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Aranya Kanda In Ramayana: The Moral Foundation for Sustainable Forest Governance in Contemporary World

Pratik Salgar

psalgar@sclc.edu.in

MM Shankarrao Chavan Law College, Pune, Maharashtra, India

Article

Keywords:

Posted Date: October 30th, 2026

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10991982/v1

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Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

Due to evolving significance to Indian Knowledge System; Ramayana has been subject for researchers for getting better solutions for Legal Systems in contemporary era. The Socio-Legal approaches in the form of Philosophy discussed in Ramayana are evident to show the wisdom of Author of Ramayana-Sage Valmiki. On the backdrop of Sustainable Development in contemporary era, Ramayana is rich heritage of Ecological Wisdom playing a role of lighthouse to guide for better governance of Environment. Out of Seven parts of Ramayana; Aranya Kanda – the 'Book of Forest' highlights the relationship between Human Being and Forest. Author here, tries best to analyse the nexus between notions of Environmental Law and Sustainability in contemporary era & Aranya Kanda in Ramayana. Author has done comparative analysis of Forest management Practices implied in the Aranya Kanda and modern strategies of Community Forestry, Sacred Groves and Sustainable Livelihood to attain ecological harmony. This research studies the ecological ethics in Aranya Kanda to form philosophical basis of existing socio-legal systems governing forestry. This research contends that Aranya Kanda is philosophical basis for ecological perspective-a notion which has close nexus with modern concepts of Conservation ethics and Participatory Forest Governance. This research creates further scope for other disciplines that how traditional narratives can be implemented in reality for better environmental management. It offers a transdisciplinary framework that bridges classical philosophy, environmental humanities, and forest ecology.

I. Introduction

India is best described by 'Unity in Diversity'. This great country has its richness in environmental resources and that is the reason why India was under British rule for around 150 years. Especially, forests were the centres of attraction for whole world for the purpose of spices and the great treasure of raw materials.

Initially, at the time of adoption of Constitution of India, it had no provision for protection of environment and natural resources. The provision for protection and conservation of environment-natural resources has been added by 42nd constitutional amendment. By virtue of this amendment in 1976, fundamental duties of citizens and directive principles of state policy were added to the Indian constitution. From adoption of constitution till 1976; Indian legal system has faced constitutional darkness regarding environmental protection. Notable thing is-the fundamental 'duties' were added to the constitution and till that point the constitution was right centric.

Unlike the constitution, duty-oriented approach has been reflected in the governance of environment in India. This duty-orientated approach is based on the vast background of history, culture, traditions in India. Even today, numerous traditions interwoven in environmentalism are followed in various parts of India. Especially, local and tribal communities play significant role in conservation of forests and other natural resources as their life is based on traditions. It is surprising to witness that these communities are conserving and protecting the resources without having any legal authority, constitutional power.

Thus, the real essence and objective of laws governing environment is observed to be achieved by these communities. It is not just their lifestyle or livelihood, but it is a matter of their ‘faith’ towards nature.

Ramayana and Mahabharata are the strong pillars of Indian society, culture and traditions. The stories from these scriptures are not just stories for Indians; but those have been deeply rooted in Indian lives as both of these scriptures cover all the aspects of human life. From this perspective, Aranya Kanda in Ramayana is the story of ‘nature’.

India has age-old tradition of sacred groves wherein the forests are protected on the basis divine trust. Despite of having laws-policies in India; there are protected forests in whole India which administered by local communities irrespective of the legal authority. ‘Faith matters for conservation’ – thus, not only in India but all over the world, we have examples wherein protection and conservation is done on the basis of ‘faith’.

Sacred groves are patches of trees traditionally protected by local communities for their religious and cultural significance. They also contribute to the conservation of the local biodiversity. These small forests are commonly found in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

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This verse from *Aranya Kanda* means that the august sages living in forest are interested in ‘wellbeing of all’ though *Rama* is priority for them. *Rama* as a King has Sages as role models who have this inclusive ideology. Considering *Aranya Kanda* as a story of forest; researcher here tries to create a logical nexus of *Aranya Kanda* with forest management in contemporary era. The socio-legal-policy perspectives of forest management in India are analysed here and the provisions of *Aranya Kanda* are referred for having suggestions for better future of effective forest management.

‘Faith’ of tribal and local communities has recognised by Indian judiciary in numerous decisions. Given the ecological and cultural importance of sacred groves, the Court recommended that they be granted protection under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, specifically through Section 36-C, which allows for the declaration of ‘community reserves.’ This would legally protect these areas, recognizing their role in biodiversity conservation and cultural practices. The State Government, in collaboration with local communities, were directed to initiate this process to safeguard both their ecological and cultural value. (Apoorva, 2024).

“Recognizing Orans as forests aligns with both domestic legal mandates and international commitments, fostering a harmonious balance between cultural heritage and biodiversity conservation for present and future generations.” (Apoorva, 2024).

The Jammu and Kashmir Heritage Conservation and Preservation Act, 2010 considers the sacred groves as the part of ‘natural feature’ and heritage sites’. This Act aims at preservation of heritage, tangible and intangible. This is the only legal protection for ‘sacred forests’ in India.

Researcher here explores the issues and challenges in contemporary era specifically regarding the forest management in India. Along with this, researcher here brings an attention to the philosophical basis of forest management aspects through *Aranya Kanda* in *Ramayana*. The paper incorporates an interdisciplinary framework that bridges classical philosophy from *Aranya Kanda* of *Ramayana*, Environmental Humanities, and Forest Governance. It investigates the socio-legal-policy perspectives of forest management in India, exploring the relationship between human beings and forests.

The specific scope centers on evaluating the nexus between ancient ecological ethics found in the *Aranya Kanda* and modern environmental law, sustainability strategies, and existing statutory frameworks governing Indian forestry. The research argues *Aranya Kanda* as a philosophical foundation for modern conservation ethics and participatory forest governance. It discourses a necessity of shift from bureaucratic and utilitarian viewpoints to an ethical-moral perspective inspired by ancient narratives.

The central discussion of paper revolves around the philosophical foundation for recognition of rights related to forests contrary to existing approach of forest governance. The paper describes the harmonious co-existence of human beings with plants, animals, birds, wildlife as enshrined in Aranya Kanda. An author explores the significance of scared groves highlighting faith of local communities and customary practices which are often efficacious in achieving ecological goals compared to statutory mandates. The paper commences with the analytical view of existing legal framework in India regarding forest governance followed by the discussion of linkages between Aranya Kanda and forest management in India along with the detailed analytical discussion. The concluding part describes the aspects from Aranya Kanda which can be incorporated for better forest governance.

II. Faith: An Instinct for Sustainability of Forests

[illegible]

*"All this is for habitation by the Lord, whatsoever is individual universe of movement in the universal motion. By that renounced thou shouldst enjoy; lust not after any man's possession." (*Upanishads*)*

Abovementioned verse from *Ishavasyopanishad* – a text from Hinduism signifies the duty of human being for extracting limited resources and emphasises that human being has no ownership over it. This philosophy has been reflected in the "Doctrine of Public Trust" imposing the responsibility on the state to manage the natural resources effectively.

The ancient Roman Empire developed a legal theory known as the "Doctrine of the Public Trust". The Public Trust Doctrine primarily rests on the principle that certain resources like air, sea, waters and the forests have such a great importance to the people as a whole that it would be wholly unjustified to make them a subject of private ownership. (SC Observer, 2026)

Religion, as a social institution impacts the human life. Governing aspects of human life are reflected in the religion and the religious texts are considered to be the source of it. The religions across the world have provisions enshrining the affection towards nature.

In Christianity, as enshrined in the holy Bible in Chapter I First Book of Moses called Genesis, “And God said, Let the earth bring forth grass, the herb yielding seed, and the fruit tree yielding fruit after his kind, whose seed is in itself, upon the earth: and it was so.”

Within the Chinese philosophical framework, the divide between nature and nurture is more significant than the distinction between subjective phenomenal appearance and reality. The contrast between natural dào and social, human dào drives the Chinese epistemic dialectic. Our social learning accumulates over generations. Communities’ mores and conceptions of reality blend cooperative conformity with efficient learning, reform and evolution. Daoists would appreciate how twenty-first century science keeps discovering other parts of life on earth that have counterparts of choices, better and worse outcomes, and cultures that accumulate guidance. (Plato.Stanford)

Dr. Radhakrishnan, through his lectures at Manchester College Oxford in 1926 has mentioned the opinion about Hinduism, “Half the world moves on independent foundations which Hinduism supplied. China and Japan, Tibet and Siam, Burma and Ceylon look to India as their spiritual home.

(VIF India)

The ease with which Hinduism has steadily absorbed the customs and ideas of peoples with whom it has come into contact is as great as the difficulty we feel in finding a common feature binding together its different forms. But, if there is not a unity of spirit binding its different expressions and linking up the different periods of its history into one organic whole, it will not be possible to account for the achievements of Hinduism.” (VIF India)

Considering these opinions, researcher has a opinion that “Hinduism is a way of life”. It has no boundaries of religion. This work has been referred by Hon’ble Supreme Court of India and has been confirmed the opinion by Dr. Radhakrishnan in *Adi Saiva Sivachariyargal Nala Sangam & Ors. v. The Government of Tamilnadu*.

Though tree worship had been common practice of Hindu religion in India, the worship and conservation of a specific tree or plant species in each temple and sanctity attributed to these sacred trees are unique to the temples of Tamil Nadu and its neighbourhood.

Sacred groves are an ingenious method of in-situ conservation where the entire ecosystem with varied populations of different species is conserved by the social sanctions. Conservation of populations is definitely advantageous where different genotypes are conserved, and here exists a strong emotional bond between the sacred groves and local community. (VIF India)

The sacredness of such a landscape is heavily dependent upon its cultural context. These cultural contexts included traditions, rituals performed in the region and the beliefs of the people living there. Thus, sacred landscapes generally have no connection with materiality. However, they create a sensory perception that allows man to feel the space. In a cultural context, sacred landscapes are revered due to their natural environments and the energies of that specific place. This reverence was due to the sacred values of the landscape: its natural beauty, tranquillity, harmony and uniqueness. These are intangible values that can be perceived only through one's senses. (Rethinking Future)

The life of tribal or local communities is based on the traditions developed from the anecdotes wherein the life of others than these communities is based upon religion. Even though the perspective reflected in the religious texts and anecdotes is similar; one can observe the difference at the level of its implementation. The tribal or local communities are instrumental in conservation and protection of forests irrespective of the legal or constitutional authority. They follow the traditions to conserve the environment and this has been the major factor contributing to the protection and conservation of sacred forests in Indian and across the globe.

There is variety of nomenclatures across the world for 'sacred forests' and also these forests have the deities too. Thus, it is important to haver a bird eye view of the traditions regarding the sacred forests across the world.

III. Protected Sacred Groves: A Global Perspective

Today, one third of all land is degraded or degrading, which harms biodiversity and jeopardises essential ecosystem services such as carbon storage. Protected areas offer a solution. If effectively managed and fairly governed, such areas can safeguard nature and cultural resources, protect human health and well-being, provide sustainable livelihoods and so support sustainable development. (IUCN)

UNESCO has recognised few protected forests / sacred forests as World Heritage Sites. This fact itself is evident that how these protected areas are contributing to conservation of environment. Also, it confirms the cultural-spiritual-social-environmental significance. Following are some examples where

European beech forest is the natural vegetation across temperate Europe. However, a long history of human use including modern forestry has led to substantial habitat loss and the creation of simplified forest ecosystems. Only small remnants of old-growth forests are left. Much of this and other key habitats, such as wetlands, are found in protected areas including the special protection areas of Bory Tucholskie and Ostoja Wkrzańska in Poland, Schorfheide-Chorin and Schaalsee-Gebiet in Germany, and Rold Skov and Gribskov in Denmark. In Sweden, Ramsar sites protect much of the wetland area including Klingavälsån-Krankesjön and Helgeån Ramsar. (One Earth)

The Norse Temple at Uppsala served as the site for numerous religious ceremonies, with the most notable being the great nine-year sacrifices. These events, as described by Adam of Bremen, involved offerings to the Gods, including animals and, in rare cases, humans. These rituals were aimed at

ensuring fertility, good harvests and favor from Gods. Adjacent to the temple was a sacred grove, where the sacrifices were hung as offering to divine. This grove was considered a holy space, embodying the connection between the natural and spiritual worlds. (The Worrier Lodge)

Sacred trees and groves are associated with taboos about cutting and potential supernatural punishments to trespassers. These locally-adapted management systems still serve today as protective forests against natural hazards, while in the past they could also regulate the use of natural resources for the community, serving very often as a last resort in times of need. Sacred forests are little known outside the communities, which have preserved them as sacred. These communities suffer today from abandonment and as a result the area of Zagori and Konitsa, where these forests occur, are among the least populated areas of Greece. (MED INA)

In Kenya, the Mijikenda Kaya Forests consist of 10 separate forest sites spread over some 200 km along the coast containing the remains of numerous fortified villages, known as kayas, of the Mijikenda people. The kayas, created as of the 16th century but abandoned by the 1940s, are now regarded as the abodes of ancestors and are revered as sacred sites and, as such, are maintained as by councils of elders. The site is inscribed as bearing unique testimony to a cultural tradition and for its direct link to a living tradition. (UNESCO)

In Nigeria, the dense forest of the Osun Sacred Grove, on the outskirts of the city of Osogbo, is one of the last remnants of primary high forest in southern Nigeria. Regarded as the abode of the goddess of fertility Osun, one of the pantheon of Yoruba gods, the landscape of the grove and its meandering river is dotted with sanctuaries and shrines, sculptures and art works in honour of Osun and other deities. The sacred grove, which is now seen as a symbol of identity for all Yoruba people, is probably the last in Yoruba culture. It testifies to the once widespread practice of establishing sacred groves outside all settlements. (UNESCO)

The role of cultural and spiritual values is crucial to nature conservation. In India, over 1 million sacred forests and 100,000 to 150,000 sacred groves exist. These wilderness areas hold deep religious and spiritual meaning to Indian Hindu indigenous communities. In Hinduism, it is believed that nature worship is part of their moral obligations. Dating for centuries, many Hindus still practice tree worship to pay their respects to their deities and fulfil their wishes. According to their holy scriptures, Lord Brahma created all creatures and all are equal because they need each other to coexist. This spiritual belief is very similar to the mechanism of a healthy ecosystem. Many scientists believe that traditions and faiths like these are essential to encourage biodiversity conservation efforts. (IUCN)

Considering the significance of holy scriptures, researcher has chosen *'Aranya Kanda'* from *Ramayana* as a basis for philosophical foundation to deal with the contemporary issues and challenges governing forests in India. Sage *Valmiki*-the author of *Ramayana* has narrated the story of Lord Rama and especially in *Aranya Kanda* – a book of 'Forest'; he has described nuances of human life which guide us for effective management of forest resources. These descriptions give an idea of the sustainability

approach in human and nature relationship. Therefore, *Aranya Kanda* of *Ramayana* plays vital role in shaping the philosophy governing the sustainability of forests in India.

IV. Parallels between in and Forest Management in India

The legal and ethical foundation of Indian Forest Management is defined by a profound fundamental aspect: the traditional, spiritual, and rights-based relationship with the forest, demonstrated by the ancient concept of *Aranya Kanda*, set against the modern, centralized, and regulatory framework established by post-colonial statutes. To summarise, the laws regarding the forest management in India are focusing on 'recognition of rights' whereas the philosophy in *Aranya Kanda* sets out 'duties to be performed'. As it lays down the 'moral duties' to be performed; it doesn't describe 'economic perspective' unlike the Indian Forest Act, 1927.

Considering the ancient era, there was effective and controlled use of forest resources as described in *Aranya Kanda*. Thus, as per the real objective of The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980; it is purely enacted to deal with contemporary challenges of using land for non-forest purpose. Recognition of the rights of forest dwellers and tribal community has the nexus with *Aranya Kanda*. As per *Ramayana*; Rama respects the forest dwellers and local communities. Thus, it shows the faith and sense of responsibility towards Kingdom, King and forests ultimately.

The *Aranya Kanda*—the third book of the *Ramayana* detailing the exile of *Rama*, *Sita*, and *Lakshmana* in the vast *Dandaka* Forest—portrays the forest (Aranya) not as a mere resource base, but as a sacred repository of knowledge (*Tapovana*), a retreat for spiritual practice (Ashrama), and a vital political space where the righteous (sages) seek protection.

Description and Inclusive Definition of 'Forest' in Aranya Kanda

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(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 2, Shloka 2–3)

Rama followed by *Lakshmana* has indeed seen that midst of the forest which is filled with very many animal herds, where the bears and tigers are frequenting, and whose trees, creepers, bushes are ruined, water ponds rendered unsightly, birds song-less, but where the swarms of crickets are whistling deafeningly.

As per the description in these verses, 'forest' is considered as a whole inclusive of animals, birds, trees, bushes etc. There are sacred groves in diverse regions of India which are rooted in culture, traditions, resulting in effective management and conservation of forests. The traditional view as described in *Aranya Kanda* enshrines the principles of protection, co-existence, and spiritual nourishment. For the sages, the forest was not just a dwelling but a sanctuary whose integrity was supreme to their existence.

This is articulated beautifully when *Rama* assures the sages of his protection, upholding the highest *Dharma* (righteous duty).

This concept of *Dharma* (righteous duty) has reflected in the fundamental duties in Constitution of India. These duties of Citizens and Directive Principles of State Policy for State have been added by the amendment to the Constitution in 1976. Researcher emphasises the fact that the ethical foundation for Fundamental duties and Directive Principles has enshrined in *Ramayana* and other scriptures belonging to Indian Knowledge System unlike the Constitution adopted in 1950. The watering down of scriptures as reflected in laws and policies has resulted in the degradation of environment. Thus, the time has come to refer back to the philosophy enshrined in *Ramayana* and related scriptures for dealing with the challenges in contemporary era.

Spiritual and Cultural Significance of forest in Aranya Kanda

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(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 1, Shloka 5–6)

Meaning, there are with oblation items, vessels, deerskins and sacred grass, and they are beaming forth with gigantic trees that yield sacred and palatable fruits, and with ritual fuels, and water vessels, tubers and fruits. Those hermitages are sacrosanct for Ritual fire is being worshiped with fire-oblations and sacrifices to the reverberating Vedic sounds, and they are enwrapped with lotus ponds with lotuses, and even with flowers of forest.

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(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 1, Shloka 3)

The meaning of above verse is, those hermitages have well-tidied thresholds on all sides, dense with many deer and teemed with many groups of birds, and they are the recourse for all living beings.

Here, the emphasis is on non-extractive, harmonious co-existence, which is the exact ethic the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 attempts to impose on a development-driven state. This sense of moral responsibility is important factor for shaping the behaviour of citizens. Similar approach has been reflected in the fundamental duties of Indian Constitution imposing the sense of responsibility on human being sharing the Earth as a resource. It imposes the reasonable restrictions on the exercise of rights of human.

According to Dr. Ramchandra Guha-an eminent environmentalist, while Western environmentalism often stems from a position of luxury and lifestyle concerns, Indian environmentalism is driven by the necessities of survival. Millions in India depend on sustainable resources for their daily needs, making environmental stewardship a critical issue of livelihood rather than choice. (MK Gandhi)

Dr. Ramchandra Guha mentions in his book 'Environmentalism: A Global History' that, an early exemplar of this tradition was William Wordsworth (1770–1850), whose poetry expresses an intimate affinity with the natural world. During his lifetime, Wordsworth walked some 1,75,000 miles through England and as the literary historian Jonathan Bate remarks, he taught his readers 'how to walk with nature'.

The Gandhian version of the simple life did indeed follow the English model in several respects: in its focus on manual labour, in its elevation of the village as the supreme form of human society, in its corresponding rejection of industrial culture as violent, competitive and destructive of nature and thus unsustainable in long run.

The nuance of 'Simple Life' has been reflected in the Indian philosophies including *the Aranya Kanda* which underlines cultural and spiritual significance of forests.

Duty of Individual and State enshrined in Aranya Kanda

[illegible]

(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 9, Shloka 8)

This is the dialogue by *Sita* to *Rama* where she says that, "Oh, dextrous one, all this can possibly be shouldered by one with controlled senses, and oh, graceful one for a gaze, I am also aware of your sense control." Thinking from practical perspective and contemporary relevance; this verse imposes the duty on human being to control the use of resources and imposes the duty on the state to manage the natural resources in effective way by virtue of the Doctrine of Public Trust.

[illegible]

(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 9, Shloka 11)

Which means, only in this respect you have started towards the well-known *Dandaka* forest along with your brother, and wielding bow and arrows.

Rama's vow to protect the sages and their *Aranya* signifies the State's duty to safeguard the ecosystem from destructive forces. Modern law reflects this duty in the FRA, which empowers the village assembly to govern and manage Community Forest Resources and mandates its consent prior to any forest diversion.

[illegible]

(Aranya Kanda, Sarga 9, Shloka 30)

This means, from virtuousness prosperity emanates, from righteousness happiness, and by honourableness all are achieved, and this universe is the essence of probity.

In comparison with the historical facts across the world, following facts are significant from the point of view of Indian environmental history.

George Perkins Marsh from North America, and Dietrich Brandis from South Asia, were in the frontline of what was to emerge as a scientific movement of truly global consequence. By middle of 19th century, the centralization of political authority and the formation of nation states allowed experts to intervene more broadly, on a national and international scale, in the planning and management of natural resources.

It began to make sense to speak of 'national forests', or of 'rivers as the property of nation', where previously these resources were recognise largely as being locally owned and controlled, by villages, tribes or municipalities.

The founder of the United States Forest Service, Gifford Pinchot, honoured as his mentor and prime inspiration a German Botanist, Dietrich Brandis; it was Brandis who has previously set up the Forest Department in India, perhaps the largest and most influential of natural resources bureaucracies; this department was returned with interest a century later when the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi were freely borrowed by the German Greek Party, the most potent political expression of contemporary environmentalism.

22% of India's land mass is still controlled by forest department, but less than half of this has tree cover on it: proof of the failure of German forestry to successfully replicate itself in the tropics. One Asian country that has not followed European models-in this as in so many other aspects-is Japan, also and not coincidentally, a country that never came under colonial rule. Independent of, and at least as early as in, Germany, Japanese scientists had developed skilled methods of regenerative forestry that helped stabilize the forest cover and mountain slopes of their islands. The historian Conrad Totman notes that between 1590 and 1660 Japanese farmers and timber merchants 'devastated much of their forest land and seemed to be in the process of pressing the archipelago beyond endurance.'

Considering these historical facts, Indian cultural heritage with specific reference to *Aranya Kanda* in *Ramayana* plays vital role in shaping the philosophical foundation for forest governance in contemporary era. Thus, existing legal and policy gaps in this regard can be addressed with philosophies in scriptures.

Unlike commercial extraction of forests in colonial time; these verses emphasise on limited yet sustainable utilisation – a respectful notion. Researcher here observes the contrast that the Indian Forest Act, 1927 in colonial period was having an objective to earn revenue, prioritise the control of State, timber extraction for commercial purposes which abridged traditional rights by classifying them as 'privileges' which can be settled or extinguished through processes enshrined under Section 3 of the Act.

Researcher here is bringing the nexus between relevant provisions of *Aranya Kanda* and contemporary principles of Forest Management. This analysis is based on following perspectives: (a) Description and Inclusive Definition of 'Forest' (b) Spiritual and Cultural Significance of Forest (c) Duty of Individual and

State. The first principle and second enshrines the comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the concept of ‘forest’. This holistic understanding of forest is significant for managing the resources and especially human-nature conflict. It is important to note that, forest here is considered as ‘sacred’ which underlines the moral perspective and faith of citizens. The later principle imposes the moral as well as social duty on citizens and state to be the protector of forests.

V. Existing Legal and Policy Framework for Forest management in India: Analytical View

Being complex in nature, forest laws in India represent evolving legal needlepoint intertwined from colonial-era resource control, post-independence conservation imperatives, and the constitutional mandate to protect the environment and tribal rights. The predominant legal framework seeks to balance competing interests: conservation of biodiversity, sustainable forest management, and the livelihood rights of forest-dwelling communities. The management of sacred forest in India has been a significant concern for the researcher; as it is based on beliefs, tradition and faith of the people involved in management of these sacred forests. New generations are less involved with their cultural roots and therefore have less interest in maintaining sacred groves. That is why, in recent years, local environmental organisations have been working closely with local communities to conserve these holy forests. With the help of these structured institutions, sacred groves will continue to be preserved for generations to come. They also guide the local communities on how to make income from their grounds without overexploiting any resources.

The evolution from the restrictive Indian Forest Act, 1927 (IFA), which primarily focused on the commercial exploitation and state control of forests, to the more ecologically sensitive and rights-based statutes, marks a significant paradigm shift. The primary objective of the Act is “to consolidate the law relating to forests, the transit of forest-produce and the duty leviable on timber and other forest-produce.” Objective of the Act makes it clear that the statute is enacted for the economic purpose. The Indian Forest Act, 1927, remains active but is increasingly viewed through the lens of modern environmental jurisprudence. This gives power to the state to declare Reserved Forests and Protected Forests along with imposition of restrictions on activities within them. On the backdrop of Colonial era, the legacy of restraining the traditional rights often resulted in disputes and disaffection too.

National Forest Policy, 1952 stated that, India, as a whole, should aim at maintaining one-third of its total land area under forests. It further stressed that more than 60% of the land area in the hills (the Himalayas, the Deccan and other mountain systems) and 20% in the plains are to be kept under forests for their protective functions. The Policy provided a spatial connotation for the term ‘forest’ and to that extent it expanded the meaning of forests. A further element that enlarged the scope of the term ‘forest’ was that the class of “tree lands” was included as a category of forests for the purpose of augmenting the function of environmental amelioration, although tree lands are beyond the notified lands under the Indian Forest Act, 1927. Thus, during the post 1952 period the general understanding of the term ‘forests’ transcended beyond the notified area under the Indian Forest Act, 1927. The existence of large

areas under forests in Europe, nearly 41.35%, was definitely a motivating factor to aim at increasing and maintaining the forest cover in India.

The National Forest Policy, 1988 emphasized that the existing “forest” and “forestland” should be fully protected. Further, it states that “forestland” or “land with tree” cover should not be treated merely as a resource readily available and therefore to be utilized for various projects and programmes but to be viewed as a national asset. Further this policy says that diversion of “forestland” for any non-forest purpose should be subject to the most careful examinations by specialists from the standpoint of social and environmental costs and benefits. In essence the 1988 National Forest Policy has recognized “forest” and “forestland” as national assets to be managed for environmental stability and ecological balance. It lays down policy prescriptives for conservation; restoration of the ecological balance owing to depletion of forest resources and increasing the productivity. It also speaks of the relationship of man (especially forest dwelling tribal communities) with the forests and their needs of fuel and fodder as well as a host of non-timber forest produce. It calls on all agencies responsible for forest management to ensure that the tribal people are closely associated with the regeneration, plantation, and harvesting of forests so as to provide them with gainful employment.

After independence, it was difficult for Indian Forest Policy to reconcile; because of historical legal deviance with indigenous ethical tradition. The reconciliation of Forest Policy had started with enactment of the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980. Section 2 of this Act makes the prior approval of Central Government mandatory for diversion of any forest land for non-forest purpose. This legal restriction institutionalised the unregulated commodification of forests. This provision resonates with the moral principles enshrined under *Aranya Kanda*: non-extractive value of forests and its protection as sacred treasure for human beings.

The Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 has been enacted with an objective “to provide for the conservation of forests and for matters connected therewith”. This Act is a pivotal piece of legislation, enacting a crucial check on the unregulated diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes especially for development activities. Its primary mandate is to ensure that forest land is not diverted without the prior approval of the Central Government. The Supreme Court’s stringent interpretation of the term “forest” in the case vastly expanded the Act’s protective reach to include any land recorded as forest, irrespective of ownership, as well as areas matching the dictionary meaning of “forest.” The Act has been given credit by some for slowing the rate of deforestation in India, in part by providing a defence against political pressures –where the State Governments may be particularly vulnerable - for converting forest areas to other uses.

By virtue of the landmark judgement of Hon’ble Supreme Court of India in *T. N. Godavarman Thirumalpad v. Union of India*; the notion of protection for forests was broadened. This case has established the Doctrine of Public Trust and broadened the scope of definition of ‘forest’. Taking the essence from Article 48A and 51A(g), the court contended further- suspension/ban on tree felling and non-forest use without the approval of the Central Government, suspension of wood-based industry licences and high-

power monitoring mechanism. It is significant to note here that, the principle held under *Godavarman* case is a mandate even though not enforceable, but having binding force of morality.

The most direct statutory response to the historical injustice resulting from the Indian Forest Act's colonial approach—which contradicted the community-centric ethos of *Aranya Kanda*—is the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This statute is a restorative law which legally recognizes the Individual Forest Rights and, critically, Community Forest Rights over forest land and resources (Section 3(1)). This recognition of the forest-dweller as a rightful steward, not a criminal encroacher, directly validates the ancient concept of the forest as an integral living space.

The utmost philosophical shift came with the enactment of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This piece of legislation is significant as it aims at "recognising and vesting the forest rights and occupation in forest land in forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who have been residing in such forests for generations but whose rights could not be recorded; to provide for a framework for recording the forest rights so vested and the nature of evidence required for such recognition and vesting in respect of forest land." This landmark legislation is transformative, directly correcting the "historic unfairness" done to forest-dwelling communities. It legally identifies two main types of rights: Individual Forest Rights and Community Forest Rights. The statute primarily modifies the power dynamic by granting rights over land, minor forest produce, and access to biodiversity, thereby decentralizing forest governance and integrating conservation with local self-governance. It mandates the consent of the village assembly for any forest diversion, acting as a powerful democratic safeguard.

Section 5 of the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006. This section imposes the duty on the holders of forest rights i.e. local community to protect the wildlife, forest, and biodiversity, and to ensure that the ecological balance is maintained. Furthermore, Section 4(1)(b) grants the Community Forest Rights for protecting, regenerating, conserving, or managing any community forest resource. The Act democratizes the Rakshana duty, transferring it from the colonial State to the local community, which mirrors the authority entrusted to Rama by the forest's original dwellers.

As directed by Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in *Orissa Mining Corporation Ltd. V. Ministry of Environment & Forest*, Gram Sabha has a role to play in safeguarding the customary and religious rights of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers under the Forest Rights Act. Section 6 of the Act confers powers on the Gram Sabha to determine the nature and extent of "individual" or "community rights". In this connection, reference may also be made to Section 13 of the Act coupled with the provisions of Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996, which deal with the powers of Gram Sabha.

There was an enactment of The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act, 2016 with an objective "to provide for the establishment of funds under the public accounts of India and the public accounts of

each State and crediting thereto the monies received from the user agencies towards compensatory afforestation, additional compensatory afforestation, penal compensatory afforestation, net present value and all other amounts recovered from such agencies under the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980; constitution of an authority at national level and at each of the State and Union territory Administration for administration of the funds and to utilise the monies so collected for undertaking artificial regeneration (plantations), assisted natural regeneration, protection of forests, forest related infrastructure development, Green India Programme, wildlife protection and other related activities and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto." This Act was enacted on the basis of the direction of Hon'ble Supreme Court of India in T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad vs. Union of India.

The key challenges of The Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act, 2016 are: Land Availability limitations, diversion and underutilisation of funds, ecological limitations and monoculture, greenwashing and violation of rights, gaps in policy and institutional setup. As per the mandate of the Act, an afforestation land should be adjacent and contiguous to the diverted forest for better management. However, suitable non-forest land is often unavailable, especially in smaller states and heavily forested regions. The land provided is frequently unsuitable for plantations and unfit for other productive uses. The funds collected before 2016 are underutilised as stern implementation began after enactment of this Act. Monoculture plantations under the Act may disrupt ecological corridors, face biotic pressure and may frustrate the scientific ecological approach. The compensatory afforestation replaces rich forests with commercial forestation with conflict in interest of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Large-scale land conversion for bioenergy, biochar, or afforestation can increase risks to biodiversity, water and food security. In contrast, restoring natural forests and drained peatlands, and improving sustainability of managed forests enhances the resilience of carbon stocks and sinks and reduces ecosystem vulnerability to climate change.

VI. Issues and Challenges regarding the Global Forest Management and Solutions inspired from

Despite of having many legislative and policy instruments; the forest management across the world is facing the issues and challenges. Cultural decline and secularization is one of the major issue regarding the forest management. On the backdrop of Modernization, the essence of 'faith' which governs the forests as discussed is losing its significance in the era of technology and science. Due to population explosion, the dependency on the natural resources is increasing day by day. This increase in demand is creating the stress on the natural resources including the forests. The major shift of individuals on Artificial Intelligence is responsible for decline of faith and morality governing the sustainability of forests. The burning issue for today's era is Climate Change and Ecological Stress degrade the forest health. Thus, we need to bring the ethical consideration for the forest management across the globe. In the following table, the relevant provisions of *Aranya Kanda* in *Ramayana* are explained from which there can be numerous aspects to be learnt for effective management of Forests.

Provision from *Aranya Kanda*	Contemporary Significance	Learning for Effective Management in Contemporary Era
Aranya Kanda, Sarga 2, Shloka 2–3	Exhaustive Definition of Forest and connected Resources	Collective Sense of Responsibility
Aranya Kanda, Sarga 1, Shloka 3, 5–6	Cultural and Spiritual Significance of Forest emphasising the duty-oriented approach	Ethical Foundation for effective implementation of Law
Aranya Kanda, Sarga 9, Shloka 8	Duty of Individual and State to protect the Forests	Fundamental Duty of an individual to protect and conserve the Environment and Forests
Aranya Kanda, Sarga 9, Shloka 30	Duty to Protect through Doctrine of Public Trust	Duty of the State to achieve Sustainability

VII. Conclusion and Suggestions

The Indian narrative of forest significance is a continuous dialogue across millennia. The *Aranya Kanda* provided the spiritual and ethical blueprint for human-forest coexistence, advocating for a protective and respectful relationship. Even though, these are the ethical-moral principles; it is a matter of faith which plays significant role as to obedience of people in achieving an objective of law governing the forests in India. As discussed here, the faith behind the customary practices of sacred forests in India is significant in achieving objective of environmentalism unlike the laws. An ethical-moral perspective behind the customary practices is successful in achieving an objective of laws.

The Indian Forest Act, 1927 has brought the major shift in forest governance through the state control over the forests. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 recognised restorative justice through re-establishing the rights of traditional communities which echoes the responsibility as enshrined in concept of '*Dharma*' under *Ramayana*. Along with this, in 1996, Godavarman judgement is foundation for expanding the scope of definition of 'forest' to protect them from unbridled economic activities. Spiritual tradition, community rights and judicial oversight are three factors which characterize the Forest Governance and Ecological Preservation in India.

The conceptual understanding of bridging the spiritual and legal framework in Indian forest governance creates the transformative model for dealing with modern ecological and social challenges. The *Aranya Kanda* aids as philosophical foundation for laws and its liberal judicial interpretation in India.

In comparison with the pre-colonial laws governing forest management in India; post-colonial era of forest management needs to incorporate ecological justice, community rights and conservation. The *Aranya Kanda* in *Ramayana* provides the spiritual-philosophical nexus to go beyond pure bureaucratic and utilitarian perspective.

The limitations of the research are as following:

1. Research is purely doctrinal. It purely provides the theoretical basis for forest governance.
2. Research is more inclined to the ethical and moral considerations as an essential factor for the success of any law/policy.
3. Rather than the policy recommendations and amendments in the Law, this research suggests the philosophical basis and historical relevance with the forest management which can be guiding for global management.

Declarations

Funding Declaration:

I, Dr. Pratik salgar, the Corresponding Author of this Article hereby declare that the research conducted for the purpose of this article did not receive any funding from any of the funding agencies.

Data Availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this research as no data were generated or analysed. The entire work is the product of desktop research.

Informed Consent

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any other authors. It is solely the work of this author.

Ethical Approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants performed by any other authors.

Author Contribution

Dr. Pratik Salgar conceived the study, developed the theoretical and analytical framework bridging the Aranya Kanda and contemporary environmental jurisprudence which led the drafting of this manuscript. Author conducted the review and legal analysis of modern forest acts, case laws, and policy frameworks. Author has referred the original Sanskrit text along with its English translation and then interpreted in relation with ecological ethics. Author has reviewed the manuscript.

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