

Indian Mythology and Ecocriticism

Anukriti Badola¹ and Ambuj Kumar Sharma²

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be University), Haridwar, Uttarakhand, INDIA.

²Professor, Department of English, Gurukul Kangri (Deemed to be University), Haridwar, Uttarakhand, INDIA.

²Corresponding Author: prof.ambuj@gmail.com



www.ijrah.com || Vol. 4 No. 5 (2024): September Issue

Date of Submission: 03-09-2024

Date of Acceptance: 16-09-2024

Date of Publication: 30-09-2024

ABSTRACT

According to Indian philosophy, human body is said to be formed of five elements – Panchtattva, namely earth (*prithvi*), water (*apas*), fire (*agni*), air (*vayu*) and aether (*akasha*). From the birth of an individual till his death, the Indian way of life is closely connected to nature. From home hearths to the funeral pyres, wood and fire are predominantly present. A newborn is consecrated with the holy waters of Ganges and the ashes of the dead are immersed in the same holy water. Indians have long had an intense connection with nature. This connection is clearly reflected in the Indian mythology. The two major Indian epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, present nature in its various manifestations presenting it sometimes as a saviour, sometimes a protector and many times as a pioneer. The connection between Indian mythology and nature becomes conspicuous when we come across characters like *Bhumija Sita*, *Suryaputra Karna*, *Vayuputra Hanumana* and *Shakuntala* (the nature's child) who is born and brought up in the lap of nature and whose beauty and innocence are as pure as nature itself. These writings and characters have deeply impacted the Indian psyche through ages. This paper will study such connection between Indian mythology and environment in detail and analyse how Indian mythology has contributed in preserving the nature keeping in mind the concept of eco-criticism.

Keywords- Mythology, Eco-criticism, Nature, Ramayana, Mahabharata.

The mythology of India encompasses Hindu mythology, Buddhist mythology, mythology of Jainism, Sikhism, Manipuri traditions, and more. This study directs its attention towards Hindu mythology, specifically examining its impact on ecological consciousness of people. Hindu mythology, intricately intertwined with the Hindu faith, comprises a vast array of texts, including the revered Vedas, epic narratives such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, Puranic literature, and diverse regional folklore. By focusing on Hindu mythology, this paper seeks to illuminate its profound influence on shaping the ecological consciousness of its followers and society at large.

While, "Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment... It studies the interconnections between the nature and culture, specifically the cultural artefacts of language and literature" (Glotfelty 18-19). According to A

Glossary of literary Terms, "Ecocriticism explores the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment, conducted with an acute awareness of the damage being wrought on that environment by human activities" (Abrams 98). Eco critics mainly focus on the questions like how does this text approach nature or how it views nature and what can we learn from it. It also deals with the appreciation of nature through literature. The epic sagas majorly centre on the relations between human beings and cosmic forces. Many Indian philosophies and communities value and worship the nature around *i.e.*, plants, trees, water, the cosmic bodies etc. The Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Vedas, the Upanishads and many Puranas have been highly influential in the Indian way of life. The Vedas speak exclusively about the sanctity of the Earth, the rivers and the mountains. The texts preaching righteous behaviour teach to practice non-violence towards all

living beings and speak about the joys of a harmonious relationship with nature. According to MacCulloch, a sense of wonder about the natural elements made the Vedic people attribute divinity and power to various things around us in the nature including the Earth, the Heavens, the Clouds, the Sun and the Moon. The Earth is to be revered as she is the mother of us all, the all-giving, extremely generous mother. She is to be honoured and respected for she bears and tolerates us. The sacred Vedas have many hymns addressed to the mother Earth.

To Earth belong the four directions of space.

On her grows food; on her the ploughman toils.

She carries likewise all that breathes and stirs.

Earth, may she grant us cattle and food in plenty! (111)

The above hymn from Prof. Pannikar's *Vedic Experience: An Anthology of Hinduism's Sacred and Revealed Scriptures*, talks about the glory and virtues of the Earth. Another hymn talks about the duties to be disposed of by the dwellers of the Earth, "May your dwellings, O Earth, free from sickness and wasting, flourish for us! Through a long life, watchful, may we always offer to you our tribute!" (117)

The Indian mythological texts aim at creating a spiritual and cultural relationship with nature as opposed to the exploitative and unethical kind of interaction with it. The rivers according to Indian mythology are considered to be holy and able to absolve the human beings of their sins. The following verse from the Vedas points out towards this feature of holy waters, "May the Waters, the mothers, purify us" (107). These waters are revered as Mother Goddesses and hence a spiritual connection is established with the nature. The divine rivers are expected to carry away the physical as well as the moral filth of our being.

Whatever sin is found in me,

Whatever wrong I may have done,

If I have lied or falsely sworn,

Waters, remove it far from me (Pannikar 108).

This sanctity and sense of piety ascribed to the rivers has inspired the cleaning up of the Ganga and the Yamuna rivers. Almost all the rivers in India have some religious significance and are sacred because they nourish and purify not only the body and mind but also the inner being.

In the Indian mythology, nature is revered in all its forms and manifestations. The forests too hold a special significance in these mythological texts. The Upanishads, which are parts of the Vedas are considered to be more philosophical and mystical. These have been associated with the forest and are also called *aranyakas*, the texts of the forest. In Indian traditions, the forest was not only the wilderness but a place not bound by the rules of the society. Thapar observes that the forest was not just a wild space beyond settlement but a place

"where the hierarchies and regulations of the *grama* were not observed" (113). The forests were considered to be places where men retired to gain higher wisdom, getting close to *prakriti*, the nature. The forests have been revered as not only a place for gaining wisdom in seclusion but also a place where interaction between various species of flora and fauna takes place, a seat for symbiosis. The Upanishads say, *sarvam khalvidam Brahma*, 'Everything is Brahma' and hence believe in the presence of divine in every being. They speak of a substantive spirit that pervades all of us and draw deep connections between nature, human beings and life.

Another genre of Indian mythology, the Puranas also talk about the righteous behaviour one should adopt towards the nature and environment. Trees are vital to our ecosystem, our planet and our well-being. The *Matsya Purana* states, *dasa putra samo druma* i.e., one tree is equal to ten sons. According to *Varaha Purana* and *Vishnudharmottara Purana*, the one who plants trees will never fall into hell. These texts connect the man to the nature culturally and spiritually. The nature is valued so highly in Indian mythology that its destruction is linked with the end of the world. The Puranas and the great Indian epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata give detailed description of the periodic destruction of the world. There are four epochs in each cycle. The Mahabharata describes the events at the end of the fourth and the last epoch (aeon):

At the end of the Eon the population increases... and odour becomes stench, and flavours putrid... there befalls a drought of many years that drives most of the creatures... All people will be naturally cruel... Without concern they will destroy parks and trees and the lives of living will be ruined in the world. Slaves of greed they will roam this earth... when the end of the Eon is at hand. (Buitenen 586-589).

These lines written in the Mahabharata ages ago hold relevance today in the contemporary world. They forewarn the humans of the approaching doom making them aware of their unsustainable pace of development. The depth of Indian reverence for nature becomes quite conspicuous in the mythological texts when the nature is found in its various manifestations. Among the myriad characters, two stand out prominently: *Bhumija* Sita from the Ramayana and *Suryaputra* Karna from the Mahabharata. In the Ramayana Sita appears as the embodiment of nature - just like a plant she sprung from the earth and returns to the earth. The close resemblance between Sita and her mother *Bhumi* (Earth) can be seen in the great tolerance and patience with which Sita confronts all the difficulties of her life. Sita spends the major part of her life in the forests being close to nature. The *Chitrakuta*, *Dandaka*, *Panchavati* and *Ashoka* forests are important settings in the Ramayana. She chooses to leave behind the royal pleasures and lives in

the exile for fourteen years along with her husband. Even during hardship, she takes refuge in the forest and gives birth to her sons Lava and Kusha. Her undiminishing willingness to be close to nature is quite evident through her actions. Some scholars even consider her to be the nature itself in its feminine form. Other instances of revering nature and biodiversity in the Ramayana are the monkey king and his army, including Lord Rama's greatest devotee Hanuman, the vulture demi-gods Jatayu, Sampati and the sagacious and gallant bear Jambavan, who played an important role in the narrative assisting the protagonist, Lord Rama in his endeavours to rescue Sita. The basic idea behind this representation is that man co-exists with other forms of being in a system where everything is interdependent and the energy flows cyclically.

Another such character from Indian mythology who is closely connected to nature is Karna from the Mahabharata, who is known to be the scion of the Sun God and so designated as *Suryaputra*. Karna is known for his benevolence and kindness, just like the *prakriti* (nature) he is all giving and altruistic. He was born with the natural armour – *kavach* and *kundal*, given to him by the Sun God, which made him invincible just like the Sun. But he gave it away happily when asked by Indra in the disguise of a brahmin. Karna's life is intertwined with elements of nature, evoking themes of destiny, honour, and sacrifice. Despite facing numerous trials and tribulations, Karna remains steadfast in his principles, embodying the strength and endurance of nature itself. One more human manifestation of nature in the Mahabharata is Shakuntala, the daughter of a celestial nymph named Menaka and an ascetic Vishwamitra. She is born in the wilderness and brought up in the *ashrama* of sage Kanv in the lap of nature. Her pure innocence and the undiluted, serene beauty make her the nature's child. Such humans from the mythology being so close to nature that they appear to be nature itself in the human form, make men aware of their oneness with nature. This kind of representation seems to be aimed at inculcating a very strong environmental consciousness.

In the contemporary era, scholars throughout the humanities are finding ways to add an environmental dimension to their respective disciplines. The anthropologists are thinking about the value systems and rituals that have helped cultures live sustainably. Even the psychologists are exploring the link between environmental conditions and mental health. The effort towards saving the ecosystem is consolidated. The man needs to shift his approach to environment from anthropocentric to biocentric. William Rueckert remarks, "In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric (as opposed to biocentric) vision and his compulsion to conquer, humanise, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing" (113). In Indian mythology this

biocentric approach towards nature can be found. These mythological narratives serve as profound reflections of Indian cultural ethos, emphasizing the intrinsic value of nature and the imperative of harmonious coexistence with all forms of life. These texts impart timeless wisdom on the significance of preserving and respecting the natural world—a message that resonates across generations and underscores the enduring bond between humanity and nature. A very commonly used *shloka* in Sanskrit language represents the importance of all beings and that happiness of one depends on the other:

*sarve bhavantu sukhinah, sarve santu niramayah
sarve bhadrani pashyant, maakashcid dukh bhaag
bhavet.*

May Everyone be happy, may everyone be healthy and disease free. May everyone see what is noble and may no one suffer from misery. The belief accepting the presence of Brahma (divine) in every being inspires the Indians to treat the nature with reverence and move forward at a sustainable pace.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abrams, M.H. (2014). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Ed. M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. Cengage Learning Inc.
- [2] Buitenen, J. A. B. Van. (1978). Trans. *The Mahabharata: The Book of the Forest*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- [3] Glotfelty, Cheryll. (1996) 'Introduction.' *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The University of Georgia Press: Athens.
- [4] MacCulloch, J.A. S.v Nature (*primitive and savage*). In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Vol. IX. (ed.) James Hastings, 1994, reprint 1926.
- [5] Panikkar, Raimundo; *Vedic Experience: An Anthology of Hinduism's Sacred and Revealed Scriptures*. Himalayan Academy Publications.
- [6] Rueckert, William. (1996) 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism'. *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Ed. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm. The University of Georgia Press: Athens.
- [7] Thapar, Romila. Article "Perceiving the Forest: Early India," in *India's Environmental History: From Ancient Times to the Colonial Period*, edited by Mahesh Rangarajan and K Sivaramakrishnan.