

# Environmental Relevance of Bhakti-era Thought in the Anthropocene: A Study of Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa

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<p>Received: 25 Nov 2025; Received in revised form: 18 Dec 2025; Accepted: 22 Dec 2025; Available online: 27 Dec 2025</p> <p>©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (<a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/</a>).</p> <p><b>Keywords—</b> mythology, ecology, ethics, bhakti, ecocriticism.</p>	<p>The contemporary epoch of the Anthropocene, marked by unprecedented human impact on ecological systems, has generated an urgent need to revisit ethical frameworks that challenge exploitative and anthropocentric modes of thought. This paper examines the ecological relevance of Goswami Tulsidas's Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa by situating its Bhakti-era ethical vision within present-day environmental discourse. Drawing upon ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and Indian philosophical traditions, the study argues that Tulsidas articulates a relational and moral ecology grounded in dharma, bhakti, and restraint, which offers meaningful insights for addressing contemporary ecological crises. Through a close reading of the epic, the paper explores how nature – comprising forests, rivers, animals, and the Earth itself – is represented as sacred, animate, and ethically significant. Tulsidas's vision resists anthropocentric domination by emphasising humility, non-violence (ahimsā), and harmonious coexistence between human and non-human life forms. The ethical ideal of Rāma Rājya, often interpreted as a socio-political utopia, is re-read here as an ecological model where moral governance ensures environmental balance and collective well-being. The Bhakti emphasis on devotion, surrender, and compassion further fosters an environmental ethic that values care over control and sufficiency over excess. By recontextualising Bhakti-era ecological thought within the framework of the Anthropocene, this study challenges the assumption that pre-modern religious texts lack contemporary environmental relevance. Instead, it contends that Tulsidas's ecological ethics offer a counter-narrative to modern extractivism and technocratic solutions, foregrounding moral responsibility and ethical self-restraint as foundational to ecological sustainability. The paper thus positions Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa as a vital resource for reimagining human-nature relationships in an age of ecological uncertainty.</p>

## I. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the Anthropocene as a defining concept of the contemporary age has foregrounded

the extent to which human activity has become a dominant geological and ecological force. Characterised by climate change, biodiversity loss,

environmental degradation, and the overexploitation of natural resources, the Anthropocene marks not only a scientific and ecological crisis but also a profound ethical failure in the relationship between humans and the natural world. While modern environmental discourse often turns to technological innovation and policy reform for solutions, scholars in the environmental humanities increasingly argue that ecological crises cannot be addressed without a fundamental reorientation of ethical values and worldviews. In this context, revisiting pre-modern literary and philosophical traditions becomes both relevant and necessary.

Ecocriticism has played a crucial role in facilitating such interdisciplinary engagements by examining how literary texts encode environmental values, ethical frameworks, and alternative modes of human-nature relationships. Expanding beyond its early focus on nature writing, contemporary ecocritical scholarship increasingly engages with religious texts, indigenous traditions, and pre-industrial cultural imaginaries that challenge anthropocentric paradigms. Within this expanded scope, Bhakti literature emerges as a significant yet underexplored repository of ecological ethics. Rooted in devotion, humility, and moral restraint, Bhakti-era thought offers relational models of existence that resist the logic of domination underpinning modern extractivist economies.

Goswami Tulsidas's *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* occupies a central position within the Bhakti tradition and the cultural imagination of the Indian subcontinent. Composed in the sixteenth century, the epic re-narrates the Ramayana through the ethical and devotional lens of Bhakti, emphasising *dharma*, compassion, and social harmony. While the text has been extensively studied for its religious, moral, and socio-political dimensions, its ecological implications remain comparatively understudied within contemporary critical discourse. Yet, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* presents a richly textured vision of the natural world in which forests, rivers, animals, and landscapes are imbued with moral and spiritual significance rather than reduced to inert resources.

Nature in Tulsidas's epic functions as an ethical and pedagogical presence that shapes human conduct and reflects moral order. The forests of exile, sacred rivers such as the Ganga and Sarayu, and the

harmonious coexistence of human and non-human beings collectively articulate a worldview grounded in balance and reciprocity. The ideal of *Rāma Rājya*, often interpreted primarily as a political or moral utopia, may also be read as an ecological ideal where righteous governance ensures not only social justice but environmental stability. Such a vision stands in sharp contrast to the ecological disruptions characteristic of the Anthropocene, where human ambition frequently overrides ethical restraint.

This paper seeks to examine the relevance of Tulsidas's ecological ethics in the context of the Anthropocene by situating the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* within contemporary environmental debates. Drawing upon ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and Indian philosophical traditions, the study argues that Bhakti-era thought offers a moral ecology based on humility, non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), and devotion, which can meaningfully contribute to present-day ecological consciousness. Rather than proposing a return to the past, the paper reads Tulsidas's text as a resource for ethical reflection, capable of challenging modern anthropocentrism and inspiring more sustainable modes of coexistence.

By foregrounding the ecological dimensions of *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, this study aims to expand the scope of ecocritical inquiry and demonstrate the enduring relevance of Bhakti literature in addressing global environmental crises. In an age defined by ecological uncertainty, Tulsidas's vision reminds readers that environmental sustainability is inseparable from moral responsibility, and that the path toward ecological healing lies as much in ethical transformation as in technological advancement.

To examine the ecological relevance of Tulsidas's *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* in the context of the Anthropocene, this study adopts an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws upon ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and Bhakti philosophy. Such a composite approach is necessary, as the ecological vision articulated in the text cannot be fully apprehended through modern environmental theory alone, nor can it be reduced to purely theological interpretation. Instead, the epic operates at the intersection of ethics, spirituality, and ecology, demanding a framework that accommodates moral, cultural, and cosmological dimensions of human-nature relationships.

Ecocriticism provides the primary analytical lens for this study. As articulated by Cheryll Glotfelty, ecocriticism examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment, foregrounding questions of environmental representation, ethical responsibility, and non-human agency. Lawrence Buell further expands this scope by arguing that environmentally oriented texts cultivate ecological consciousness by reimagining nature as an active presence rather than a passive setting. When applied to pre-modern texts such as the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, ecocriticism enables a re-reading of literary and religious traditions as repositories of ecological values that predate industrial modernity. Rather than treating nature as metaphor alone, this approach recognises the epic's landscapes, rivers, and forests as ethically significant spaces that shape and reflect moral order.

Environmental ethics further enriches this framework by addressing the moral foundations of ecological relationships. Modern environmental philosophy has increasingly challenged anthropocentrism—the assumption that human interests alone possess moral value—advocating instead for biocentric or ecocentric perspectives. These perspectives resonate strongly with Indian philosophical traditions, where the natural world is often conceived as sacred, interconnected, and morally instructive. In *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, ethical conduct (*dharma*) is inseparable from ecological harmony; moral transgressions disrupt not only social order but the balance of the natural world itself. The epic thus anticipates contemporary environmental ethical concerns by situating ecological responsibility within a broader moral universe.

Central to this ethical ecology is Bhakti philosophy, which underpins Tulsidas's narrative vision. Bhakti, with its emphasis on devotion, humility, surrender, and compassion, offers an alternative ethical framework to domination-based models of human-nature relations. Unlike instrumental rationality, which values nature primarily for its utility, Bhakti cultivates an attitude of reverence toward all forms of life as manifestations of the divine. This devotional orientation fosters restraint, non-violence (*ahimsā*), and care—values that are increasingly recognised as essential to ecological sustainability in the Anthropocene. By dissolving

rigid hierarchies between humans and the non-human world, Bhakti thought aligns with ecocritical calls for relational and non-anthropocentric modes of existence.

The concept of moral ecology is particularly useful in bridging ecocriticism and Bhakti thought. Moral ecology refers to a worldview in which ethical behaviour and ecological balance are mutually reinforcing. In the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, the righteous conduct of individuals and rulers ensures harmony not only within society but across the natural order. The ideal of *Rāma Rājya* exemplifies this principle, presenting a vision of governance rooted in justice, compassion, and restraint, where environmental stability emerges as a natural consequence of moral leadership. Such a vision contrasts sharply with Anthropocene governance models that often prioritise economic growth over ecological well-being.

By integrating ecocriticism, environmental ethics, and Bhakti philosophy, this study establishes a framework capable of addressing both the textual specificity of *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* and its contemporary ecological relevance. This theoretical synthesis allows for a nuanced understanding of Tulsidas's ecological ethics as neither archaic nor symbolic alone, but as a viable ethical resource for rethinking human-nature relationships in an age of environmental crisis.

In *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, nature is more than a physical backdrop for human action; it functions as a sacred moral order that enforces ethical conduct and reflects cosmic balance. Tulsidas portrays forests, rivers, mountains, and animals as ethically charged spaces, demonstrating a worldview in which human morality and ecological well-being are inseparably intertwined. This sacralisation of nature aligns with ecocritical perspectives that recognise non-human agency and the moral significance of landscapes in literature, while simultaneously reflecting indigenous Indian philosophical conceptions of the natural world as animate and ethically instructive.

The forests of exile, particularly Dandakaranya, are central to this ethical ecology. The forest is not a neutral space but a testing ground where Rāma, Sītā, and Lakṣmaṇa confront both internal desires and external threats. The narrative repeatedly emphasises that the forest responds to human

intentions: acts of greed, violence, or selfishness invite danger, whereas humility, restraint, and devotion ensure survival. Tulsidas writes, for example, that the forest watches the deeds of all who enter; none can escape its vigilance (Ayodhyākāṇḍa 45.12–13). Here, nature functions as both observer and moral arbiter, embodying a relational ethic in which human actions are inseparable from ecological consequences.

Rivers, including the Sarayu and sacred streams encountered during exile, similarly operate as morally significant entities. The river is depicted not merely as a provider of water or sustenance but as a conscious presence that nurtures, purifies, and, when disrespected, punishes. The episode of Rāma's immersion in the Sarayu symbolizes the inseparability of spiritual, ethical, and ecological order: to harm or disregard the river is simultaneously to violate dharma and disrupt cosmic balance. Such depictions resonate with contemporary ecocritical concerns about the moral and intrinsic value of non-human beings, illustrating that pre-modern texts can articulate sophisticated environmental ethics.

Animals and non-human life are also integrated into this sacred moral order. Hanumān's interactions with monkeys, the guidance of forest creatures, and the warnings conveyed through birds and other wildlife demonstrate the epic's recognition of non-human agency. These beings are not passive; they participate actively in the ethical universe of the epic, guiding human characters toward righteous choices. The narrative thereby fosters an understanding of the natural world as relational and morally significant, in line with what Arne Naess's deep ecology would term a recognition of the intrinsic value of all life forms.

Finally, the concept of *Rāma Rājya*, often interpreted as an ideal political order, also has profound ecological implications. Tulsidas presents a vision of governance in which justice, moral integrity, and respect for dharma extend to the environment. In this system, the ruler's ethical conduct ensures the flourishing of forests, rivers, and communities alike. By situating environmental stability within a moral and social framework, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* anticipates modern discussions of ecological governance and demonstrates the interdependence of ethical, social, and ecological well-being.

Through these depictions, Tulsidas constructs a vision of nature that is sacred, morally instructive, and relational. Human survival and societal harmony depend upon recognition of the moral agency inherent in forests, rivers, and animals. In the context of the Anthropocene, this vision offers an alternative framework for ecological consciousness—one that integrates ethical restraint, spiritual reverence, and environmental stewardship as foundational to sustainable human–nature relationships.

In *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, the concept of *Rāma Rājya* functions not only as an ideal political and moral order but also as a model of ecological governance, where ethical, social, and environmental responsibilities are inseparable. Tulsidas envisions Rāma's rule as a holistic system in which the welfare of humans, animals, and nature are mutually reinforced, demonstrating that sustainable governance requires moral accountability toward all forms of life. By framing ecological stewardship within the framework of righteous leadership, the epic anticipates contemporary discussions in social ecology, environmental ethics, and sustainable governance.

Central to this vision is the principle of dharma. Under *Rāma Rājya*, rulers and citizens alike are expected to act with restraint, compassion, and moral discernment. These ethical norms extend beyond human society to include forests, rivers, and other non-human entities. The text emphasizes that disregard for these norms results in ecological imbalance, social disruption, and moral decline, illustrating an early recognition of the interconnectedness of social and environmental well-being. As Tulsidas writes a kingdom flourishes when dharma is upheld; when the forests are protected, the rivers flow, and all creatures thrive (Ayodhyākāṇḍa 76.5–7). This articulation suggests that ecological stability is a direct consequence of ethical governance rather than an incidental outcome of human activity.

*Rāma Rājya* also exemplifies equitable distribution of resources and environmental care. By ensuring that forests and rivers remain unexploited and that wildlife and human communities coexist harmoniously, the epic models what contemporary scholars might describe as socio-ecological balance. Such a framework resonates with Murray Bookchin's concept of social ecology, which links hierarchical or

exploitative social structures to ecological degradation. In the *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa*, ethical leadership mitigates these hierarchies, fostering a system in which exploitation is morally and socially unacceptable, and ecological stewardship is normalized.

Moreover, the ritual and spiritual dimensions of *Rāma Rājya* reinforce environmental ethics. Sacred landscapes, offerings, and observances cultivate awareness and reverence for nature. The epic suggests that devotion (*bhakti*), humility, and moral vigilance are not solely spiritual acts but also ecological practices, as they guide humans toward responsible interaction with the natural world. In this sense, the Bhakti ethos functions as a form of embedded environmental governance, promoting conservation through ethical and cultural norms rather than through coercion or legislation.

Finally, *Rāma Rājya* demonstrates the interdependence of human and non-human well-being. The flourishing of the kingdom is inseparable from the vitality of its forests, rivers, and animals. This relational understanding aligns with ecocritical and environmental ethical perspectives that advocate for holistic approaches to sustainability, emphasizing that human prosperity cannot be pursued in isolation from ecological integrity. *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* thereby models governance that is not only politically just but environmentally conscious, providing a pre-modern template for addressing Anthropocene challenges.

By situating ecological responsibility at the center of ethical governance, Tulsidas's vision of *Rāma Rājya* demonstrates the enduring relevance of Bhakti-era ecological thought. It underscores that sustainable human-nature relationships require integration of moral, social, and ecological considerations, and that ethical restraint and reverence for nature are foundational to both societal and environmental flourishing.

The ecological and moral vision articulated in Tulsidas's *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* offers enduring ethical lessons that resonate profoundly in the context of the Anthropocene. In an era characterised by climate change, biodiversity loss, and widespread ecological degradation, the epic's insistence on humility, restraint, and respect for non-human life

provides a framework for rethinking contemporary human-nature relationships. By positioning ethical conduct as inseparable from environmental stewardship, Tulsidas prefigures modern discourses on sustainability, relational ecology, and integrated social-ecological governance.

One central lesson is the principle of restraint and sufficiency. The epic repeatedly illustrates the consequences of greed, excessive desire, and exploitation, emphasizing that imbalance in human action leads to both moral and ecological disruption. Episodes such as Rāma's measured approach to the forests of Dandakaranya demonstrate that survival and prosperity depend on moderation, careful observation, and ethical decision-making (*Ayodhyākāṇḍa* 45.12-13). In contemporary terms, this principle parallels notions of sustainable consumption, environmental stewardship, and responsible resource management.

Another lesson concerns the interconnectedness of all life. Forests, rivers, animals, and humans are depicted as mutually dependent, reinforcing a relational ethic that aligns with biocentric and deep ecological perspectives. Tulsidas conveys that human flourishing cannot be isolated from the well-being of the broader ecological system. For example, the respectful engagement with rivers and sacred groves, and the recognition of animals as morally and spiritually significant, illustrate an early understanding of what modern environmentalists call non-anthropocentric ethics. These narrative strategies encourage readers to perceive the natural world as active, morally relevant, and deserving of care.

The epic also foregrounds ethical governance as ecological responsibility. The ideal of *Rāma Rājya* demonstrates that leadership rooted in dharma, justice, and compassion ensures not only social harmony but ecological balance. By linking human governance to environmental outcomes, Tulsidas prefigures contemporary discussions of environmental policy and ecological governance, suggesting that ethical decision-making at societal levels is critical for sustaining natural systems. Such lessons have direct implications for the Anthropocene, where political and institutional choices significantly affect planetary health.

Finally, Tulsidas integrates spirituality and devotion as mechanisms for ecological consciousness. The Bhakti ethos cultivates empathy, humility, and non-violence, reinforcing environmental care through moral and spiritual practice. In the Anthropocene, where technological solutions alone are insufficient, such an approach underscores the need for value-based environmental ethics—a cultural and spiritual dimension that complements scientific and policy interventions.

In sum, *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* provides a multi-layered ethical vision in which human, social, and ecological well-being are intertwined. Its lessons—restraint, relationality, ethical governance, and eco-spiritual consciousness—offer enduring guidance for addressing contemporary ecological crises. By reading Tulsidas's text ecocritically, scholars and practitioners can recover pre-modern strategies for ethical human-nature engagement that remain relevant, inspiring, and morally compelling in the Anthropocene.

## II. CONCLUSION

The ecological vision articulated in Goswami Tulsidas's *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* offers profound ethical and practical lessons for contemporary environmental thought. Through its portrayal of forests, rivers, animals, and sacred landscapes as morally and spiritually significant, the epic establishes a sacred moral order in which human actions are inseparable from ecological consequences. By foregrounding humility, restraint, ethical governance, and devotional care, Tulsidas anticipates many principles now central to modern ecocriticism, deep ecology, and environmental ethics.

The concept of *Rāma Rājya* demonstrates that ethical governance is foundational to ecological balance, while the sacredization of nature illustrates that environmental stewardship is both a moral and spiritual responsibility. Through the interdependence of humans and non-human entities, the epic fosters a relational ecological ethic that challenges anthropocentric paradigms. Furthermore, the integration of Bhakti devotion as a means of cultivating environmental awareness highlights the potential of cultural and spiritual values to guide sustainable human-nature interactions.

In the context of the Anthropocene, where environmental crises are increasingly driven by unrestrained human activity, Tulsidas's ethical vision provides both a moral compass and a practical template for ecological responsibility. The epic demonstrates that ecological sustainability is inseparable from ethical and spiritual consciousness, emphasizing that care, respect, and moral accountability toward all forms of life are essential for planetary well-being. Reading *Śrī Rāmacaritamānasa* ecocritically thus recovers a pre-modern but profoundly relevant model of environmental ethics, offering insights that are crucial for reimagining human-nature relationships in the twenty-first century.

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