

Civilizational Dialogue and Multicultural Collaboration in the *Ramayan*

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 2

Month: January

Year: 2026

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Shankar, Shrinath,
and Kishan Pawar.

“Civilizational Dialogue and
Multicultural Collaboration
in the Ramayan.” *Shanlax
International Journal of Arts,
Science and Humanities*,
vol. 13, no. 2, 2026,
pp. 95–100

DOI:

[https://doi.org/10.34293/
sijash.v13iS2-i4-Jan.10589](https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS2-i4-Jan.10589)

Shrinath Shankar

Department of Mass Media

Vidyalankar School of Information Technology, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Dr. Kishan Pawar

Principal

Somaiya Vidyavihar University, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

Even though considerable amount of scholarship has been conducted on the Ramayan as a literary and religious work, it remains a civilizational document that defines ideals of ethical governance, human values and intercultural interaction. Being traditionally researched within the studies of the Indian tradition, the Ramayan is also an active structure of the civilizational exchange and the multicultural interaction beyond the borders of regions, societies, and time. The paper examines the Ramayan as a story about ethical interaction between different cultures and specifically on how it has dealt with cooperation, conflict and mutual recognition of different civilizations. The latter point, which is the focus of this paper, is the India–Sri Lanka axis in the epic, where the clash of Ayodhya and Lanka could be understood not only as a polarity of two civilizations but as the contact of two civilizations, which are highly developed. The image of a rich and culturally accomplished kingdom portrays Lanka as a challenge to the interpretations of any cultural form otherness, and this portrays the ethical subtext of the Ramayan as much more complex than it is generally perceived. Another theme that comes out in the building of the Ram Setu is its symbolism as a unifying factor and transregional cooperation, one that is based on common moral intent and mutual ground as opposed to acquiring territories. Outside the subcontinent, the spread of the Ramayan to the mode of Southeast Asia and other areas testifies to how it can be hijacked to fit the culture of various traditions and still be true to its original ethical spirit. Indonesian, Cambodian and other versions of the epic also evidence the localization of the text—a process that emphasizes universal values of righteousness (dharma), loyalty, sacrifice, and leadership based on ethical motivation thus reinforcing the fact that the Ramayan is a channel of soft power and a source of intercultural dialogue much earlier than globalization came into being. It is on this background that this paper proposes that the Ramayan provides a conceptual framework of significant importance to the global dialogue today because of the emphasis it places on ethics and human values as the tenets of teamwork. The teachings of moral restraint, inclusive cooperation, and respectful interaction beyond the differences embedded in the teachings of the epic can provide useful lessons in terms of promoting ethical global cooperation and civilizational coexistence in a steadily becoming culturally plural and interdependent world.

Keywords: Ramayan, Civilizational Dialogue, Multicultural Collaboration, Ethics and Human Values, India–Sri Lanka Cultural Relations, Transnational Epics, Global Cultural Heritage

Introduction

Despite a large body of research that has examined the Ramayan as a literary masterwork and a religious epic, its role as a civilizational document has not been highlighted in the normal academic discourse. A large part of the surviving literature has inclined towards giving preference to its narrative qualities, mythological symbolism or devotional aspects and the epic has been placed largely within the context of the Hindu religious tradition. Although this has led to some fruitful results, there is a danger that by so doing we lose the greater ethical, political and civilizational picture as embodied in the text. In addition to narrative form and devotional form, the Ramayan offers a rational and continuous reflection of a moral government, values of humanness, and the interaction of cultures, which places it in the form of a moral code of social and political life.

The epic is more than a tale of personal heroism about the idealized figure of Rama, but a multi-layered civilizational text that speculates on the way in which societies structure authority, negotiate moral issues, and react to ethical crises. The kingship in Ramayan is considered not in terms of conquering and extending borders but in terms of following dharma, moral restraint and accountability to the subjects. Human values like loyalty, compassion, sacrifice and justice are constantly prefigured as sources of legitimate power. Dhand suggests that the moral world of the Ramayan is essentially relational and its ethical concept does not necessitate adherence to some predetermined rules but involves constant moral thinking (Dhand).

Historically, the Ramayan has been placed in the quadrants of Indian philosophy, religious studies and classical Sanskrit literature and regarded as the artefact of one civilizational tradition. But this very narrowly focused reading restricts the interpretive possibilities of the epic. The large scale geographical and cultural migration in the narrative; the royal courts in Ayodhya, forest communities in which ascetics and tribal bands lived, the politically unstable kingdom of Kishkindha, and the wealthy island culture of Lanka allows the epic to address ethical issues along social and cultural lines. These changes of setting are not accidental, but they are part of the epic to explore in relation to moral principles how they are put to test and redefining in various civilizational settings.

According to Sheldon Pollock, Sanskrit epics are functioning as cultural systems that influence political imagination, the moral code, and social imagination even after centuries outside of the historical contexts of their creation (Pollock). Ramayan, in this respect, is a transhistorical, transregional ethical reflection. The way it depicts interaction between various communities, human, semi-divine, forest-dwelling, urban, is indicative of an implicit theory of civilizational dialogue that is based on moral responsibility, as opposed to cultural superiority. Difference is recognised, but ethical judgement is always grounded on deed and not on the self.

This chapter thus explores the Ramayan as a story of multicultural cooperation, moral thinking, and cultural transmission all over the world. It is the thesis that the epic expresses a paradigm of civilizational dialogue which favours negotiation as opposed to domination, cooperation as opposed to exclusion and moral universality as opposed to cultural absolutism. The Ramayan provides a paradigm that is still very timely to modern debates on global collaboration, intercultural ethics and even civilizational coexistence in a more plural and more globalised world by meticulously forecasting ethical involvement across difference.

Multicultural Collaboration and Civilizational Interaction: The India–Sri Lanka Axis

The cross-civilizational multicultural cooperation is one of the structural and ethical values of the Ramayan, which is most predominant in the India–Sri Lanka axis. The battle between Ayodhya and Lanka was traditionally interpreted as a sharp moral contrast between the good and the evil, the right and the wrong. Although this type of reading puts stress on the moral lucidity of the epic, it runs the risk of obscuring the civilizational richness of the epic. Tighter textual and moral analysis shows that the confrontation is not described as one between a civilised and a barbaric other but rather as one between two highly evolved political and cultural entities whose interaction is defined by moral negotiation, coalition building, mediation and moral contest.

Lanka is described as a technologically modern and rich and as an intellectually civilised land many times. Its city planning, architectural splendour, material mastery and the refined citizens can defy any simplistic classification of the kingdom as a civilizationally impoverished country. Ravana is also portrayed as a scholar of Vedas, a skillful king, and a follower of Shiva, which makes him a problematic figure as a villain. He is eventually destroyed not due to cultural inferiority, but due to the ethical transgression, namely, the transgression of the restraint, consent, and moral duty. Goldman maintains that the Ramayan makes the difference between cultural sophistication and ethical behaviour, thus opposing the confusion of moral judgement and the civilizational identity.

The aspect of ethical complexity in the India–Sri Lanka encounter is also revealed as the figures of mediation to cross the boundaries of civilization. The story of Hanuman travelling to Lanka that is usually read mostly as an act of heroism and reconnaissance can also be perceived as a sign of intercultural interaction. His careful and respectful notes about the social organisation of Lanka, the city, and the sophistication of its culture can be associated with an ethic of recognition and not an instant moral judgement. Hanuman admits the greatness and order of Lanka but is dedicated to the cause of morality of Rama which shows that being moral does not require that one erase the culture.

Similarly, the character of Vibhishana also illustrates that ethical opposition has its basis inside Lanka and not moral rectitude. His identification with Rama is based on a moral denial of the activities of Ravana and not denial of his own culture. The fact that Vibhishana was introduced into the camp of Rama strengthens the epic’s argument that morality should come first before political allegiance and cultural identification. Lutgendorf argues that these moments upset these strict insider/outsider lines and foreground moral agency as a personal and general ability.

The most powerful symbolic image of the India–Sri Lanka cooperation in the epic is the construction of the Ram Setu. On the contrary, the bridge reflects the shared moral mission and the transregional cooperation. Its building is done with varied participants; Vanaras (Monkey Army), forest dwellers, and allies in other regions, but each has a role to play according to their ability and not their position. In turn, the Ram Setu is an icon of affiliation as opposed to conquest, and there is a greater focus on mutual moral purpose than the occupation of the land. Brockington notes that these shared approaches predetermine the idea of cooperation as based on a moral consensus instead of civilizational superiority or imperialism.

The Ramayan, through the India–Sri Lanka axis, creates a delicate form of interaction between civilizations that recognises the difference in culture and demands ethical universality. When conflict ensues, it is not portrayed as a necessary side effect of the contact of civilizations, but rather the effect of moral failure. Through the privileging of dialogue, mediation, and moral responsibility, the epic goes beyond the conflict-centred stories and presents the viewers with a different way of intercultural engagement, which rests on the shared human values, instead of the cultural superiority. By so doing, the Ramayan foresees modern paradigms of moral international collaboration and co-existence among civilizations.

Ethics and Human Values: A Comparative Perspective

The main ethics of Ramayan is structured around the idea of dharma, the notion that cannot be simplified into simple set of morals or some kind of moral absolutism. Unlike the deontological systems, which assert that nothing can be changed, and consequentialist paradigms, which revere the outcomes as singular entities, the dharma in the Ramayan is contextual, relational, and situational in nature. It requires moral judgement, restraint and introspection, whereby people must compromise conflicting responsibilities instead of acting in a mechanical way, following established rules. Ethical action in the epic is analysed in terms of intention, proportionality, and responsibility as pointed out by Arti Dhand, thus making the decision on the morality process relevant rather than based on unquestioned morality (Dhand).

This moral stance allows the Ramayan to describe moral life as a complex and dialogic one. The characters are constantly faced with moral issues and questions that do not have definite answers and therefore require

them to consult, discuss and be humble. The exile of Rama, the ordeal of Sita and the betrayal of Vibhishana all serve to stress the fact that according to the epic, the ethical clarity is attained through the long-term moral thinking and not instant judgement. In this regard, ethics as a social practise projected in the social relations and political institutions is placed in the Ramayan.

Comparatively, such a structure sets the Ramayan apart from most of the Western epic traditions especially those based on Greco-Roman literary culture. Epic literature like Homer's Iliad tends to preempt martial prowess, conquest, and personal glory as some of the main ethical ideals and moral authority is built on heroic ability or imperial fate. In comparison, Ramayan repeatedly defers the authority to the control and triumph to the moral lawfulness. The authority of morality in Rama is not determined by conquering but through renunciation, compliance with ethical duty and pursuing social order and justice with strong determination. The fact that he willingly took the personal sufferings to protect dharma puts the ethical self-restraint as the utmost kind of leadership.

This disposition is like the idea of ethics developed by Amartya Sen, which is based on a dialogic and public process, supported by reasoning, accountability, and moral debate. The focus of ethical evaluation as discussed and justified by Sen would go in line with the exposition of moral decision making in the Ramayan as a collective and deliberate process as opposed to a unilateral declaration of power (Sen). The epic, therefore, envisages contemporary ethical theories where deliberation, moral pluralism, moral responsibility are of primary importance than moral absolutism.

The description of Ravana also supports the ethical philosophy of the Ramayan. It is not the difference of cultures, the political ambition, or the confrontation between civilizations, but the violation of all universal human principles: most of all, consent, dignity, and restraint that led to the downfall of Ravana. Despite his intellectual genius, administrative skill and cultural sophistication, the moral decline of Ravana is caused by the fact that he was unable to control the desire and observe ethical norms. Even Lanka itself is regularly presented as wealthy, civilised, and culturally sophisticated, giving the message of the epic that failure of morality is personal and not civilizational.

The framing enables the Ramayan to criticise the authority without the incrimination of cultural otherness. Moral judgement is applied to actions and not identities and ethical responsibility is maintained as a universal code that is relevant across civilizations. Through disestablishing the equivalence of cultural complexity and civilizational greatness, the epic itself is a statement of an ethics that relies on common human values, as opposed to hierarchy of civilizations. By doing so the Ramayan provides an extremely timely ethical paradigm in relation to modern plural societies where coexistence is not determined by the homogeneity of cultures but rather by the morality of actions and acknowledgment of one another.

The Ramayan as Global Cultural Heritage

The fact that the Ramayan has been transmitted outside the Indian subcontinent solidly proves that it is a global cultural heritage text, and not a tradition specific to one religious or national context. Its easy dissemination throughout the Southeast Asian region, which is manifested in Thai, Indonesian, Cambodian, Lao, Burmese, and Malaysian versions, proves the incredible versatility of the epic and its moral applicability. These transregional movements make the Ramayan among the earliest forms of narrative to enable the continuity of intercultural interaction, way before modern globalisation. According to Paula Richman, the ability of the epic to express ethical issues across linguistic, political and cultural borders has made it continue to be relevant in various societies.

More importantly, regional adaptations of the Ramayan are not simply imitations of the version of Valmiki. Rather, they rework the story so as to fit the local histories, political ideologies and religious structures and traditions of art. Thai Ramakien, for example, assimilates Buddhist ethical sensibilities and royal ideology, whereas Javanese and Balinese versions are based on indigenous cosmologies, and performative aesthetics. The art of the temples and court traditions in Cambodian renderings are concerned with kingship and cosmic

order. Nonetheless, despite the differences in form and emphasis, the ethical essence of the epic is also largely the same. The righteousness (dharma), loyalty, sacrifice, moral restraint, and ethical leadership values remain the ones that organise these adaptations, which highlights the moral strength of the epic across cultures.

Philip Lutgendorf observes that the international dispersal of the Ramayan is an example that ethical stories might be utilised as a malleable cultural resource instead of fixed pieces of text (Lutgendorf). The moral system of the epic is, however, sound enough to not collapse into relativism but still allow a local reinterpretation. Such equilibrium between permanency and flux helps the Ramayan to be readable and viable in immensely diverse social environments, both in court and rock reliefs and folk theatre and modern mass media.

The concept of multiple Ramayans, as propounded by A. K. Ramanujan, is influential and provides a theoretical understanding of multiplicity not as disintegration of the Ramayan but rather as cultural life. The fact that there are several versions of Ramayan confirms the openness of the epic to reinterpretation without losing the ethical centre. Instead of weakening the story, this plurality strengthens the role of the narrative as a common moral property, enabling different communities to approach the epic in manners that do not only declare their own past but also address their issues in ethics (Ramanujan).

Seen in this light, the Ramayan is an early form of cultural soft power, which does not rely on coercion or domination but uses persuasion, moral appeal and narrative appeal to get its way. It can be regarded as one of the eastern, western, and universal cultures, which makes it an essential work in the study of the world cultural heritage. The fact that the epic has been relevant throughout the centuries and continents is indicative of its ability to mediate cultural difference via a shared ethical language, which renders this epic an important resource of comprehending how narratives influence civilizational connectivity and moral imagination on an international level.

Conclusion

The Ramayan is a large civilizational model which integrates multicultural cooperation, moral deliberation as well as transnational cultural sharing together into a collective moral thought system. Breaking borders of its traditional classification as an epic of literature or a religious text, the given analysis previews the ongoing questioning of ethical leadership, intercultural dialogue, and legal duty in the text. Its plot structure and moral principles challenge confrontational and exclusionary civilizational paradigms of interaction.

One of the main reasons as to why the Ramayan has become so relevant is because of its demand of ethical universality as opposed to cultural dominance. Ethical judgment in the epic is always focused on behaviors and intentions and not identities and affiliation with a particular civilization. The Ayodhya/Lanka encounters, the intermediary actions of characters like Hanuman and Vibhishana, the spirit of collaboration, dialogue and restraint being the lead rather than struggle and cultural annihilation is an expression of an ethical worldview with a pre-eminence of collaboration, dialogue and restraint instead of confrontation and cultural destruction. The difference is not denied or vilified but approached using moralism.

The transregional nature of the transmission of the epic also becoming a strength towards the concept of being a common moral and cultural resource. Its adaptation in Southeast Asia and other areas shows that it has the ability to continue in ethics continuity and plurality in cultures. Quite on the contrary, the presence of a variety of Ramayans proves its liveliness as a living civilizational text that can deal with various historical and cultural settings.

In the interdependent globalized world, which is characterized by cultural plurality, Ramayan contains timeless provisions on how civilizational coexistence can work. These three characteristics make it an important ethical asset to the modern global discourse through its focus on inclusive collaboration, moral restraint, and respectful interaction across the line. Not only is the Ramayan a primary source of Indian tradition but a civilizational text that has enduring value in the entire world, it has its basis in universal human values.

References

1. Brockington, John. (1998). *The Sanskrit Epics*. Brill.
2. Dhand, Arti. (2002). *The Dharma of Ethics, the Ethics of Dharma: Quizzing the Ideals of Hinduism*. Oxford University Press.
3. Goldman, Robert P. (1990). Rama and Ravana: Moral conflict and ethical resolution. *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 18(3), 221–240.
4. Lutgendorf, Philip. (2001). The global Ramayan. *South Asia Research*, 21(2), 153–175.
5. Pollock, Sheldon. (2006). *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press.
6. Ramanujan, A. K. (1991). Three hundred Ramayans: Five examples and three thoughts on translation. In P. Richman (Ed.), *Many Ramayans: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia* (pp. 22–49). University of California Press.
7. Richman, Paula (Ed.). (1991). *Many Ramayans: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. University of California Press.
8. Sen, Amartya. (2005). *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
9. Tripathi, Amish. (2015). *Ram: Scion of Ikshvaku*. Westland.
10. Tripathi, Amish. (2017). *Sita: Warrior of Mithila*. Westland.
11. Tripathi, Amish. (2019). *Raavan: Enemy of Aryavarta*. Westland.
12. Tripathi, Amish. (2022). *War of Lanka*. Westland.
13. Valmiki. (1996). *The Ramayan* (A. Sattar, Trans.). Penguin Classics.