



Re-envisioning (reimagining) Human and Animal Relationships in the Anthropocene: A few Insights from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana

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Abstract

Though there are in number of studies are available in the area of Anthropocene, this present study tries to depict a new angle with regard to human animal relationships in the Hindu scriptures – the Mahabharata and the Ramayana using the theory of Animal studies and the discourse of anthropocentrism. The above said two epics steeped in Indian or Hindu cosmology, where human, animal and nature coexist interdependently. An outlook that is sharply different from the human centric dogma in the Anthropocene. A few characters from the epics like Hanuman, Jatayu and Garuda and the Nagas represent agency and moral complexity that shows how ancient Indian philosophy acknowledges the consciousness of and spiritual values of nonhumans. The research article shows how the epics anticipate modern debates around species equality, Eco ethics, and coexistence through post humanist and ecological lenses. The discussion in the article identifies the Indian philosophy presents a sustainable and equitable model of relational ethics that can guide contemporary ecological awareness. This research paper also contends that going back to these epic stories contain significant lessons for re-envisioning human-animal relationship in the Anthropocene by refiguring out the mythological insight with twenty-first-century environmental concept.

Keywords: Animal Studies, Anthropocene, Indian Epics, Posthumanism, Ecocriticism, Human–Animal Relations, Mythology and Ecology

Introduction:

One of the major developments is Anthropocene in the twenty first century, coined by chemist named Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in order to dominate the era in which homo sapiens are dominant geological force shaping the structure of the planetary system (Crutzen and Stoermer 17). In the same era is called an environmental disaster-global warming, deforestation, pollution, habitat destruction

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and species extinction etc., as a result of anthropocentric dominance. As Donna Haraway suggests, the Anthropocene bears witness to the implications of human exceptionalism and to the failure to recognize multispecies interdependence (Haraway 160).

Going against this human-cantered ideology, ancient cultural and spiritual traditions all over the world have long conceptualized relationships based on coexistence instead of domination. In the Indian philosophical tradition, nature and animals are not placed in an inferior position. Rather, nature and animals share in the sacred and moral order of the universe. As Christopher Key Chapple explains, Hindu cosmology conceptualizes “a web of life wherein all beings are manifestations of the same cosmic reality” (Chapple 45). This ecological ethos is strikingly depicted in the two Sanskrit epics known as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, which position human–animal relationality at the heart of ethical existence.

Figures like Hanuman, the intelligent and loyal vanara who serves as a key player in the Ramayana, are manifestations of the belief that animals are agents with a measure of knowledge and spiritual potential greater than the status of symbolism. The other character in the Ramayana is Jatayu, the vulture sacrifices himself in the rescue of Sita, this symbolises that a bird can also play a role of a human. The race of Naga, in the Mahabharata, and other sacred bird Garuda are portrayed as justice, kinship, conflict and ecological warning. These examples clearly show that Indian epics recognise the dignity of nonhuman beings and their moral depths and all living beings are alike existential values.

According to Cary wolf the post humanist critique upsets the supremacy of human beings as she recognises that animals as subjects of experience and meaning to their life (Wolf 99) Similarly, Ecocriticism urges a reading practice that resituates nature as an agent of cultural storytelling (Garrard 6). The epics, when viewed through these lenses, are repositories of indigenous environmental knowledge with ecological wisdom predating most of the contemporary environmental discourses.

Returning to such texts thus does not signal any regressive turn to the past but rather offers ways to reimagine an ethical future in which multispecies coexistence would lie at the heart of planetary survival. As Amitav Ghosh argues, conventional forms of narration often contain accumulated ecological awareness that modernity has side-lined (Ghosh 43). The Ramayana and the Mahabharata, approached from a post humanist critical perspective, emerge as two strong guides for reimagining interspecies relationships in our ecologically precarious times.

Aim of the Study

The study will seek to reinterpret representations of human–animal coexistence within the Mahabharata and the Ramayana through ecological and posthuman frameworks for offering culturally rooted answers to the Anthropocene crisis.

Research Methodology

The author chose a qualitative and interpretative research methodology which is based on the textual analysis and comparative philosophical inquiry as this research paper is aiming to getting into the Ramayana and Mahabharata shows human animal relationships and such representations resonate with contemporary Anthropocene debates

Theoretical Framework

The comprehension of the kinship in the Ramayana and the Mahabharata requires the study of three major critical approaches such as Animal Studies: apposes animal character agency; Posthumanism: flattens the human-centred hierarchy; and Eco criticism: situates narratives in ecological ethics as three of them reinterpret mythological narratives and prefigures modern environmental thought within the context of the Anthropocene.

Relevance to the Anthropocene Debate

Due to a global crisis worsening with regard human animal relationships the global scholars make a case for the re engagement of indigenous epistemologies which value more to the co-existence (Plumwood 21). The Indian epics, through these theoretical lenses in this case are stretched from academic analysis to actionable ethical models for a world in the present environmental danger.

Human–Animal Relations in Indian Cosmology

The indigenous concept of India is Vasudhaiva Kodambakkam that focuses on the basis of holistic view believing that all forms of life – humans, animals, and other elements of the environment, are interrelated expressions of the same cosmic essence. As per the writing of Christopher Chapple that Hindu philosophical writings emphatically deny the separation among living creatures and focus the presence of Atman or divine consciousness in all life (Chapple 52) subsequently any living forms are not positioned as tools for human benefit but definitely as co participants in sustaining universal harmony. The core concept of Indian philosophy is present the classical texts – the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas obviously emphasise that there are great respect and sacredness for animals by giving them symbolic, spiritual and functional importance. Living beings like cows, serpents, monkeys, birds and elephants are not just honoured for their species but they are shown as embodiment of cosmic forces attached to gods and mythic histories. An Indian writer Rita Sherma rightly makes a critical observation that in Hindu thought divinity is ecologically distributed that power and sacredness flow into nonhumans dissolving the species boundaries cf. Sherma 114. With this concept of equality since ages humans are to develop compassion, non-violence, and moral obligation towards the nonhuman world.

In the Ramayana, the alliance between humans and vanaras depicts a social model wherein different species collaborate to uphold Dharma-righteousness and justice. Similarly in the Mahabharata, the scenes of neglect of ecological duty which unleash destructive consequences are displayed. For instance, the burning of Kanadava forest serves as a caution against human domination over the nature and its natural beings (Hiltebeitel 301). Apart from this the theme of reincarnation of lord Vishnu finds

its significant place in shaping interspecies ethics, the fact is that a soul may take rebirth in whichever body as per the karma, it requires empathy toward all beings. This fluidity of existence demands that humans engage with animals not as others but as a relative of his or her own clan or family and this is linked through shared cosmic cycles (sarma 67). This is the concept that inherently questions anthropocentrism and confirms continuity among all living beings.

Human–Animal Narratives in the Ramayana

As it is well known that one of the Indian epics the Ramayana is the richest literary archives on human-animal relations within the Indian tradition as it depicts animals are not mere accessories, they are agents of moral action, political decision making and cosmic order. Some of the characters are depicted here

Hanuman: Agent of Devotion, Intelligence, and Power

One of the celebrated and reputed figure with no doubt is Hanuman who is vanara of extraordinary physical strength and intellectual brilliance. His entire life is the embodiment of Bakthi and Dharma, leaping across the ocean to the search of Sita or delivering the ring of the then king Rama as a symbol of hope demonstrate strategic thinking, empathy and moral agency unparalleled by even many human warriors are some of his actions. Hanuman's arc serves to disrupt purported hierarchies of species distinction through making an animal the most capable and moral hero of the epic. His entire life in the story reflects the Hindu recognition of spiritual excellence within nonhuman forms, positioning animal as vehicles of divine will (Golman 228).

Jatayu: Martyrdom and Ethical Heroism

Another important character is Jatayu, it is an old vulture who sacrifices her life in rescue of Sita's abduction by Ravana, though the bird is physically weak it fights against injustice thus symbolising the guardianship of virtue taken by nonhuman creature. Later Rama weeps a lot for Jatayu and gives a lot of respect during its funeral rites furthermore establish that the epic recognizes animals as full subjects of honor and emotional worth (Sattar 142). This undermines anthropocentric conceptions by situating a bird within the ethical community of kinship.

The Vanara Community: Collective Interspecies Alliance

The alliance between Rama and the vanaras at Kishkindha in the Ramayana symbolizes political and ecological alliance. The vanara kingdom under the leadership of Sugriva and council of Hanuman functions autonomously and negotiates on equal terms exhibiting political independence and autonomy from Shulman 198. Its involvement in the war against Lanka is one not of subservience but of mutual respect and common purpose. It explains that all living beings are equal in the world of Anthropocene.

A demigod and elder brother of another character in the Ramayana is Sampathi who sacrificed his two wings as a process of helping his younger brother Jatayu. After losing his wings he lived in the mountains of Vindhya as a sage while teaching others the importance of patience and wisdom in one's life. The story happened between both these brother in a competition flying high of the sky and losing his wings in rescue of his brother shows how much sympathy he has towards his younger brother which can inspire human beings.

Human–Animal Narratives in the Mahabharata

Ulupi

Ulipi is a princess of Naga's clan who is also a daughter of Kauravya, a serpent king. She enters in the story of the Mahabharata when Arjuna was in exile. As a part of this she becomes close to Arjuna and marries him. Ulipi plays a prominent role in the life of Arjuna after he is slain by his son by demonstrating her supernatural powers and devotion (Hiltebeitel. 2001)

Takshaka

He is a most significant in protecting the forest Kanadavaprasta, as a consequence of the clash between Kouravas and Pandavas the Pandavas are supposed come out of Hastinapura kingdom and to build a new kingdom for them. Before building Indraparasta Arjuna tries to set fire the Kandavaprasta forest then Takshaka objects and prays to lord Indra to rescue them. Thus he represents ecological retaliation against human arrogance. (Doniger, 2009)

Jambavan

It is a unique character in both the epics the Ramayana and Mahabharata, is epitome of wisdom it is said. This ancient bear-king assists Lord Rama and Lord Krishna in the crisis. He represents a deep time and ecological memory; his age places him unique which is beyond ecological scales and challenging Anthropocene short-term period. (Chakravarthy, 2009)

Kaliya

The classical tale of Kaliya from the Mahabharata forms a vital event in the childhood life of Krishna, once again establishing the divinity of Lord Vishnu and his incarnated self. One day when cows were drinking water in the river Kaliya suddenly their heads swirled and they realised that they were dying of deadly poison from the river water. Lord kirshna came upon in rescue of the cows and gave them a life-giving look. When the river water is being polluted by dominance and fear he threatens by poisoning the water which shows the survival and ecological purity. Even lord Krishna chooses to move the serpent elsewhere instead of killing it opens anthropogenic debate and it gives more ecological values. Involvement of kaliya family in this story proves the idea that the mythic ecosystem is built on relationships among many species, not just human beings.

The Boar

The boar figure in the Mahabharata which evokes stronger posthuman concepts unlike the Varaha, the incarnation of lord Vishnu, this demonic boar resists both human and divine authority. The life this Creature shows the right of nonhuman life to occupy and defend its own space challenging human-centred power and this is present in posthumanism elements. Its confrontation with Arjuna reveals that the forests in the epic are not passive settings but vibrant, sentient worlds capable of confronting human action.

Discussion: Mythology as a Guide for Ecological Imagination

The narrative in both the epics of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata proves that both animals and humans live together maintaining ecological structure. The relational ontology that how animals presented in these two epics reject what Braodotti refers to the “Hierarchy of species” that underpins modernity’s environmental exploitation (Braodotti 2013). One of the most fascinating things in these two epics is the interpretation of animals where animals intervene and come in rescue of dharma revealing moral capacities which was historically reserved for humans by western philosophy. Particularly the bird Jatayu in the Ramayana is not a mere narrative aside but a profound ecological reminder, the protection of the vulnerable goddess Sita in this regard Jtayu becomes a coollective duty transcending species boundaries (Narayana 1997). A much similar action is done in the case of Hanuman in view of posthumanism that claims intelligence and ethical response are not merely monopoly of the Homo sapiens (Wolfe 2010).

Even the incarnations of the lord Vishnu such as a first at first, tortoise and a boar indicate continuity rather a division between species which exactly symbolises the actual reciprocity but not simply as pyramid of domination and exploitation among species. And this is what the modern thought that invokes “shared vulnerability” among all living beings in the Anthropocene (Ghosh 2016). The above discussion clearly shows that the epics remind us that coexistence is not a utopian dream but an ancient ethic deeply embedded in cultural memory. Focusing much on the coexistence as mythological insights into contemporary environmental discourse enables us to cultivate a more compassionate, sustainable life.

Differences in Narrative Purpose and Ecological Symbolism

Some of the differences of these two epics in the use of animal symbolism to express ecological truths: they are-

Aspect	Ramayana	Mahabharata
Primary focus	Moral protection & loyalty	justice & cosmic balance
Animal representations	Supporters of righteousness (Vanaras Jatayu)	Hybrid beings & nature spirits regulating consequences (Nagas, Gandharvas)
Ethical function	Companions in heroism	Reminders of environmental limits

Narrative tone	Clear division of good vs. evil	Moral Ambiguity & Cyclical Justice
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Relevance to Anthropocene Concerns

The Anthropocene crisis is a product of a belief in the existence of humans above ecosystems. These epics counter that ideology by demanding that humans recognize:

The interpretation of the animals in the two epics counter that ideology by demanding that humans recognise in the anthropocene crisis-

1. Co-dependence among species
2. Rights of nonhuman life
3. The ecological violence and its consequences

Summary of the Argument

Element	Contribution to Anthropogenic Discourse
Shared ethics	Promotes multispecies coexistence
Symbolic differences	illuminate varied ecological teachings.
Mythic knowledge	Offers enduring models of living sustainably
Cultural relevance	Reframes environmental care in moral terms

Conclusion

The present analysis is based on the core concept of Indian philosophy is present the classical texts – the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas obviously emphasises that there is great respect and sacredness for animals by giving them symbolic, spiritual and functional importance. Living beings like cows, serpents, monkeys, birds and elephants are not just honoured for their species but they are shown as embodiment of cosmic forces attached to gods and mythic histories. An Indian writer Rita sherma rightly makes a critical observation that in Hindu thought divinity is ecologically distributed that power and sacredness flow into nonhumans dissolving the species boundaries. With this concept of equality since ages humans are to develop compassion, non-violence, and moral obligation towards the nonhuman world. In the Ramayana, the alliance between humans and vanaras depicts a social model wherein different species collaborate to uphold Dharma-righteousness and justice. Similarly in the Mahabharata, the scenes of neglect of ecological duty which unleash destructive consequences are displayed. For instance, the burning of Kanadava forest serves as a caution against human domination over the nature and its natural beings. Apart from this the theme of reincarnation of lord Vishnu finds its significant place in shaping interspecies ethics, the fact is that a soul may take rebirth in whichever body as per the karma, it requires empathy toward all beings.

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