

Ecological Dimensions of the *Ramayana*: A Conversation with Paula Richman

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Introduction

A well known Tamil scholar, Paula Richman has written extensively about the diversity of the *Ramayana* tradition and nurtured a body of scholarship that investigates the complexity of the narrative tradition from South Asian culture — the various tellings of the Rama story that vary according to historical period, religious affiliation, intended audience, social location, gender, and political context. Her works include: *Extraordinary Child: Translations from a Genre of Tamil Devotional Poetry* (1997), *Women, Branch Stories and Religious Rhetoric in a Tamil Buddhist Text* (1988), *Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*, ed. P. Richman (2000), *A Gift of Tamil: Translations from Tamil Literature*, eds. Norman Cutler and P. Richman (1992), *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (1992), *Ramayana Stories in Modern South India: An Anthology* ed. and comp. P. Richman (2008).

This new anthology, recently released by Indiana University Press, has several selections that deal explicitly with nature in the *Ramayana*. Her articles on the *Ramayana* tradition have appeared in *Public Culture*, *Journal of Asian Studies*, *Cultural Dynamics*, and *Manushi*.

A William H. Danforth Professor of South Asian Religions in the Department of Religion at Oberlin College, Paula Richman visits India regularly to give public lectures about the *Ramayana*, a topic that perennially fascinates her.

I met Paula Richman in the quiet leafy ambience of YWCA, Chennai, in December 2008. She was in Chennai to speak at the annual Natya Kala Conference on *Ramayana in Performing Arts*. We sat on roughly hewn stone benches warmed by the December sun and spoke for a long time about the ecological implications of the various *Ramayana* texts. Later on, listening to the recording of the conversation, I was struck by how our meditative reflections on *prakriti* were perfectly anchored in the uninterrupted birdsong from the trees — a rare thing to be able to record given the noise and whirr of the city.

The *Ramayana*

The Ramayana is a story which largely takes place in a forest. How do we see the forest? What are its meanings?

Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* depict the forest in multiple ways, and those depictions are complicated by issues linked to dynastic succession which cause one or more royal princes to enter forest exile.

In the *Ramayana*, Rama must go to the forest to protect a shift in power. Kaikeyi wants her son Bharata to rule and so she wants Rama, who has the true claim to the throne, to be out of the way so that he cannot interfere with her son's rule. She could not come right out in the open and kill him although in some historical periods competitors for the throne were killed in cold blood. Since that was not acceptable in Rama's case, he was exiled. There is also a particular restriction that Rama cannot spend a single night in a city. If he happened to be near a settlement, he could stay there briefly but he had to get back to the forest by nightfall.

The idea is Rama is sent off to a place that is far from power and from the luxuries of palace life. His brother Lakshmana also accompanies him, as does his wife Sita. Consequently, fear that Bharata's power will be destabilized is removed since Lakshmana, a hot-headed young warrior who might be quick to retaliate, is also off in the forest. In the *Mahabharata* too, a shift in power occurs. A family unit is exiled to the

forest since Duryodhana cannot openly cause the death of the five Pandavas (although he tries to burn them secretly in the house of lac). Also in the *Mahabharata*, Savitri's royal in-laws were conquered and sent into forest exile. So, forest exile as a result of conflict over royal succession is a common pattern in the epics. Even though murdering a potential king is unacceptable, if he is forced to remain in the forest, the power base of the other claimant cannot be threatened.

Yet the *Ramayana* also presents quite a different view of the forest as well: as a place conducive to *moksha*, the liberation from the cycle of death and rebirth. Descriptions of the practice of yoga tell adherents to practice self-discipline in a quiet place under a tree or near a flowing river, emphasizing simple living and attainment of one-pointedness of mind. The *Ramayana* provides many instances of sages who practise austerities in the forest. When Rama is young, Rishi Vishwamitra asks that he come to the forest to protect the holy *yagnas* from the onslaught of demons, creatures who defile the rituals and disturb the tranquility of the forest. In this instance, Rama goes to the forest because princes should extend protection not only to the subjects in the city but to holy men who have renounced city life in order to pursue religious penance in the forest.

During the time that Rama went with Rishi Vishwamitra to the forest, he slayed the demoness, Thataka. In the *Ramayana*, Thataka's presence scorches the forest, rendering fallow all its fertile beauty. When Rama kills the demoness, the forest comes back to life. In this context I must mention an animated film called the *Warrior Prince*, an Indo-Japanese collaborative venture by Ram Mohan, an animator based in Mumbai, and Yugo Sako, a producer based in Tokyo. I interviewed both of them. In that film there is a very dramatic difference between how they portrayed the forest when Thataka was roaming in it and how the forest looks after the killing of Thataka. There is an exquisite ecological message in the film.

The background to Thataka's story also has a clear cut warning, an environmental ethic of sorts. Thataka was a demigoddess, the daughter of a Yaksha. She was married to a chieftan named Sunda and had two sons named Mareecha and Subahu who were endowed with great physical strength. Sunda and his sons attracted the anger of the sage Agastya, since they engaged in the violent act of uprooting ancient trees and slaughtering all animals that came their way. When Agastya cursed the perpetrators of this evil deed, Sunda fell dead and Thataka and her sons were degraded to demonhood. Thataka roamed in the dreadful *Thataka Vana* which she transformed into a wasteland.

The Ramayana describes this as: “Nothing flourishes here, only heat and dust remain. She is a scorcher... The name of this fearsome creature is Thataka. Just as the presence of a little *loba* (meanness) dries up and disfigures a whole human personality, so does the presence of a monster turn into a desert a region which was once fertile” (R.K.Narayan’s translation of *The Ramayana* 12).

Representations of the Wilderness Trope in the *Ramayana*

The most common Sanskrit names for “forest” are vana and aranya. Although these words are used synonymously, vana has the added connotation of abundance whereas aranya means wilderness. For example: in Valmiki’s Ramayana, Rama’s early reaction to the Dandaka wilderness is one of dismay since the paths of the forest are closed and impenetrable. The forest is seen as a dangerous and forbidding place, a place where one encounters fierce rakshasas like Viradha, whom Rama and his companions face in the second chapter of the Aranyakanda. Yet there is a totally different description of the same Dandaka forest in the Aranyakanda of attractive forest scenes of ponds covered with lotuses, thronged with water birds. In this trope of pleasant wilderness, the path towards the destination is clearly seen. Does an analysis of the landscapes of the forest reveal something about Valmiki’s and his readers’ attitude towards nature?

In his *Ramayana*, Valmiki also portrays the forest as a place of shelter and refuge. When Sita takes her twin sons to Valmiki’s ashram and raises them there, that gives a whole new sense to our understanding of the forest. The city has banished her but the forest welcomes her. Also Valmiki writes his great epic in the forest and teaches it to Sita’s sons. This gives another sense of connection of the poet to the forest.

Yet another aspect of the forest is revealed in the story of Shambuka, a Shudra ascetic who does so much penance that an anthill grows around him while he sits and focuses his mind in utter stillness. When Rama finds Shambuka in the forest, he asks him, “Are you a Shudra?” Shambuka says “Yes” and Rama cuts off his head. Later, writers such as Bhavabhuti and K.V. Puttappa found this incident so troubling that they transformed it, but Valmiki included it in his *Uttarakanda*, showing how the rules of the city and its politics can even intrude in the forest. So this gives you a very complex idea of the forest.

As you rightly pointed out, epic landscapes sometimes seem to have contradictory messages. For example: in Valmiki's Ramayana, a Marga Samskara is described without any qualms when the poet talks about Prince Bharata's expedition to Chitrakuta to meet with the exiled Rama, nearly the entire population of Ayodhya accompanies him. The entourage consists of engineers, labourers, craftsman and the like who fell trees, construct causeways, clear the woods, and construct mansions in no time. Valmiki seems untroubled by the transformation of this natural landscape and portrays the whole thing in a positive light.

Yes, since Bharata is a prince, such behaviour is sanctioned. Another, more destructive deed occurs in the *Mahabharata*—the burning of the Khandava Forest. The forest was razed to make space for the new kingdom of Indraprastha. It is a terrible scenario. The epic talks about how the animals rushed out screaming only to be consumed by Agni, the fire god. The poet gives a detailed description of the panic of these living beings, their attempts to flee and their harrowing cries while being devoured by the flames.

You asked me a question about the forest as a place of danger, filled with *rakshasas* and wild beasts. Both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* talk about this. In the *Mahabharata*, the situation differs since the war is between two human factions (not between humans and *rakshasas*.) Nonetheless, in the *Mahabharata*, *rakshasas* still pose a threat because they are fond of devouring human flesh. That is why Bhima kills Hidimba, a *rakshasa*, who intends to devour human beings. Intriguingly, however, Hidimba, the sister of the now dead Hidimba, falls in love with Bhima and he marries her. As his wife, Hidimba becomes a protector of Bhima's family, including his brothers and his mother, who have joined him in forest exile. On the other hand, in the *Ramayana* when Shurpanaka, the sister of Ravana, approaches Rama, he mutilates her by cutting off her nose. In some versions of the *Ramayana*, Shurpanaka is actually portrayed as the ruling queen of the forest. So the exiled princes have come to her kingdom, but they do not treat her as a queen. In the *Mahabharata*, an exiled prince marries a local *rakshasi* while in the *Ramayana*, an exiled prince disfigures a local *rakshasi*. To answer your other question, there are quite a few places in the *Ramayana* where the forest is described in idyllic terms. Take for example this passage from Valmiki's *Aranyakanda*.

As they travelled with Sita, they saw varied mountain landscapes, forests, lovely rivers with cranes and sheldrakes upon the sandbanks, ponds covered with lotuses and thronged with water birds...(Aranyakanda 10: 2-4)

Many versions of the *Ramayana* say that Rama and Sita were happiest during the forest exile because they had the time and space to come to know each other well without the restrictions of joint family life or the intrusion of the daily business of kingly rule.

That's interesting. I remember reading this in David Lee's essay on the natural history of the Ramayana that Rama names twenty trees and points them out to Sita and Lakshmana in the forests surrounding Pancavati. Almost all the plants named during Rama's sojourn in the forest are wild forest trees, indigenous to the area. Valmiki must have had a very good sense of the natural history of the place.

Yes, the *Ramayana* brings before us a picture of great biodiversity. For example, consider Hanuman trying to locate the life-giving *Sanjivini* herb. But there are so many herbs on that hill that Hanuman simply cannot remember the name of the herb that he was supposed to bring back. To me that is an example of the great diversity of herbs that existed during the time when forests covered nearly all the South Asian subcontinent.

There is so much talk on dharmic ecology these days, especially the Hindu way of life which believes in Sarva-bhuta-hita (The Welfare of All Beings). When you look at Sage-kings in these epics, a pattern emerges. In this archetypal journey, the hero goes from the city-state into the forest where he grows to his full potential and puts it to good use when he returns to the kingdom. Rama is a sage-king. Was he able to reconcile the sattvic values of a forest dweller with the kshatriya values of the ruler?

It is very complicated. Sita asks Rama, "Why do you have to carry your bow in the forest?" He insists on carrying it and, indeed, artwork based on the *Ramayana*, shows that he and Laksman hunted animals in the forest. That was the royal prerogative. The Valmiki *Ramayana* talks about how as soon as Rama and Lakshmana cross the Ganges, they hunt a boar, a black buck, a deer and so on because they are hungry. When the king enters the forest, he becomes a different kind of forest dweller than when an ascetic does. An ascetic goes to the forest voluntarily, but a prince is sent into exile. That seems like a significant distinction. And when a prince goes, parts of his *kshatriya* nature stay with him.

You asked me about dharmic ecology. Again, the narrative contains complex portrayals of nature. For example, in ancient times, there was a belief that if a king ruled his country well, the rains would fall neither too little nor too much during the rainy season. Rather than drought or flood, the land and its cultivators would live in harmony. That is part of the concept of *Rama Rajya*. The idea is that when the natural order is in harmony with the proper rule, then well-being will flourish. But again this may be mere ideology. Whether the kings followed it or not, we cannot be sure. A case-by-case approach should be the best way to go about it.

The attractive landscapes of the Ramayana include presences like the apsarases, kimnaras, and rakshasas. Much has been speculated about the identity and historical basis for these creatures of wilderness; some scholars feel that they represent the aboriginal Adivasis. Does the Ramayana talk about the ambiguous relationship between the history of the Adivasi and the orthodox Hindu?

As you know, there is a huge debate regarding this and that debate was particularly salient in the Tamil-speaking South. For example, E.V. Ramasami argued that the *rakshasas* were the ancient Dravidians and C. Rajagopalachari vehemently disagreed with that interpretation. Each interpretation takes a different perspective. As a scholar, I do not endorse either view. In fact, my research has focused upon the many different ways that the *Ramayana* has been interpreted, beginning all the way back in the eighth century with playwrights such as Bhavabhuti.

Ethnohistorical studies interpret events like the burning of the Khandava forest in the Mahabharata to the genocide of Naga tribals. What do you think of such studies?

That could be but there is no way to know for sure. What you have used is a good phrase: “Much has been speculated.” The answer goes back to ecosophy. If the interpretation of a text is an inspiration for a harmonious way of life, then the narrative can be inspiring. But one must ask, “Is this text fundamentally about this topic?” and if not, might we be overdetermining what occurs in the text?

The Relationship between Gender and Landscape

Do ecofeministic retellings of the epic, as found for example in Ambai's "Forest" and other retellings of the Ramayana, conceive of the relationship between gender and landscape and also highlight the public as well as private spaces that need to be recognized as women's domains?

Ambai's story contains an intriguing retelling of the tale. A middle-aged Sita goes to the forest in search of self-realization. She is attracted to the swelling notes of the *rudra-vina* that fill the forest. As she follows the music, she discovers that the player is none other than Ravana, her old enemy and abductor, who now is more than willing to be her friend and music teacher. Let me read an excerpt from the end of the story:

Ravana smiled. "The body is a prison. The body is a means of freedom," he said, "Look," he said, showing her his *rudra-vina*. "A musical instrument that was created by imagining what wonderful music would come forth, if Parvati's breasts, as she lay on her back, were turned into gourds, and their nipples attached by strings. It is an extension of Devi's body... Will you try?" He lifted the *rudra-vina* from his lap and stretched it out towards her. "Let it be there on the ground," said Sita. "Why?" "It is my life, isn't it? A life that many hands have tossed about, like a ball. Now let me take hold of it; take it into my hands." So saying, Sita lifted the *rudra-vina* and laid it on her lap (Forest 90).

That is very interesting. Do you think that Sitayanas like these focus on the invention of new stories which talk about the sacredness of the body and how inhabiting one's body is an important way of being at "home"? These stories become very important in a culture that defines both the human female body and the land as "resource," as someone else's "property."

Yes, and scholar Velcheru Narayana Rao has theorized that in various Indian narrative genres illustrate different kinds of desire. The *Ramayana* concerns the desire for a woman, the *Mahabharata* concerns desire for a kingdom, and *Katha Sarit Sagara* concerns desire for monetary gain. So different epics have different ideologies.

Sita is identified with Prakrti. How do the various narrative traditions of the Ramayana embody the principles of the panchamahabhutas (the five basic elements) in the character of Sita? When Kampan's Iramavataram talks about how the fire of Sita's chastity burns the fire of Agni and the ordeal assumes a watery character, we have Sita established in her transcendent identity as Goddess Lakshmi, residing in a lotus on the waters of creation. Similarly in Kampan's epic, when Rama accuses Sita of being born of the soil like a worm, Sita's identification with the prithvi mahabhuta comes through. Do other narrative traditions explore Sita's relationship with the mahabhutas?

That's interesting, isn't it? Sita enters the fire and stays as cool as a cucumber but Agni, the god of fire, gets scorched. Kumaran Asan has composed a Malayalam poem, *Sita Immersed in Reflection*, in four sections which culminates with Sita literally becoming one with the Earth.

In section one, "Twilight," Sita looks back on her transient happiness with Rama. Now that she has attained detachment through her practice of austerities, she no longer dwells on her sorrow and grief. She recalls that earlier she wanted to die due to her anger and humiliation, but notes that she has now learned not to let such emotions control her.

In section two, "Night," she thinks about the compassion and kindness that the wives of the sages, the *tapasvinis*, had showed her during the birth of her sons and observes how starkly these women differ from the court women who are greedy, vicious, and competitive. Here again we get a sense of the binaries of the city and the forest.

In section three, "Still Dark," Sita mulls over the actions of Rama with disappointment and wonders how he could blame her for a situation over which she had no control because he listened to the idle talk of jealous people.

Section four, "Light," depicts a shift in Sita's consciousness when she suddenly realizes that Rama too has been living as a captive, trapped in the expectations that society has for a king; even he must have suffered in his own way. Sita learns to see his part and her part as roles in a cosmic drama. This understanding clears her mind. The poet describes this experience thus:

The river that joyously joins the ocean
Reflects the light of self-revelation. (*Sita Immersed in Reflection* 84).

This line refers to the light of the *Atman* (soul) uniting with the *Brahman* (the Oversoul). Simultaneously, the poet appears to affirm that Sita and Rama can never be separated. With a light heart Sita bids goodbye to the sun and the moon, the dawn and the dusk, the forest and the flowers and suddenly there is the moment of recognition when she realizes her essential oneness with Earth. She realizes that she need not part from it because her spirit will merge with the spirit of the Earth. There is no need for a farewell. Let me read the verses:

Perhaps I need not part from
the delightful world about me;
when my body unites with the earth,
my spirit may merge with this beauty.
Mother Earth, I can see you
going into your splendid chamber
carrying me in your pure arms
with maternal care and affection.
I will lie in that arbor, listening to
The mountain stream's song of peace.
The trees and shrubs nearby
will shower their blossoms on me (Sita Immersed in Reflection 84-85).

Of Form and Deformity

The natural world also plays a striking role in the Telugu short story *Reunion* by Volga, a writer and literary critic who runs 'Asmita', a women's organization in Hyderabad. Her story begins in Valmiki's ashram, where Sita lives with her young sons. The boys spend their days roaming about in the forest and return with flowers for Sita's evening worship. One day the boys bring Sita extraordinarily beautiful flowers that she does not recognize. The boys agree that the flowers are beautiful but add that the lady who owns the nursery is extremely ugly. When Sita chastises them for such harsh remarks, the boys tell her that the woman does not have a nose. Sita realizes that she must be Shurpanakha, the sister of Ravana, whom Rama and Lakshmana disfigured when she proclaimed her love for Rama. Sita decides to visit Shurpanakha. When they first met under very different circumstances, they had been enemies but now, as the two women tell each other what has transpired in later years, they realize how much they share: both of them had been humiliated by Rama and sent away. Shurpanakha tells Sita about how she had to fight a great battle within herself to emerge from the anger and self-hatred that had followed her mutilation. She

talks about how the infinite beauty of nature helped her through the battle. There she learned that form and deformity are simply two different sides of nature. Let me read out the passage:

I labored hard to realize the oneness of form and deformity in nature. I observed all forms of life. I observed the uniformity in their stillness and their movement. I discovered the secrets of colours. I had no teacher to guide me. I taught myself. I've observed every nook and corner of nature. That observation transformed my very eyes. To those eyes everything appeared beautiful. I had developed hatred towards everything including myself, but now I started loving everything including myself (Reunion 96-97).

And Shurpanakha goes on to talk about her labour with flowers, the ways in which her creative work with them has blossomed, and transformation in her plant nursery. At the end of the story, she asks Sita about her future. Sita replies that her future lay with her sons, but Shurpanakha reminds her that once they know that they are the king's heirs, the boys will migrate from the forest for the sake of developing the cities. Realizing the inevitability of the situation, Sita replies that in that case she will take refuge with the Mother Earth. It is then that Shurpanakha advises her, pointing out:

Sita, where is it that you don't have your mother? However, I think her form is more beautiful here than anywhere else (Reunion 98).

Sita sees the point and assures Shurpanakha that when her children leave her for the city, she would once again become the daughter of this Earth and find a new meaning in her life, meditating beneath the cool shades of the trees in the forest near Shurpanakha's nursery. To me this was another significant example of nature's capacity to provide nurture for the soul. Rather than bear children and then return to Mother Earth, Sita envisions a continuing life in the midst of nature with a friend working nearby.

Nature plays a starring role in Kerala filmmaker, G. Aravindan's film *Kanchana Sita*, which was inspired by C.N. Sreekantan Nair's play of the same name. Aravindan did not want Sita to be represented in the physical form of a woman. Instead Aravindan represents Sita as *Prakriti* and her moods and emotions are shown as the moods of Nature in the film. In fact Sita is a kind of absent presence in the film. Instead of restricting her to a mere character, Aravindan gives her an all-pervasive presence. She is not *Prakriti* in the passive sense of the term, but a febrile, dynamic presence that gives life to nature. There is a well done film analysis on *Kanchan Sita* by Usha Zacharias. I would like to read a few lines which discuss Sita as *Prakriti*.

“Indeed Sita as Prakriti—and Rama’s almost inevitable journey into becoming a part of her— is the heart of Aravindan’s narrative.... She now permeates the narrative through her immediate and all-pervasive presence as Prakriti, the cosmic life-force.... Thus she appears as the sunlight that marks an ever-changing path through the thick forest trees, she is audible and visible as the wind that rustles the trees, and she moves in the river as ripples in the water. She is the animating principle of nature that energizes all visible life-forms...”
 (“Prakriti and Sovereignty” in Aravindan’s *Kanchana Sita*, 105-106).

This last line sums up the way some modern South Indian writers have perceived the most significant ecological implication of the *Ramayana*.

References

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