

Ethical Ideals and the Landscape of Dharma in the Valmiki Ramayana

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ABSTRACT : *Ramayana as a narrative, embodies a happy amalgamation of several cherished ideals—those of a King (Raja Dharma), of a son (Putra Dharma), of a husband (Swami Dharma), of a brother (Bhratru Dharma). Similarly, Sita, Kausalya, Tara, and Mondadori represent the ideals of a wife (Stree Dharma). Sumantra, Guha, Bharadvaja, Jatayu, Sampati, Sabari, and Hanuman, typify the ideals of a subject (Praja Dharma or Sevaka Dharma). There is also the delineation of the ideal friendship (Mitra Dharma) between Rama, Sugriva, and Vibhishana. (Nayak; 1985, 15). The uniqueness of the Ramayana narrative consists in portraying its characters primarily as beings with flesh and blood embodying the highest ideals that humankind could emulate. This paper discusses some important points from Valmiki Ramayana that showcase important ethical values and different strands of Dharma based on the Dharma Sastras of Sanatana Dharma. Better decisions are the results of better choices of ethical values and Dharma, and these are the concepts that keep society more human than anything else does. The paper explores multiple strands of the narrative to understand multiple possibilities of truths against the vast landscape of Dharma.*

KEYWORDS – Culture, Dharma, Ethics, Morals, Ramayana, Values

I. INTRODUCTION

Dharma is a very complex concept that makes precise definition or explanation difficult. This word is variously rendered as "statute, ordinance, law, usage, customary observance, duty; (one's own) obligation, self-initiated action (ethical, social, spiritual); right, justice; righteousness, good conduct; virtue, morality, religion, religious merit, good; attribute, quality, feature (both concrete and abstract); also, the personification of many human beings, deities, abstract phenomenon. It is, of course, difficult to find straightforward equivalents in English for dharma, and in any case, the attempt to do so all too easily suggests distinct meanings for the word rather than simply the foregrounding of one aspect of its total meaning (Brockington 2004, 656). Being one of the oldest belief systems in the world, Sanatana Dharma is beyond a simple explanation. It is an exploration of a way of life and understanding of a Universal truth. A way of life that applies across the globe and considers not one but many texts as authentic since the scope of it is inconceivably large. In addition, interpreting Hinduism is challenging since the tradition is extremely diverse. (Dhand; 2002, 350).

The concept of "Dharma" in the Vedic Age was very different from how it was perceived during the Ancient, Medieval, and Modern ages. In the early Vedic Age (especially Rigveda), dharma was closely related to the 'cosmic ordinance' that was termed as 'rta' or universal harmony and order. However, as time passed by, the meaning and the usage of this word have changed so much that, sometimes, it is also considered religion to an

extent, which is not true. Though religion, especially, Bharat-originated religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism, play a major role in the definition and understanding of 'Dharma,' this word is considerably larger than the concept of religion. As a mode of life or code of conduct, the notion of Dharma foregrounded the regulation of human activities as a member of the society and as an individual, and was a means of the goal of human existence (Patyal 1995, 158). Smriti literature that has the Itihasa like Ramayana, Mahabharata and Puranas, played a major role in getting closer the definitions of Dharma and Ethical values to the common person by narrating them as stories. This storytelling, which has eventually turned into mythologies over a period, always had a deep impact on the lives of people as they could easily connect themselves with the characters in the Itihasa and Puranas and would eventually learn from the life experiences that are defined in the stories. Several modern scholars regard the Mahabharata as an exploration of the problems involved in establishing the nature of Dharma, but they regard the Ramayana as an affirmation of the centrality of Dharma to all right endeavors (Brockington 2004, 656). The epics of Ramayana and Mahabharata many a time put the place of righteousness or Dharma above their interests and likes and this shows the value that Dharma occupies as an Ethical nature in the Bharata Pantheon.

One looks in vain to traditional Hindu thought for a body of literature corresponding directly to that of the discipline of ethics in the West, or for a Sanskrit term equivalent to ethics (Creel 1975, 161). Philosophical inquiry into Hindu ethics is a modern activity; it seems that India had no interest in systematic discussions of ethics per se, though, as Creel reassures us that "India in the past did not develop a branch of philosophy similar to ethics in the West is, of course, not tantamount to the absence of ethics in India". It would seem, therefore, that if one is to discuss the apparent oxymoron of Hindu Ethics, or more specifically Hindu Ethical Theory and one must begin with rudimentary definitions, and then determine how well Western ethics and Hindu Dharma translate into each other. In his work "Hindu Ethics: A Philosophical Study," Roy Perrett (1998), offers a simple definition of ethics. Ethics, he says, is fundamentally concerned with two questions: "What ought we to do?" and "Why ought we to do it?" (Perrett 1998, 1). An ethical theory, in turn, typically involves two components: a theory of the 'Right' and a theory of the 'Good' (Perrett 1998, 1). This concept of what to be chosen as right and good (Metaethics) is a by default concept of Dharma as we understand it. In an article, Arti Dhand explains the concepts like "Dharma of Ethics and Ethics of Dharma" (Dhand 2002, 347).

In this sense, Ethical values and Dharma are often subjective and are dependent on the Culture that they are bred into. This concept is known as "Ethical Cultural relativism." In the words of Ruth Benedict from *The Patterns of Culture* (1934), "Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits." There are no universal moral truths, they say; the customs of different societies are all that exist. To many people, this observation — "Different cultures have different moral codes"—seems like the key to understanding morality. To call a custom "correct" or "incorrect" would imply that we could judge that custom by some independent standard of right and wrong. However, no such standard exists; every standard is culture-bound. Nevertheless, there are certainly some moral rules that all societies must embrace like killing and murder, because those rules are necessary for society to exist. However, this does not apply to kinship or warfare, as the slaying of enemies and forces for the larger welfare of communities follow a different ethical paradigm. War does not spring out of nowhere; rather the germs incubate within inequitable societal systems and destructive social mores as well as within individual or collective greed (Hindery 1976, 304). Cultural relativism says, in effect, that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Cultural relativism challenges our belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth. (Rachels 16).

The following claims have all been made by cultural relativists: (Rachels 16)

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.

3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that always hold good for all people.
4. The moral code of our society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

Cultural relativism is a genuine insight and sees things as they are in a society without being judgmental. When one does not belong to a particular time or a particular society, it is ethical not to judge and criticize their culture. That is how one should view mythological stories too. Cultural relativism also makes a point that an ethnocentric view is not a genuine view when one hears or studies and tries to understand Classical Literature. (Sattar 2019, xiii). Ramayana and Mahabharata are Classic literature and the very notion of Classical Literature implies that while it may be removed in time from the reader, it still speaks with relevance and meaning (Sattar 2019, xiii). No doubt, these epics still hold ethical values that are suitable for any generation that reads them making this literature eternal.

When it comes to India, the ethical teachings and their values and practices were always philosophical from the beginning. The Vedas, the oldest literatures produced had a separate section for philosophical and ethical values known as the Upanishads. An elaborate understanding of them comes in the form of Vedanta (which literally means the end of the last section of the Veda) which has been the fundamental manual guide for all the philosophies and lifestyles that have sprouted in India (Radhakrishnan 1923, 21). Epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata are not just histories and partly mythologies, but encyclopedias of cultural, moral, and ethical values that have been so deep-rooted and have eventually turned into religious texts. Traditionally, a more important link between religion and ethics is that of a regulatory one. In its crudest form, the reason is that those who obey the moral law would be rewarded with an eternity of bliss while everyone else roasts in hell. In more sophisticated versions, the motivation provided by religion is more inspirational and less blatantly self-interested.

However, there is a problem, especially in the Indian context. If the cultural relativism of ethical values is taken for granted, then the argument of cultural relativism is invoked to justify religious laws violating basic notions of human rights. The defense of cultural relativism might be required for some communities to maintain their practices, but the fear that this argument might be used to justify various social evils of religion and culture overpowers its positive uses. Thus, the subject of these Ethical values consists of the fundamental issues of practical decision-making, and its major concerns include the nature of ultimate value and the standards by which human actions can be judged right or wrong. One may question when ethics began and how it originated. If one has in mind ethics proper—i.e., the systematic study of what is morally right and wrong (Rachels 2010, 18)—ethics could have come into existence only when human beings started to reflect on the best way to live. This reflective stage emerged long after human societies had developed some kind of morality, usually in the form of customary standards of right and wrong conduct (Rachels 2010, 18).

In this way, literature like Ramayana has been a part of the religious, spiritual, and social lives of the people of India and Southeast Asia and has devised certain rulebooks for ethical values for the people who live in communities and forests. A Research survey conducted by Harikumar Pallathadka titled "Role of Ramayana in Transformation of the Personal and Professional Life of Indians: An Empirical Investigation Based on Age and Regions," it was concluded that there is a 58% of transformation in the lives of Men and 42% in Women in Business, Working class and Entrepreneur sectors (Pallathadka 2022, 120).

II. ETHICAL VALUES AND DHARMA IN VALMIKI RAMAYANA

The story and journey of Rama, the Ramayana, spreads across all over the cultures of the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia (Sattar 2019, 1). It appears in literature, music, dance, and drama, in painting and sculpture, in classical and folk traditions, in hundreds of languages, and in thousands of tellings and retellings from thousands of tellers. A. K. Ramanujan himself says "In India, no one reads and listens to the Ramayana and the Mahabharata for the first time. The stories are there. Always ready." (Richman 1991, 46). The Ramayana has been given the

status of not just an Epic but it is also a Smriti (remembered) literature that falls into the category of “Itihasa.” The influence of Ramayana is so profound, that it has been a popular literature in many parts of not just India, but the World. The Ramayana has its own culture and ethos. The Ramayana upholds a system of values. Khan in his book ‘The Concept of Dharma in Ramayana’ (1965) praises the poem and it is among the loudest, and calls Valmiki the “Father of Hindu moral thought” (Khan 1965, 180). Even Occidental scholars agree that no work of world literature secular [but not separated from the sacred] in its origin has ever exerted so profound an influence on the life and thought of a people as the Valmiki Ramayana (Hindery 289). As discussed before, on the landscape of cultural relativism ethical values and Dharma, are dependent on the region, time, and culture in which we see or hear of them. Similarly, in Valmiki Ramayana, the ethical values that have been indirectly taught also come under the “Subjectivism” of cultural relativism, which says, “Every individual should have their own decision making in deciding what to do that is right or wrong to them.” One finds in Rama a happy amalgamation of all the cherished ideals of a King (Raja Dharma), of a son (Putra Dharma), of a husband (Swami Dharma), of a brother (Bhratru Dharma) and can discover in Sita, Kausalya, Tara, and Mandodari the ideals of a wife (Stree Dharma). Sumantra, Guha, Bharadvaja, Jatayu, Sampati, Sabari, and Hanuman, typify the ideals of a subject (Praja Dharma or Sevaka Dharma). There is also the delineation of the ideal friendship (Mitra Dharma) between Rama and Sugriva, Vibhishana. (Nayak 1985, 15). This is also dependent on the question of the relativity of the culture and value systems of that time. The uniqueness of the poet consists in portraying the characters not as Gods or supra-human species but as beings with flesh and blood embodying the highest ideals that mankind could emulate. Valmiki Ramayana is divided into 7 Sections/Cantos called ‘Kanda’ starting from Bala Kanda to Uttara Kanda. Each Kanda in chronological order will be taken here to discuss some of the Dharma concepts and ethical values.

II.I Bala Kanda

Sage Vishwamithra takes Rama and Lakshmana to the forest with the permission of King Dasharatha to protect the yagna that he would be performing (1-19-8 Valmiki Ramayana). On the way, they come across a demoness named Thataka (1-24-29 Valmiki Ramayana). Sri Rama was initially doubtful about killing a demoness as killing a woman is against the rules of the royals. But here on the behest of Sage Vishwamithra,

स्वबाहुबलमाश्रित्य जहीमां दुष्टचारिणीम् |
मन्त्रियोगादिमं देशं कुरु निष्कण्टकं पुनः || 1-24-29

svabāhubalam āśritya jahī māṃ duṣṭacāriṇīm |
manniyogād imaṃ deśaṃ kuru niṣkaṇṭakaṃ punaḥ || 1-24-29

Translation: "Depending upon the strength of your self-confidence you have to eradicate this evildoer woman, and assigned by me you have to make this province free from thorniness."

Rama had to decide to slay the demoness even though it was against his ethical principles. Both Rama and Lakshmana chose the Ashrama Dharma of Rama as a Brahmachari where the instructions of the Guru must be mandatorily followed.

II.II Ayodhya Kanda

Dasaratha had borne no children from his wives (Griffith 2017, 365). Dasaratha being a childless king married Kaikeyi for the sake of progeny (Karpatri 2001, 375-378). At the time of marriage, Dasaratha promised Kaikeyi's father that only the child of her womb would be crowned as king after him (Valmiki 2.107.3). Sri Rama tells about this promise of their father to Bharata in this way:

पुरा भ्रातः पिता नः स मातरम् ते समुद्रहन् |
मातामहे समाश्रौषीद् राज्यं शुल्कम् अनुत्तमम् || 2-107-3

purā bhrātāḥ pitā naḥ sa mātaraṃ te samudvahan |
mātāmahe samāśrauṣīd rājya-śūlkam anuttamam || 2-107-3

Translation: "O, My brother! Long ago, when our father married your mother, he promised your maternal grandfather that he would confer his kingdom as an exceptional marriage gift."

Having saved Dasharatha in a battle between him and the demons once (Valmiki Ramayana 2-11-19), Kaikeyi asks Dasharatha about the promises that he has bestowed on her, she would ask them now (Valmiki Ramayana 2-11-21). Though Dasharatha had promised Kaikeyi's father that her son Bharata would inherit the throne, once given a ruler's word, is inviolable. Breaking a solemn promise undermines trust in governance and personal integrity. Even if the promise leads to personal or familial suffering, the king's obligation to Dharma outweighs private desire. Dasharatha's promise creates a moral dilemma: his personal affection for Rama vs. his word to Kaikeyi's father. The ethics embedded here is principled action under constraint, doing what is morally right, even at personal or emotional cost. This is an early illustration of moral exemplarity: leaders must act according to Dharma, not convenience.

अभिषेकसमारम्भो राघवस्योपकल्पितः |
अनेनैवाभिषे केण भरतो मेऽभिषिच्यताम् || 2-11-23

abhiṣekasamārambho rāghavasyopakalpitaḥ |
anenaivābhiṣekeṇa bharato me'bhīṣicyatām || 2-11-23

Translation: "All arrangements have been made to undertake Rama's coronation. Let my Bharata instead be coronated on this occasion itself".

This moment in the *Ayodhya Kaṇḍa* is one of the clearest ethical crises in the Valmiki Ramayana. This is not a conflict between right and wrong, but between two competing rights.

1. Raja Dharma – the king's duty to uphold truth, justice, and royal promises
2. Personal Desire (Putra-Sneha) – his deep love for Rama and longing to see him crowned

Dasharatha's earlier promise to Kaikeyi (and her father) carries political and moral weight. In classical Indian thought, a king's word is law; breaking it destabilizes cosmic and social order (*rta* → *dharma*). Ethically, truthfulness (*satya*) is non-negotiable in kingship. A king cannot act merely as a father; he must act as a custodian of social order. Personal affection, if allowed to override duty, risks turning governance into arbitrariness. Thus, Raja Dharma demands self-sacrifice of personal happiness for public trust. Dasharatha's suffering does not arise from wrongdoing but from moral integrity. He does not choose exile lightly; he is ethically compelled. This makes his condition tragic rather than unethical. In doing so, he establishes a crucial ethical principle of the Ramayana: Dharma is not what pleases the self, but what preserves moral order—even at the cost of the self. This episode sets the moral foundation for the entire epic: Rāma's obedience mirrors Dasharatha's commitment to Dharma, Bharata's refusal of kingship emerges from the same ethical soil, The Ramayana thus portrays ethics as relational and cumulative.

नव पञ्च च वर्षाणि दण्डकारण्यमाश्रितः |
चीराजिनजटाधारी रामो भवतु तापसः || 2-11-27

nava pañca ca varṣāṇi daṇḍakāraṇyam āśritaḥ |
cīrājina-jaṭādhārī rāmo bhavatu tāpasah || 2-11-27

Translation: "Rama has to take refuge in the forest of Dandaka for fourteen years and let him become an ascetic wearing rag, deerskin, and matted hair".

King Dasharatha having known the fact that the city of Ayodhya and the country of Kosala will be chaotic, still sticks to his promises and lets his favourite of all sons, Sri Rama sent to the forest for 14 years of exile. The agony of a father and the dharma of a King to not break promises was a challenging condition and Dasharatha chose the latter Dharma and ethical value above his interests and likes. It crystallizes the ethical cost of Rāja Dharma and It becomes the starting point of Rāma's moral exemplarity. Sita, Rama's lawfully wedded wife was not a part of the boon that Kaikeyi had asked for. Instead, when Rama narrated to Sita the instructions given by his father,

इति इव विलपन्तीम् ताम् प्रोवाच रघु नन्दनः ।
सीते तत्रभवांस् तात प्रव्राजयति माम् वनम् ॥ 2-27-4

iti iva vilapantīm tām provāca raghu-nandanah |
sīte tatrabhavāṃs tātaḥ pravrajayati mām vanam || 2-27-4

Translation: "Rama spoke thus to Sita, who is lamenting: Oh, Sita! My venerable father is sending me to a forest in exile."

The verse highlights Rama's ethical restraint and filial obedience (Putra Dharma)—he conveys a life-altering command without bitterness, accusation, or emotional excess, embodying inner discipline. Sita's response to Rāma's announcement of exile is one of the clearest and most nuanced articulations of *Stree Dharma* in the Valmiki Ramayana.

चतुर्दश हि वर्षाणि वस्तव्यम् दण्डके मया ।
पित्रा मे भरतः च अपि यौवराज्ये नियोजितः ॥ 2-27-9

caturdaśa hi varṣāṇi vastavyam daṇḍake mayā |
pitṛā me bharataś cāpi yauvarājye niyojitaḥ || 2-27-9

Translation: "I must dwell in Dandaka Forest for fourteen years. Bharata is being appointed as prince by my father." Further goes on to say that:

अहम् गमिष्यामि महा वनम् प्रिये ।
त्वया हि वस्तव्यम् इह एव भामिनि ।
यथा व्यलीकम् कुरुषे न कस्यचित् ।
तथा त्वया कार्यम् इदम् वचो मम ॥ 2-27-13

ahaṃ gamiṣyāmi mahāvanam priye |
tvayā hi vastavyam ihaiva bhāmini |
yathā vyalīkaṃ kuruṣe na kasyacit |
tathā tvayā kāryam idaṃ vaco mama || 2-27-13

Translation: "Oh, my dear Sita! I can go to the great forest. You can stay here only, without harming anyone as it is. Listen to my words."

Nevertheless, as *Stree Dharma*, Sita chose to walk the path with her husband Sri Rama. Importantly, it is not passive obedience, but an ethically reasoned, emotionally grounded choice. Rama advises her to remain in Ayodhya, protected and comfortable. But she declares that separation from her husband is worse than exile itself. In classical Hindu ethics, a wife is not merely a dependent but a partner in Dharma. Thus, *Stree Dharma* here aligns with *Ashrama Dharma* (householder–renunciant transition).

त्वया च सह गन्तव्यम् मया गुरु जन आज्ञया ।
त्वद् वियोगेन मे राम त्यक्तव्यम् इह जीवितम् ॥ 2-27-18

tvayā ca saha gantavyam mayā guru-jana-ājñāyā |
tvad-viyogena me rāma tyaktavyam iha jīvitam || 2-27-18

Translation: "Oh, Rama! As per the command of the elders, I also should go along with you. My life is to be abandoned here if I were separated from you."

The portrayal of Rama also typifies the moral height in the unusual display of magnanimity of mind and renunciation. When Lakshmana chastises Kaikeyi for the cunning design; Rama, without expressing the least sense of perturbation, gives rationale to her conduct by arguing that she must have been under the sway of some evil forces and had intended it despite herself. (Hindery 1976)

He says:

अपया सीएम जीवितं जहयं त्वं व।
सीते सा लक्ष्मणं न तु प्रतिजनारा संसृत्य ब्रह्मनेवयो विशेषगताः॥ 2-27-20

apāyād api me jīvitam jahyām tvadrte prabho |
sīte sā lakṣmaṇam nātha na tu pratijānate || 2-27-20

Translation: "O Lord, even if my life were to be lost, I would abandon it without hesitation apart from you. O Rāma, Sītā does not acknowledge even Lakṣmaṇa for you alone are her chosen refuge."

This verse marks the culmination of Sita's ethical reasoning in Ayodhya Kāṇḍa and represents a powerful articulation of Stree Dharma as existential commitment rather than social dependency. Sita does not merely express emotional attachment; she presents separation from Rama as a negation of meaningful life itself. Her declaration that she does not "acknowledge even Lakshmana" is not a rejection of familial bonds but an assertion of exclusive ethical alignment with her husband's Dharma.

II.III Aranya Kanda

अहं हि दण्डकारण्ये वसामि नियतव्रतः |
मुनिनां दुष्टभावानां निहन्ता धर्मसंहितः || 3-10-19

ahaṁ hi daṇḍakāraṇye vasāmi niyata-vrataḥ |
munīnām duṣṭabhāvanām nihantā dharma-saṁhitaḥ || 3-10-19

Translation: "I dwell in the Daṇḍaka forest, steadfast in my sacred vow;
I am bound by Dharma to destroy those of wicked intent
who bring harm to the sages."

This verse articulates Kṣatriya Dharma in its most classical form, the protection of ascetics and the moral order, even through violence, when necessary. Rama does not frame the slaying of demons as personal vengeance but as a Dharmic obligation undertaken through a vowed restraint (*niyata-vrata*). The ethical force of the verse lies in its assertion that violence, when sanctioned by Dharma and directed toward the protection of the innocent, becomes morally legitimate. Aranya Kāṇḍa thus reframes forest warfare not as aggression but as ethical guardianship, reinforcing the idea that Dharma may demand action that is outwardly harsh but inwardly just.

II.IV Kishkinda Kanda

When Vali had taken his brother Sugreeva's wife Ruma into his custody,

अहम् विनिकृतो भ्रात्रा चरामि एष भयार्दितः |
ऋष्यमूकम् गिरि वरम् हत भार्यः सुदुःखितः || 4-4-5

ahaṃ vinikṛto bhrātrā carāmi eṣa bhayārditaḥ |
ṛṣyamūkaṃ giri-varaṃ hṛta-bhāryaḥ suduḥkhitaḥ || 4-4-5

Translation: "I have been wronged and cast out by my own brother, and I wander here, filled with fear. Having lost my wife, overwhelmed by grief, I dwell upon this noble mountain, Ṛṣyamūka."

One would view it as unethical, as the readers would try to relate that to the modern contemporary world and as per the rules of the city (Ayodhya). But, in terms of cultural relativism, a brother taking his deceased or abandoned brother's wife into custody is a norm. (Mona Mehta, "Gond Ramayani", *speakingtree.in*, www.speakingtree.in/article/gond-ramayani). Moreover, polyandry (one woman having many husbands and particularly brothers is an acceptable social norm in those days. We can see Draupadi also as an example of this from Mahabharata). Even in this condition, Sri Rama also supports Sugreeva in his complaint against his brother and says:

उपकार फलम् मित्रम् अपकारो अरि लक्षणम् |
अद्य एव तम् वधिष्यामि तव भार्या अपहारिणम् || 4-8-21

upakāra phalam mitram, apakāro ari lakṣaṇam |
adya eva tam vadhiṣyāmi tava bhāryā apahāriṇam || 4-8-21

Translation: "A friend is known by the fruit of his help; the characteristic of an enemy is wrongdoing. Today itself I will kill him, the one who has taken away your wife."

This conveys the idea that true friends bring benefit, enemies bring harm, and here the speaker (Sri Rama) is expressing the intent to avenge the abduction of his wife. Sri Rama here judges and tries to apply the rules of the city (Ayodhya) to the forest (Vanara = Vana (forest)+Nara(man)) setting. Seen from a Cultural relativism perspective, the decision taken by Vali is ethical in a sense. However, Rama explains to dying Vali as to why he gave such a punishment. Rama categorically explains all the questions put by Vali in the last chapter from the viewpoint of scriptures that lay down principles for *Sanatana dharma*, the eternal tradition, as well as *raja dharma*, the king's duty. Vali finally concludes that there is someone superior to him and thus seeks refuge in Rama.

अस्य त्वम् धरमाणस्य सुग्रीवस्य महात्मनः |
रुमायाम् वर्तसे कामात् सुषायाम् पाप कर्मकृत् || 4-18-19

asya tvam dharamāṇasya sugrīvasya mahātmanah |
rumāyām vartase kāmāt sūṣāyām pāpa karmakṛt || 4-18-19

Translation: "While the great-souled Sugreeva is still alive, you with your habit of sinful acts have lustily misbehaved with Sugreeva's wife Ruma, who should be counted as your daughter-in-law."

It became, also, the enjoined duty of Rama to kill Vali because Sugriva, forlorn and deprived of his legitimate rights by his arrogant and non-circumspection brother, prays refuge in Rama and the latter promises his due. This highlights the speaker's (Sri Rama) condemnation of the immoral action, emphasizing the violation of dharma by living with another's wife.

II.V Sundara Kanda

Sita was both delighted and depressed respectively on hearing Rama's episode from Hanuma and Rama's overwhelmed sorrow caused by his dissociation from her. She beseeches Hanuma to arrange for Rama's arrival to Lanka to meet her within two months, the period remaining out of the time limit for her survival given by Ravana. Hanuma consoles Seetha, saying that Rama would surely come to see her. He also offers Seetha to carry her on his back to Rama's presence at Prasravana Mountain. Looking to the small size of Hanuma's body; Seetha doubts his capability to do it. Then, Hanuma assumes a gigantic form, to inspire confidence in Sita. However, explaining various reasons, Sita declines to go with him and requests Hanuma to bring her husband to Lanka.

आशंस इति हरि श्रेष्ठ क्षिप्रम् माम् प्राप्स्यते पतिः |
अन्तः आत्मा हि मे शुद्धः तस्मिन् च बहवो गुणाः || 5-35-14

āśaṁsa iti hari śreṣṭha kṣipram mām prāpsyate patiḥ |
antaḥ ātmā hi me śuddhaḥ tasmin ca bahavo guṇāḥ || 5-35-14

Translation: "O Hanuma the excellent of monkeys! Rama, my husband, will soon regain me without any doubt. Because my heart is pure and in Rama also, many good qualities are existing."

Even though Sita knew that she had only two months to live as per the time limit given by Ravana, and even when Hanuma offered her the help that he would take her back to Sri Rama, Sita chose to have rescued by Sri Rama. Sita always wanted Rama and no one else even in times of despair and life threat and was always waiting for him to come and rescue as Pati Dharma.

II.VI Yuddha Kanda

Vibhishana, Ravana's brother, together with four of his companions reaches Rama's place. Halting in the sky itself, Vibhishana asks Rama to give refuge to him. Sugriva tells Rama that he cannot trust Vibhishana the demon. Then Rama asks for the opinion of the leaders in his group. Angada, Sharabha, and Jambavan express their apprehensions about accepting Vibhishana. But Hanuman says that Vibhishana need not be doubted because he thinks that Vibhishana understands the merits of Rama and the demerits of Ravana. Hanuman further adds that Vibhishana is approaching Rama for refuge because Vibhishana is desirous of obtaining the kingdom of demons. Hanuman requests Rama to take his final decision on the matter.

Vibhishana says thus:

मन्त्रे व्यूहे नये चारे युक्तो भवितुमर्हसि |
वानराणाम् च भद्रम् ते परेषाम् च परम्तप ||

mantra vyūhe naye cāre yukto bhavitumarhasi |
vānarāṇām ca bhadram te pareṣām ca paramtapa ||

Translation: "O, annihilator of enemies! You ought to be aware of the design, distribution, and leading of the army and the secret service of the monkeys and of your foes. May good come to you!"

Vibhishana who came from an enemy is indeed to be doubted. He is not to be made as a trustworthy person so soon. But Rama and Vibhishana join hands and Vibhishana takes the ethical and Dharmic side of truthfulness and leaves the side of Raavana, his brother who is on the side of Adharma (non-conduct). Vibhishana's well-meaning brotherly advice incurs him the humiliating expulsion; These bespeak of the 'Evil' repelling the righteous, though thrown out by their brothers, Sugriva and Vibhishana find refuge in Rama, 'Good' can co-exist with the 'good,' not with the 'evil.' So, only the righteous can be the kindred. It is also truistic that two evils cannot co-exist. They destroy each other. When evil is pitted against good it invites its eventual ruination. Hence the rapport with the good and the righteous is noble and enduring and is, verily, the brotherly love.

II.VII Uttara Kanda

Shambuka is an interpolated character that is found in the interpolated last section of Ramayana, the Uttara Kanda (Richman 2008, 111). According to the story, Shambuka, a Shudra ascetic, was killed by Rama for attempting to perform tapas in violation of dharma, resulting in bad karma which caused the death of a Brahmin's son (Shastri 1952, 582). According to this story, when Rama was ruling Ayodhya, a Brahmin approached the court and told everyone that his young son has died due to the misrule of Rama. Rama immediately called a meeting with all his ministers and enquired about the cause of this. The sage Narada told him that this has happened due to a violation of a rule of tapas (austerities). Narada informed him that a Shudra was performing tapas, which was prohibited in the age of Treta. So, Rama went in search of the Shudra and found the place where Shambuka was performing penance. After confirming that Shambuka is indeed a Shudra, Rama killed him. The gods praised Rama for this act and congratulated him for protecting their interests and for not allowing Shudra to attain heaven in person. Brahmin's son was also resurrected (Shastri 1952, 587).

This is an unpardonable crime and extremely demeaning in the contemporary world. However, if seen through the lens of cultural relativism, one can see that the rules of the city in the Thretha Yuga had the concept of not giving access of Tapas to the lower caste people, as by performing tapas, humans can beget powers and the power usage by uneducated people can be dangerous to the society. Here the caste system has been mentioned as Shudra that should not be understood in the contemporary terms of SC/ST/BC but to someone who is an illiterate and who does not have an idea of the knowledge that is passed on through the Vedas through a designated Guru.

III. CONCLUSION

The Raja Dharma, Ashrama Dharma, Stree Dharma, Bhratru Dharma, Mitra Dharma, Apat-dharma are very well explained in Valmiki Ramayana. Though at some instances the concept of cultural relativism comes into picture for an unbiased understanding of the mythology, yet, as said by Arshia Sattar (Sattar 2019, xiii), Classical literatures and the values that they teach remain eternal through the ages. Instead of looking at the text and judging if Rama or any other character was right or wrong, it would be better, if the mere concept that choosing the right thing that is suitable at that moment for the benefit of a major section would be beyond our personal likes and dislikes is more useful. In the end, it is the stories that remain and the ethical values that they teach to be passed on to the next generations.

Valmiki Ramayana has eventually become just one layer of the many versions and narrations that have come into existence over the centuries. But, whatever and how many ever still come, the question that constantly remains is, the moral dilemma with which the text must be understood. Though Cultural Relativism is always suggested and necessary for an unbiased analysis, yet the tale has been so close to the hearts of the people that we subconsciously connect with it on a personal level and make our own interpretations. This has been the reason why Ramayana is a popular text too. Even though the story is not unique, and some have argued that the idealized characters within it have little or no psychological complexities, then why is it told and retold in different variations (Sattar 2019, 29) in almost all literary genres?

The subjectivity of ethics is a relevant insight that is worthy of being explored in the Ramayana narrative. Several actions of Rama are questionable to every thinking mind. Episodes such as banishment of Sita, Rama's conflict between his personal honour as king and duty as a husband, the killing of Shambuka, are indications of this innate dichotomy of ethics. The killing of Vali further questions Rama's application of the rules of Ayodhya to the forest. The forest as a landscape is regulated through the laws of the forest that may conflict with the rules of Ayodhya. Dharma and its related issues are open to interpretations as the concept of Metaethics, which states the meaning of right or wrong is always subjective and classic literature like Ramayana are always alive in the cultures spread across and probably understanding them from an ethnocentric view sometimes is also ethically right. The Ramayana does not derive its meaning from sacred geography or history: rather it draws its significance from what it can tell us about ourselves, our decisions, and the way we choose to live our lives (Sattar 2019, 32). It should be borne in mind that the Ramayana although a historical account, it does not give us an account of how

kings, as a matter of fact, ruled in ancient India only, rather, it prescribes ways in accordance with which the king should rule. (Nayak 1985)

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