been asked to convey a message to Godāvarī by Lopāmudrā, the wife of venerable Agastya. Lopāmudrā wants Godāvarī, the best of rivers, to take care of Rāma during his visit to Pañcavaṭī by lessening his pain as sweet memories of the days spent with Sītā will bear agony in him. Godāvarī can lessen his pain by caressing him with the breezes arising from her waves carrying the cool particles of the spray of water wafting with the fragrance of lotus filaments. Here, this relation of Lopāmudrā with Murlā and Godāvarī as the concerned mothers caring for their dear son Rāma is tremendously evocative as it shows nature-human relationship to be deeper and more selfless than human-human relationship. This episode also suggests that the ascetics and sages living in forest among the beings of nature used to turn themselves indistinct from them. For instance, the relations among the beings of nature, Ātreya Lopāmudrā and other sages were quite intimate, and therefore, they were able to communicate with each other, and share their pleasures and pains. These sages were caring for the beings of nature, and in turn, they were more cared by nature.

⁵ "*Ahampyājīñāpitā 'Tamase tvayi prakṣṭapremaiva vadhurjānaki*" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 69).

This play, as has already been mentioned, is also theological in approach, primarily for having been based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*. The play also hints towards the fact that the elements of nature are always regarded as the divine beings due to their benignity towards humans. It can clearly be seen in the conversation of Murlā and Tamasā about Sītā's abandonment by Rāma in an utter painful situation. When Sītā begins to suffer from the pangs of travail, she throws herself in the streams of Ganges and there in the lap of Bhāgīrathī (Ganges) and in the benign presence of her mother Pṛthvī (the Earth), gives birth to the twin sons. The play suggests that both Rāma and Sītā were having many of the beings of nature as their kinfolk who always around them for their protection and care. The play further suggests that it was not the case only with Rāma and Sītā, but with all those men and women who are concerned with nature. The sages and their wives living in the forests prove to be better examples to support the argument. Bhāgīrathī and Pṛthvī have repeatedly been addressed by Murlā and Tamasā as divine personages. Granting a divine status to the objects of nature is an age old phenomenon in Hinduism. P. Radhamani, in this regard, states "Hinduism considers each and every phenomena of the earth such as trees, rivers, mountains, etc., as sacred (deep ecology) and believes that these phenomena are protected by their own presiding gods or goddesses. So, any direct harm done to the material world is really an ill treatment towards gods" (499). Such theological approach towards various objects of nature was somewhere founded to promote eco-care based on ethics of religion.

One of the play's primary objectives seems to be throwing light on the godly roles that nature plays in the lives of human beings. It is clearly depicted in the play that nature, being always benign unlike humans, stands by the side of those who need help and support. Rāma and Sītā took shelter in the forest when they were asked to leave his father's palace because of love for wealth and power of one of his stepmothers i.e., a fellow human being. It was nature that received them with open heart. And further, the play depicts the concern of nature towards Rāma and Sītā when they are separated by fellow beings. It is the nature in the play that empathises with them, tries to bring solace to them, and forget the pain caused by separation, at least momentarily. In conversation with Swarnalatha Rangarajan, Paula Richman states that in *Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa* forest is portrayed as the place of refuge also. When Sītā is renounced by Rāma, she, with her

twin sons, reaches Vālmīki's Ashram and raises them there. The city casts her away but the forest welcomes her and that yields a new sense of our perception of the forest (25).

The concerns of the beings of nature for Rāma and Sītā depicted in the play are way beyond the humans. Knowing the fact that Rāma in Pañcavaṭī can be comforted only with the presence of Sītā, and it is not possible for Sītā to remain away from Rāma when he is in Pañcavaṭī, Bhāgīrathī bestows power on Sītā to be invisible. Even Sītā's invisible presence around Rāma comforts him, and simultaneously gives solace to Sītā. Bhāgīrathī's making Sītā invisible saves her from transgression of the limit of her self-respect, and also allows her to see her beloved Rāma, whom she reposes too with her presence. Bhavabhūti's play is replete with such creative modifications in the story of Rāmāyaṇa that repeatedly emphasise on the support that nature extended to Rāma and Sītā in their difficult times. The playwright deftly portrays a fulfilling relationship between Sītā and various objects of nature. She finds all her relatives in the forest along with a very dear friend called Vāsantī (a Sylvan Deity), who suffers not less than Sītā in her pain. Sītā calls Vāsantī her dear friend.⁶ She visits her to deliver the news that the young elephant reared up by Sītā (now a grown up) had been attacked by some other more powerful elephant on which Sītā's reaction is not less than an affectionate mother for that elephant, which very clearly can be perceived from her call for help. She calls upon her lord, Rāma (Āryaputra) to save that child of hers.⁷ This call for help again leaves her in dejection for having called the name to which her lips were accustomed in Pañcavaṭī. When Rāma, on Vāsantī's call, goes to save that young elephant, finds it victorious over the elephant that attacked it, and he was rejoiced. There, Vāsantī draws his attention towards a peacock that was reared up by Sītā. Rāma is reminded of the time when Sītā used to make that peacock dance, and thereafter his attention was automatically drawn towards that Kadamba tree, which also was fostered by Sītā. Vāsantī reminds him of that stone-slab where they used to take rest and where Sītā used to feed deer by giving them grass which were still there, waiting for her. Looking at all this, Rāma says, "even birds and animals are not

⁶"*Amhahe jānāmi priyasakhī Vāsantī vyāharatīti*" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 70).

⁷"*Āryaputra paritrāyasva paritrāyasva maṁ putrakam*" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 71).

indifferent to their acquaintances; they care for familiarity not less than humans,"⁸ which suggests that if nature/animals are treated lovingly, they respond similarly.

The play, with an adept use of theological sentiments and aesthetic perception as tools, succeeds in drawing an intimate human-nature relationship based on complementarity of the two. Environmental aesthetics as branch of study to promote eco-care amply depends on many other factors. Heta Kauppinen notes, "The inclusion of ethical, social, psychological and ecological theory as well as utilitarian and political aspects have shaped contemporary environmental aesthetics" (12). Aesthetic aspect of nature induces human psyche to dutifully protect the objects of beauty as part of socio-ethical norms.

3. Nature as Enabler for Love and Reciprocity

The human-nature relationship is primarily a relationship of mutual benefit. If humankind cares for its surrounding environment, the nature flourishes and, in turn, it offers a healthy environment to humankind. The whole of history of humankind shows reciprocal love and care between human and its surrounding environment. Carson, in this regard, says, "The history of life on earth has been a history of interaction between living things and their surroundings... Only within the moment of time represented by the present century has one species – man – acquired significant power to alter the nature of his world" (23). The serious attempts need to be made to reorient humankind from anthropocentrism to symbiocentrism.

The play undertaken here for study also emphasises on the similar fact that nature has immense significance in the lives of humans. The play simultaneously perpetuates the godliness of nature to retain reverence in the hearts of the audience. Sītā is not presented to have been left alone in want of friends or kin in that forest; she finds all relations there, and was always well attended by them. The responses to Sītā and Rāma from nature in its various manifestations are reciprocal as Sītā was addressed by Tamasā, Murlā, Godāvarī, Bhāgīrathī as a child and Sītā too considered them no less than her mother. As Sītā is a very dear friend of Vāsantī, she also is no less dear to her. This reciprocal relationship of love between humans and nature is very well depicted in the play. Jaṭāyu, who sacrifices his life

⁸ "Hanta tiryāñcoapi paricayamanurundhante" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 81).

saving Sītā from Rāvaṇa continues to be reverent to Sītā throughout. She remembers Jaṭāyu at Janasthāna, the place where usually he used to perch. Addressing Jaṭāyu as father, Sītā laments his absence at Janasthāna, which has turned to be dreary without him⁹. In the play, all the rivers and the earth are addressed as Bhagawatī either by Sītā or by the other characters of the play.

Sītā, who emerges from the earth and disappears into it, is inseparably associated with nature. Wendy Doniger in her book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* writes that Sītā never dies; but whenever she is parted away from Rāma, she takes shelter into a natural element. She goes into the lap of natural element thrice in her lifetime. Firstly "into the fire" when Sītā is asked to prove her chastity right after she is won back by Rāma after the end of Rāvaṇa. Secondly "into the forest" when she is banished by Rāma out of public condemnation over her possible sensual indulgence with Rāvaṇa, here she dwells in the forest taking shelter in Vālmīki's hermitage and gives birth to the twin sons. Thirdly "into the earth" when she was asked again to prove her chastity amidst people to get along with Rāma, Sītā prayed to the mother earth to provide her space in her lap. The goddess earth appears and Sītā descends into the earth. These three incidents are testimonies that depict Sītā's affinity with the nature and forest (214-17).

Bhavabhūti's use of personification of natural beings works well in bringing forth those aspects that Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa failed to explore. Rāma, being a king, was neither supposed to express his grief explicitly to others nor to be asked harsh questions such as those that Vāsanti, one who does not have anything to do with his lordship or kingship, asked. Vāsanti, listening to Rāma incessantly talking about Sītā with pain, blames Rāma for being ruthless and hard-hearted, as fame was dearer to him, and he did not think of the Sītā's pain while taking this heartless decision of abandoning Sītā.¹⁰ Vāsanti, accusing Rāma of flattering Sītā with number loving expressions, holds him responsible for the pitiable situation of Sītā. She quotes the words that

⁹"Hā tāta Jaṭāyo, śūnyam tvayā vinedam janasthānam" (Bhavabhūti 1903, 77).

¹⁰"Ayi kaṭhor yaśaḥ kila te priyam/ Kimayaśo nanu ghormataḥ param./ Kimbhavadwipine hariṇīdṛśaḥ/ Kathaya nātha katham bata manyase" (Bhavabhūti, 1903, p. 85).

Rāma used for flattering Sītā, “You are my life, my other heart, moonlight to my eyes, and ambrosia to my limbs,”¹¹ and, then asks him to tell her Sītā’s current situation who was driven to forest without even caring for what might happen to her there. This conversation of Vāsantī with Rāma is suggestive of the piety that a relation true to itself may foster. This selfless love shown by a sylvan deity in the play is primarily due upon the equitable love and concern reciprocated by Rāma and Sītā. Vāsantī’s dialogue can also be interpreted to be the dialogue between one’s purer self and nature. If nature is treated like a friend, it responds accordingly. It mollifies in anger or distress, and guides to the right path in the state of oblivion. Like Vāsantī, it also serves to make us realize the mistakes that we commit. It was possible only for Vāsantī whom both Rāma and Sītā consider their friend to ask such questions to make Rāma hear such harsh words out of love and care.

Tamasā, the river, on Sītā's objection to Vāsantī's harshness towards Rāma consoles Sītā that whatever Vāsantī said to Rāma is out of affection and grief. Vāsantī pierces Rāma with the darts of her harsh words on account of her right to do so which she rightly claims for having been one of the dearest friends of Sītā. She tries to make Rāma realize what a grave blunder he committed by abandoning Sītā just because of the ungrounded sayings of his subjects.

When Rāma feels the presence of Sītā around him, which actually is a truth as Sītā invisibly is present there, tells Vāsantī about it, who denies and hides the fact from him. When he asserts Sītā's presence to her she calls it insanity due upon the pain of separation (*kaṣṭamunmād eva*). When Rāma, in Pañcavaṭī, gets recovered to his senses and realizes that Sītā was not around him; it was just a state of delusion and then exclaims with pain, "*hā kaṣṭam!*" (Oh, my ill fate!) finding himself helpless in the present state, starts recounting the great help that he obtained from nature in its various forms (other than human) in recovering Sītā from the custody of Rāvaṇa and says lamenting, “In what region do you exist, my Darling? . . . that even my friendship with the Monkey-chief is of no avail to me; the heroism of the monkeys is useless, as also the talent of Jāmbavat; where even the Wind-god’s son

¹¹ “*Tvaṃ jīvitam tvamasi me hṛdayam dwitīyam/tvaṃ kaumudī nayanayoramṛtam tvamange./ Ityādibhiḥ priyaśatairanurudhya mugdhām/tāmeva śānamatha vā kimihottareṇa*” (Bhavabhūti 1903, 84).

has no access, where even Nala, the son of the World-architect, cannot construct a path, and which cannot be the target even of Lakṣamaṇa's arrows?"¹² (Bhavabhūti 1965, 133).

Here Rāma recounts the best of assistance that he received in bringing Sītā back Lanka by defeating Rāvaṇa, and laments his hapless fate as all those who prevailed over the unconquerable Rāvaṇa are helpless in finding Sītā this time. This pain that he is undergoing is the result of his own action. This episode also serves to highlight the fact that all the help that Rāma received during his fight against evil Rāvaṇa was from non-humans. In the end of the same act, Tamasā comforts Sītā while Rāma was leaving Pañcavaṭī for Ayodhyā by reminding her of the celebration of the birthday of Lava and Kush with the divine river Bhāgīrathī. This can clearly be observed throughout the play that nature in one or the other forms remains with Sītā in all her pains and pleasures.

Even the analogies used in the play reflect the richness of the eco-aesthetical perspective of the playwright. For instance, when Kauśalyā sees Lava who very closely resembles Rāma, she compares his physical and behavioural attributes with her son and daughter-in-law using the analogies derived from nature. She says,

He has taken after dear Rāma not only in the build of his body which is brilliant and dark like a little-opened blue lotus resembles Rāma, but in his voice also which is resonant and sonorous like the cackle of royal swans when their throats become melodious by feeding on lotus-filaments. I say, the touch of his body too is like that of Rāma: Smooth like the interior of a full grown lotus! My child let me look at the lotus of your face. (Raising his chin, observing minutely, and with tears of deep feeling) Royal Sage, if very closely observed, his face exactly resembles the moon-like face of the dear daughter-in-law: Don't you see? (Bhavabhūti 1965, 165).¹³

¹² " *Vyarthe yatra kapīndrasakhyamāpi me vīryam hāñām vṛthā
Prajñā jāmbavatoapi yatra na gatiḥ putrasya vāyorapi.*

*Mārgam yatra na vishvakarmagtanayaḥ kartum naloapi kshamaḥ
Saumitrerapi patriṇāmaviṣaye tatra priye kvāsi me*" (Bhavabhūti 1965, 132).

¹³ *Aho na kevalam darvikasannilotpalaśyāmalojjoalena dehabandhena
kavalitāravindakesarakaṣāyakaṇṭhakalahānsaninādādīrghadīrghena swareṇa
ca Rāmabhadramanuharati. Nanu kaṭhorakamalagarbhapakṣmalaḥ*

Such comparisons prevail throughout the play which clearly brings to our notice that the life of people during the time was very much in harmony with nature.

4. Conclusion

Conclusively we can say that this play written on the story of a Hindu epic explicitly shows that the environmental philosophy is an inherent attribute of this ancient religion where various manifestations of nature are considered to be divine. The philosophy behind bestowing this divine status to various categories of nature is largely similar to eco-sophy promoting a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, and making humans aware of the unparalleled love and care, and unsurpassable power of nature. The play, vindicating the godliness of the beings of nature, very aptly presents their benignity towards the humankind.

This play can aptly be categorised as an appropriate instance of an eco-theological work as it primarily explores the interaction between ecological values, such as sustainability, and the human-nature relationship. In the play, this relation of humans and nature is beautifully portrayed showing the concern of nature towards human beings and receiving the same from them. Here, the play portrays that the Sylvan Deity feels privileged by the visit of Ātreyaī, a Ṛṣi's wife, and considers himself fortunate to have Vālmikī's āśrama in his premises, giving shelter to Sītā, Lava, and Kush. He welcomes Ātreyaī and offers to have whatever she likes. Sylvan Deity's exchange of speech with Ātreyaī shows her concern with human affairs. The play representing a religious story, presents the characters in such a way that all promote eco-care throughout. In the play it is presented that the forest feels happy to have the company of sages and ascetics, who were living beyond human selfishness, and therefore, they do not harm nature. The play shows its concern with various categories of natural environment in relation with humans to show the place of humans within nature. It is with the help of such narratives that hold the faith of people, literature has immense capacity to contribute to the cause of environment.

śariīrasparśoapi tām dṛśa eva vatsasya. Jāta paśyāmi tāvatte mukhapuṇḍarikarṇ. Rajarṣe, kim na paśyasi? Nipuṇam nirupyamāṇo vatsyāyā me vadhwā mukhcandreṇāpi samvadatyeva (Bhavabhūti 1965, 164).

Recognising the power of faith in achieving the sustainable development goals, UN Environment took an initiative in 2017 to reach out to faith based organisations and faith leaders in involving them to actively promote the relationship between environment and faith. Religious texts and faith leaders are best heard by common people, and they influence the minds of people the most. Bhavabhūti too knew it well. He has ably remodelled the narrative borrowed from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and characterization in the play to utilise the power of faith for bringing people in action to protect the environment. He has presented various phenomena of nature in deified manner making lord Rāma and goddess Sītā much vocal to show reverence towards nature and care for it.

It is a known fact that sustainability is primarily rooted in ethics, and the relation of ethics and religion is inseparable. The ethical impact of the play is deeply ingrained in various aspects of it such as anthropomorphic characterization to show reciprocal human-nature relationship, projection of various categories of nature as god's own relatives, forest as the only setting of the play, and extremely curtailed role of humankind except for the protagonists who hold the status of being deities. It is this approach of the playwright that makes the play more contemporary, and relevant to the modern discourse on environmental ethics and sustainable development goals. The play makes an implicit appeal to its readers and spectators about environmental ethics that involve such things as the attitude and lifestyle of each person by portraying a harmonious coexistence in the setting of a forest. It further conveys a message to its readers that nature partakes in human's pain provided humankind is able to involve nature to that extent.

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