

Original Article

Tracing Sustainable Roots of Feminine Personalities: Insights from Ramayana

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Abstract: *Ramayana is human experience. The magnificent epic paints beauty-pathos, suspense-rage, love-envy, pity-frustration with deep passion, culminating in a sustainable life. It is a journey in quest of identity of human enrichment. The central theme of the study aims to focus on the in-depth ideologies embedded amongst women personalities of the epic Ramayana. The qualities, attributes, and life-management characteristics of women in the Ramayana hemisphere serve as an intense backbone for sustainable human living in the coming generations. The paper attempts to highlight the immense contribution of the woman wisdom of Ramayana in shaping human lives and the golden principles governing leading a meaningful life. As an epic, Ramayana transcends every attempt to glorify ideal womanhood, portraying through Ahalya's sacredness, Kaushalya's motherhood, Sita's austerity, Tara's courage, Tadaka's fierceness, Surpankha's illusionary beauty, Mandodori's determination and Shabari's devotion. In Ramayana, the woman epitomizes universal motherhood with the potential to influence the entire universe. The epic glorifies the affection of a mother who has awakened, which exemplifies that love and compassion are not solely confined to one's own but a love extended to all of nature, all beings, including people, animals, plants, rocks, and rivers. The paper makes a modest attempt to visualize the impact of epic where Ramayana is truly a way of living a sustainable life.*

Keywords: *Ramayana, Woman, Epic, Sustainable, Wellbeing.*

I. ROADWAY TO RAMAYANA

One of the founding texts uniting the diverse cultures of the Indian Subcontinent and the Asian countries is the Ramayana. The story line sketched with twenty-five thousand verses of majestic Sanskrit and attributed to the poet Valmiki. The introductory canto of the epic proclaims. One who reads this sacred account of Rama, which can purify and erase all sins and is equal to the Vedas, is relieved of all sins. The Rama story has acted as a teaching story in various ways: a hero story, an itihasa, and the ayana "path" of Rama. Ramayana is more than a story. It was alive in the real world, validating a lifestyle, and a standard for behavior and worship. The three elements of the story—return, conflict, and separation—usually move in a circle. A system of values is also preserved in the sacred book. Since a sacred book represents a value, it must also represent the ideals that the community that created it upheld. In essence, the Ramayana tells the tale of how man becomes God. The central ethical issue of truthfulness is the crux of Ramayana. The Ramayana has remained a constant and perennial source of inspiration down the centuries in the regional literatures worldwide. Ramayana is not just an epic but a national fountainhead of all legendary lore and ethical conduct, which has grown with the people like the Indian Banyan with countless roots and branches in the imagination of the different regional men of letters. The appeal of the Ramayana is an expression of man's eternal quest for abiding human values and paving the way towards sustainable living.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The essential objective of the paper is to explore the supreme woman qualities of the ancient epic Ramayana. The idea of the paper focuses on:

- To explore the exemplary woman personalities portrayed in Ramayana.
- To showcase the sustainable responsibilities of feminine characters in Ramayana.

III. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The nature of the study is conceptual, extensive, descriptive, and analytical in nature. There will be no use of statistical tools and techniques in the study.

IV. ESSENCE OF WOMANKIND IN RAMAYANA

In the epic Ramayana, the role of women can be investigated from varied perspectives. As an epic, Ramayana transcends every attempt to glorify ideal womanhood.



A) Ahalya's Sacredness

In Ramayana, Ahalya can be explicated as a symbol of purity and portrays that whenever a woman was dishonored, she was not excommunicated; rather, she could regain her place through repentance and austerity.

B) Kaushalya's Motherhood

In Ramayana Kaushalya, in the early hours of her son's supposed inauguration as crown prince, Rama's mother offers the svasti-yaga, the offering of her son to assure good fortune for him.

C) Tara's Courage

The life of Tara has a chequered history. Her husband, Bali, the king of Kishkinda, was killed by Rama. Tara's lamentation on Bali's death ultimately imputes the fault to Rama. Tara excuses neither Sugrva nor Rama and the latter expressly failed to give proper reasons for which Rama had to kill Bali.

D) Tadaka's fierceness

The tale of Ramayana narrates how a yaksini, a mere female-camel, possesses the might of a thousand elephants. The metamorphosis of Taraka from a yakshini into a raksasi is a sad episode. Upon the killing of Sunda, Tadaka's son- the unexpected cruel event in Tadaka's life led to her complete degeneration. To begin with, whether Tadaka was justified in her reaction to Agastya's killing of Sunda or not, her reckless behavior was an expression of controlled vengeance.

E) Mandodari's Determination

Mandodari, the wife of Ravana was a strong woman. The abduction of Sita, in particular, by her husband left a permanent sore in her mind, but she never transgressed the limit as it would mean a loss of faith in her husband. She criticized her husband and agreed with his younger brother Bibhisana. Mandodari's unflinching faith in her unfaithful husband secures her place as an ideal woman in the actual meaning of the phrase.

F) Shabari's Devotion

The tale of the purification and devotion of Shabari is unfolded in the epic Ramayana. Shabari belonged to the Bhila caste and was a disciple of the sage Matanga. Shabari was a kind-hearted, affectionate host who fed Rama and Lakshmana with water, fruit, flowers, leaves, etc. After that, Lord Rama spoke to her, "*You ask for anything you desire*". Then Shabari said, "*Oh Lord, take me under your protection and let me achieve salvation.*" She then voluntarily relinquished her life and proceeded to Vaikuntha, the eternal abode of Vishnu.

These women appear to have been evaluated based on their otherwise excellent behavior as wives, the purity of their intentions, and their ideals, rather than any outward behavioral flaws or physical flare-ups for which they bear no responsibility. In the contemporary period epic Ramayana, there are instances of diverse womankind where the woman is regarded as a devata (Goddess) and pramada (seducer). Despite her sincerity or love for the truth, she lacks mental equilibrium, judgment, and strength of character. Despite being the head of the household, she doesn't deserve autonomy or freedom, not even when it comes to family matters. Irrespective of such contradiction, there is an attitude of deep reverence towards this 'ideal' woman in the mind of every faith-loving individual. Moreover, despite varied opinions and prejudices, the golden epic of Ramayana portrays the true essence of a woman realistically vests as a young woman, a wife, a mother, a householder, and the matriarch of the household, maintaining and elevating the family and its finest customs

V. SITA: THE EPITOME OF WOMANHOOD

It is said that Sita performs Sandhya prayers, or ritual prayers, in the morning, noon, and evening, accompanied by mantras. Sita is ready to give up all the comforts of the palace and go into the forest with her husband. Sita Ramayana is the symbol of the ideal of the wife. In the past, women were viewed as men's equals in that their spouse's actions, which included sitting by his side during ceremonies, were to be completely embraced by the wife in order for him to gain merit or advance spiritually. Whereas the wife saw her husband as the physical embodiment of the Lord, the husband focused his attention on the Supreme Being during his daily routine and meditations.

VI. THE PERENNIAL FLOW OF SUSTAINABLE RELATIONSHIPS: AN OUTLOOK FROM RAMAYANA

The Upanishads state that before creation, even before the emergence of light, shape or form, and speak of a process through which the One will manifest itself in many forms, including the male and the female ones. The relevance of equality of all human beings stands on the ground that they are all alike and the product of the five elements of panch-bhutas. Manusmriti, one of the earliest Dharmashatra texts, asserts that the process of self-division of the one included gender differentiation as well. The Upanishads, too, speak of human beings generally, not of men as opposed to women. They formulate problems of life and offer thoughtful solutions for the whole of humanity. This supreme objective of self-realization is held to be accessible to men and women alike. The Samhita literature speaks of women as kulpalak (family nurturers). Even in the post-Samhita period, the woman was regarded as ardhangini, one-half of the very being of man and in no way subordinate to him. According

to Manu, the Goddess of fortune and her spouse are the same thing; the wife is also worthy of worship, illuminator of the home and full of bliss due to giving birth to children. The highest possible praise for women could be found in Manusmṛiti:

- The Gods are happy when women are respected; however, no sacred rites can bring rewards to those who do not honor women.
- Between wives (Striyah) who are destined to bear children who secure many blessings, who are worthy of worship and irradiate (their) dwellings and between the Goddess of Fortune (Striyah who reside) in the houses (of men), there is no difference whatsoever.
- In the production of children, the nurturing of those born, and the daily life of man (of these matters), women are visibly the cause.
- Offspring are the due performance of religious rites, faithful service, the highest conjugal happiness, and heavenly bliss for the ancestors, and oneself depends on one's wife alone.

Yajñavalkya extols women and proclaims them as earthy embodiments of all divine virtues. The typical qualities of women are God-given gifts to them. Mahabharata looks at women as the light and very life of a home and as the pre-eminent source of family happiness. It is important to note that in ancient India, society's attitude towards even a fallen woman was quite different from today's. She was even considered auspicious enough to be invited to ceremonial occasions, the reason being that such a woman was regarded as the preserver of some of the sixty-four arts, especially music and dance. According to Mahabharata, "In a house where the woman is honoured, there Gods are pleased. But where they are not honoured and are insulted nothing does in that house yields good results".

VII. EXEMPLARY SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES IN THE RAMAYANA ERA

In most of the Upanishads, a striking phenomenon can be visualized where Purusha and Prakṛiti are the embodiment of Lord Shiva- the eternal figure of Oneness and Divinity. An illustration of glorified sustainable practices of womanhood in the Ramayana tradition can be visualized in the following table:

SL.No.	Practices	Sustainable Implications
i.	Birth of Sita	The birth of Sita at King Janaka's palace was always regarded as a welcome event. It indicates that their people in ancient times wished for the birth of a daughter, so in one of the early Upanishads, a certain ritual was recommended to guarantee the birth of a daughter who would study. A daughter could prove to be better than a son; a daughter like that was considered a family pride.
ii.	Philosophical Debate of Gargi & Yajñavalkya	The lady philosopher Gargi posed the most nuanced philosophical queries for discussion during a gathering of philosophers convened by King Janaka. She launched her attack on Yajñavalkya with admirable coolness and confidence. Gargi's in-depth interrogation of Yajñavalkya demonstrates her exceptional dialectic skills.
iv.	Visvamitra ideology of samskaras in women	The value-based dispositions or samskaras are the very essence of womanhood. The most emphatic and comprehensive exaltation of the value of a woman comes from the sage Visvamitra. He says categorically that ideally, a wife is eminently helpful in enabling her husband to strive successfully. After all, the four principal objectives of life, namely righteous living, securing material resources, gratification of desires and spiritual emancipation, are the basic ingredients of a sustainable life.
v.	Niyoga Custom by sage Vaisṛtha	The custom of Niyoga recommends a chastised life for a widow, but if she wishes to have a son, provided she does not have any issue with her first husband, she could have one son through the system of Niyoga. Vaisṛtha also approves of Niyoga and recommended only one son through this system. The only provision was that she should choose a stranger if a brother-in-law was unavailable.
vi.	Widow Remarriage by Vaisṛtha Dharmastra	A widow is allowed to remarry if she desires, which is evident from the verse of Rgveda, in which she was asked to get up and enter the world of the living while she lay beside her deceased spouse on the funeral pyre. Tara, the widow of Banara king Vali and her remarriage with Sugriva, the younger brother of Vali, was just a random case in the prevalent social system that extends permission to remarry even to a woman having children.

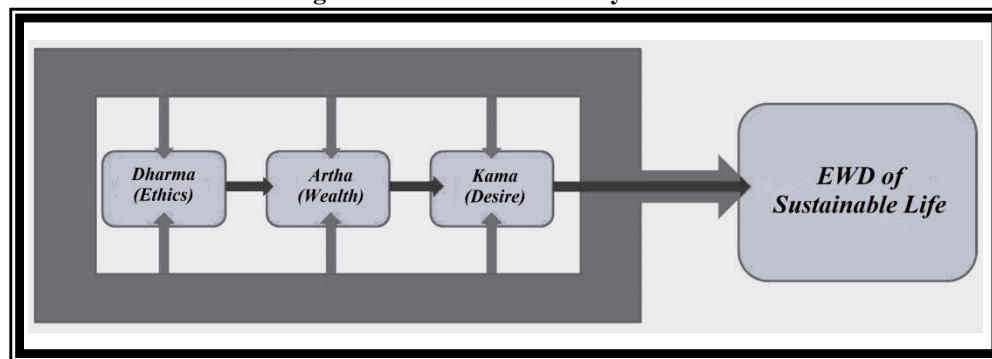
vii.	Concept of Stridhana in the Epic Era	In the Vedic period, women were entitled to own and bequeath their special properties or stridhana. After her marriage with Rama, Princess Sita was gifted with certain types of moveable property, mostly jewellery and gifts related to many. Regarding the inheritance of stridhana, the straightforward rule laid down that the woman's sons and daughters should succeed together, taking equal shares.
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According to Tagore, “Women are the gifts of the absolute being, and she has come to this world to strengthen to enlighten fame and prestige of man”. It can be rightly asserted that, therefore, the tradition did not constitute the basis for the dispute over women's status; actually, the opposite was true. In actuality, women became the forum for discussion and reform of tradition.

VIII. COLLATING SUSTAINABLE FRAMEWORK

Sustainability is the bell tone of the present millennium. Surviving and sustaining is considered the lifeline rhythm of mankind globally. It is quite imperative that the relevance of achieving a sustainable, goal-oriented life is the need of the hour. A sustainable life framework is designed in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sustainable Life Cycle Model



Source: Author's creation

IX. IMPLICATION AND USEFULNESS OF THE STUDY

The women exhibit a state of maturity and courageously exercise their capacity to think, reason, and make choices. All of them are on a common platform in establishing meaningful alliances with life and the people who live with them or around them. They would rather think, speak, and act for themselves within the framework of relationships and familial values and yet negotiate and create an individual space and identity of their own. The Ramayana has its own history ingrained in the numerous versions created around the theme at various points in time and location, so it does not belong to any historical period. A multitude of groups' appropriation of the story results in many versions that express those groups' social goals and ideological concerns. The ancient Indian scripture Ramayana, time and again, speaks of norms of an ideal way of living wherein all kinds of living beings live together in blissful harmony. An awareness of our actions and a rise in human consciousness born out of inner commitment is the call of the hour.

X. CONCLUDING HIGHLIGHTS

The substance of the Rama Tale has exercised through history on the minds and hearts of the people of India, the land of its birth is quite remarkable. On the threshold of the new millennium engulfed with technological innovation, fluctuating climate and changing life patterns have brought a profound transformation in the global lifeline. At this juncture, the relevance of Ramayana in the present era is thus quite pertinent as it has glorified the ideals of human beings who stood for Dharma and Satya in life's journey. It was an inherently dynamic tradition of story-telling. Ramayana stories did not fossilize in India but continued to grow and change. It has bestowed upon us the perfect woman, the epitome of grace and virtue for women. It has demonstrated to us the perfect family structure in which everyone prioritizes the well-being of one another. It has provided us with role models of perfect companions, brothers, and servants who go above and beyond to console their loved ones. It has presented us with the perfect State. To put it another way, it has presented us with enough concepts and goals to motivate us and help us transcend from the human to the divine. The paper advocates that spiritual response is needed to maintain equilibrium in all aspects of human life. The real essence of the paper visualizes a holistic perspective of the epic promulgating the universal message for every human being to lead a sustainable life at all levels, global-organizational-individual, and thus spreading the optimistic vibes of humanity as;

“LokahSamastahSukhinoBhavantu” – Let the entire world be Happy.

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