

Reframing occupational safety culture through dharma: lessons from the Ramayana

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Occupational safety culture is conventionally understood through technical systems, regulations, and management structures. However, ethical values hold a key role in shaping human behavior, responsibility, and risk-related decision-making in workplaces. The Ramayana, a classical epic of the East, foregrounds the concept of dharma-moral duty, righteousness and responsibility, offering a rich moral framework that can inform contemporary approaches to occupational safety. This conceptual paper examines how the principles of workplace ethics and duty (dharma), as articulated in the Ramayana, can contribute to a deeper understanding of contemporary occupational safety culture. It aims to develop an integrative conceptual model that connects ancient moral philosophy with contemporary safety paradigms.

Methods: The study employs qualitative textual analysis of the epic's major episodes and characters. It focuses on duty, leadership, protection of the weak, worker responsibility, and ethical decision-making. These themes are then linked to modern occupational safety culture constructs, such as leadership commitment, worker participation and protection of vulnerable groups, using a narrative synthesis approach.

Results: The Ramayana illustrates multiple ethical responsibilities. Rama, the protagonist, as the perfect ruler, promotes collective welfare. Lakshmana, Hanuman, and the Vanara Sena, as devoted workers, accept responsibility. Sita's trials focus on the importance of systems that protect vulnerable individuals. Vibhishana's moral dissent exemplifies the courage to stand against unethical practices. From these narratives, a Dharma-based safety culture framework is derived, highlighting (1) ethical leadership that protects workers, (2) worker duty and solidarity, (3) institutional protection of vulnerable groups, and (4) moral decision-making under risk.

Conclusion: Integrating dharma principles into occupational safety culture provides a complementary ethical foundation for technical and regulatory systems. Future empirical studies can validate and operationalize this framework in workplace settings.

Keywords: Dharma, Ethical Leadership, Ramayana, Occupational Safety, Safety Culture, Worker Duty

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Introduction

Modern workers have paid attention to the framework of occupational health and safety (OHS) because most of them have been suffering from both physical hazards and psychosocial stress. Within this context, ethical frameworks such as duty, moral responsibility and social order offer valuable insights to understand human behavior and responsibility in mitigating workplace risks.¹ These ethical norms advocate for safety, moral insights, as well as the importance of introducing ethical and cultural frameworks into the workplace. Besides technical standards and legal provisions, organizations should nurture human dignity, fairness and responsibility. In this context, the epic provides ethical insights that can be linked to occupational safety culture. It highlights ethical values, leadership models and lessons in duty (dharma), echoing the ideals of occupational safety. Leaders and workers simultaneously can adhere to these ideals to protect one another and uphold collective wellbeing.

Modern occupational safety research has emphasized that safety culture is not merely a set of regulations but a shared ethical environment within organizations.² This notion aligns with the epic's concept of dharma. It acts as a cohesive force to bind leaders, workers and communities to serve and safeguard others. Rama's embodiment of just leadership, fairness, and responsibility plays a key role in fostering a safety culture required for the organization. Sita, Lakshmana, Hanuman and the Vanara Sena (monkey army) represent teamwork, resilience and moral ethics. Their values become an impetus to address harmful conditions. These ethical insights are increasingly relevant to the promotion of modern occupational health frameworks. In this context, the World Health Organization (WHO) stresses the need for workplaces to adopt a holistic approach that safeguards both physical and mental, social and ethical well-being.³ Similarly, safety management systems such as ISO 45001 and the ILO-OSH 2001 guidelines emphasize leadership commitment, worker participation, and ethical responsibility in preventing accidents and creating a culture of safety.⁴

The epic upholds moral philosophy, embracing the concept of dharma (duty). Dharma embodies ethical values such as moral responsibility, social order and right conduct. These values promote and protect life, fairness, and the collective welfare of the workers in the workplaces. Brockington stresses that dharma in the Ramayana acts as a

guiding moral standard that actors invoke when confronted with conflict and duty.⁵ He argues that characters often put dharma above their personal desire for the collective welfare. Rama accepts exile by adhering to the principles of Dharma, putting aside his personal gain. He becomes the exemplary ideal ruler, upholding collective moral order above self-interest.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative textual analysis of selected episodes and key characters in the epic. It explores ethical and philosophical dimensions of the epic. The research focuses on themes like duty (dharma), leadership, protection of the weak, worker responsibility and ethical decision-making. The study interprets how socio-cultural contexts contribute to the formulation of moral obligations. These thematic insights are then systematically linked to contemporary constructs of occupational safety culture. Leadership commitments are analyzed through the actions of righteous rulers and decision-makers. Workers' participation is interpreted through collective responsibility and adherence to assigned roles. The research examines the protection of vulnerable groups with their ethical duty to safeguard those at risk. It also unveils modern concerns for the welfare and inclusivity of workers. It also uses a narrative synthesis approach to bridge traditional literary analysis with modern safety frameworks. It integrates ancient ethical principles with contemporary organizational practices and enhances ethical leadership and safety culture in occupational settings.

Results

The narratives of the epic focus on various ethical responsibilities borne by different characters. Rama, the protagonist, fights for collective welfare and justice, putting aside his personal interests. Lakshmana, Hanuman, and the Vanara Sena are disciplined, loyal, and devoted to a common goal. Sita's encounter with severe trials symbolizes the protection of vulnerable individuals from harm, injustice and neglect. Vibhishana courageously fights against injustice, questioning unethical authority and upholds righteousness despite personal risk. From these narratives, a Dharma-based safety culture framework is derived. It highlights ethical leadership, worker duty, solidarity, institutional protection of vulnerable groups and moral decision-making under risk.

Additionally, the epic emphasizes accountability of the characters, leaders and workers for their actions. They possess the capacity to forecast unintended incidents. These elements reinforce ethically based approaches to occupational safety. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to contemporary Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) principles.

Discussion

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The epic focuses on dharma that comprises of virtues like loyalty, selflessness and justice. Bisbey et al. note that in safety culture, organizational values hold important role to shape employee behavior.⁶ In the text, dharma plays both cultural and ethical role for right action. Sattar and Din argue that leadership in Indian epics is based in dharma to protect the community and uphold justice.⁷ The notion of dharma is analogous with modern occupational safety leadership. The leadership asserts that safeguarding workers is more important than their profit and personal benefit. Goldman and Sutherland, in the Ayodhya Kanda, illustrate that the application of this principle can be seen in Bharata's response to Rama's exile. Bharata, rather than claiming the throne, acts as a custodian. He gains trust and confidence of Rama. Bharata proves that renouncement of personal power for the sake of moral responsibility and social order is real adherence of dharma.⁸ This insight parallels occupational safety in which collective wellbeing

is put in the center. The neglect of responsibilities often leads to accidents and erodes trust among workers. Likewise, the narrative of Bharata, the brother of Rama, advocates ethical duty and personal sacrifice for the collective good. Goldman and Sutherland explain that Bharata renounces the kingship obtained through unjust means and instead upholds Rama's rightful authority. His activities demonstrate that adherence to dharma requires subjugation of personal gain to moral obligation and the welfare of the kingdom.⁸ The narrative reflects that safety responsibilities in workplaces often dwarf personal convenience. Dharma, an ethical foundation, aligns with modern safety culture frameworks. As Bisbey et al. assert that safety culture evolves through values, behaviors and reinforcement processes.⁶ Weaving dharma into this framework suggests that duty, fairness and protection are timeless ethical entities that can bolster organizational safety cultures even today. Leadership is central to occupational safety culture. Modern safety science shows that leaders' ethical commitments and behaviors influence safety mechanisms in practice. The epic provides models of leadership ingrained in dharma and imparts lessons for ethical leadership in occupational contexts. Rama's ethical leadership stands for ethical duty against personal gain. Brockington notes that the ideals of dharma influence Rama's decisions at times when they need sacrifice.⁵ Goldman and Sutherland depict that Rama willingly accepts exile, upholding his father's promise and preserving moral order. He exemplifies that true leadership focuses on duty rather than personal interest.⁸ Rama's act bolsters integrity and moral responsibility, fulfilling his father's desire. In modern workplaces, this mirrors leaders who enforce safety standards despite pressures for productivity and cost-cutting.⁴

Leadership also possesses the courage to question unethical authority in order to set an example for collective welfare. Sattar and Din emphasize that Vibhishana's disagreement against Ravana represents moral leadership, where community protection prevails over loyalty to power.⁷ This resonates with the concept of safety voice, in which employees question unsafe practices. Transformational leadership upholds integrity, vision and individual support and creates safer workplaces. Clarke's meta-analysis discovers that leaders who inspire and support workers reduce accidents and increase compliance.⁹ Zohar, a pioneer in safety climate research, adds that leaders influence safety outcomes by signaling

through daily practices whether safety or production takes precedence.¹⁰ These insights echo how Rama's actions in the epic put safety values first for his people. Integrating ancient insights with modern evidence, the epic highlights three leadership qualities such as integrity (Rama), moral courage (Vibhishana) and fairness in collective decisions. These qualities are applicable to modern safety culture. Goldman and Sutherland claim that Rama displays integrity by accepting Vibhishana. He upholds ethical judgment and protection over suspicion. He exhibits fairness and safeguards those who seek shelter.⁸ Bisbey et al. argue that leadership is a driving agency for developing safety culture as it creates working ambience to enact and reinforce norms.⁶ Kelloway et al. further show that leaders' active commitment to safety reduces injuries, fostering trust and engagement.¹¹

Occupational health and safety centers on the protection of vulnerable groups in the workplace. Gender, age, risky employment and exposure to high-risk environments give rise to vulnerability. The epic contains narratives that provide a cultural lens on workplace ethics to mitigate risk in a hazardous work environment. Sita is abducted and put behind bars, violating ethical duty; however, her sacrifice can be viewed as her duty to protect vulnerable individuals. Sita's trial and suffering are analogous to harassment, discrimination, and unsafe environments in modern workplaces. The epic also underscores the shared duty to protect those who are at risk. Goldman and Sutherland state that Hanuman traces Sita in captivity. He prioritizes her safety and dignity, acting as a protector rather than an aggressor. His activities show that he has fulfilled an ethical commitment to safeguarding the weaker.⁸

After tracing Sita in captivity, Hanuman expresses his loyalty towards Rama. His act demonstrates that he has further upholds a moral obligation to protect the vulnerable from harm. Sattar and Din note that such acts exemplify leadership ethics rooted in dharma that safeguard the powerless as a moral obligation.⁷ This is analogous to modern OHS frameworks where workers, supervisors and managers share collective responsibility for identifying risks and supporting vulnerable colleagues.⁸ Vulnerable groups experience higher occupational injury and psychosocial stress. Walters and Wadsworth argue that marginalized workers often do not have the structural protections by which they are placed at greater risk of injury and exploitation.¹² WHO emphasizes

that psychosocial risks—such as harassment, overwork and stress—are a growing threat to workers' wellbeing, particularly for vulnerable populations.¹¹ These findings warn that if we neglect duty toward the vulnerable, it will destabilize social and organizational harmony.

Weaving dharma into modern workplace ethics unfolds the twin obligation of leaders and institutions. It urges structural protections while promoting a culture that protects vulnerable individuals. Just as Rama and his allies become responsible for rescuing Sita from harm, organizations today should execute protective measures for all at risk. Ethical leadership, robust policies and participatory practices together uphold both safety and justice. Workplace safety culture depends on both leadership and the responsibility of workers. Goldman and Sutherland in *Yuddha Kāṇḍa* emphasize that Rama and his allies make a coordinated effort for the rescue of Sita. Their collective loyalty, shared duty and mutual trust make possible the successful rescue of Sita. Such activities prove that ethical outcomes arise from cooperative responsibility rather than individual action alone.⁸ The epic champions this principle by showing the contribution of collective effort, loyalty and shared duty to overcome challenges. These lessons echo strongly with modern occupational safety frameworks that emphasize participatory responsibility.

Lakshmana serves Rama tirelessly during exile and battle. His unconditional support to Rama teaches a lesson on how the worker should be responsible, vigilant, and active for team safety. Brockington points out that the ideals of dharma in the epic are applicable to both rulers and subordinates. Their loyalty towards duty retains order.⁵ In occupational contexts, this incident becomes helpful to understand how frontline workers play key role in implementing safety practices and monitoring risks. Goldman and Sutherland state that the construction of the Setu (bridge) to Lanka was accomplished because of the coordinated endeavor of the Vanara forces under guidance. Each contributes according to their capacity and exemplifies how shared responsibility and organized effort are essential for accomplishing high-risk tasks.⁸ The mobilization of the Vanara Sena (monkey army) shows the importance of the value of teamwork in facing hazardous tasks such as the construction of the bridge. Sattar and Din emphasize that this episode demonstrates collective dharma in which every member contributes to a common mission

despite personal risk.⁷ Employees' collective participation for hazard control helps to mitigate risk factors.

Workers' joint participation holds importance for effective safety systems. Walters and Wadsworth state that participatory arrangements significantly improve risk management and lead to better health and safety outcomes.¹⁰ This imparts the lesson that collective commitment guarantees safety goals. Hanuman's courage and devotion in the Lanka mission exemplify how individual responsibility can inspire collective resilience. In safety psychology, Neal and Griffin demonstrate that workers' safety motivation and role perceptions directly predict safety compliance and participation.¹³ These insights suggest that fostering solidarity and shared responsibility based on ethical duty bolsters workplace safety culture. Ethical decision-making in occupational health and safety requires balancing productivity, risk and human wellbeing. The epic presents multiple episodes where characters face dilemmas under conditions of danger, providing analogies for ethical decision-making in modern workplaces.

Rama decides to accept exile despite injustice. His acceptance shows that ethical duty (dharma) prevails over personal gain. Brockington explains that this choice reflects the prevalence of moral order over self-interest.⁵ In OHS, leaders face dilemmas in which they cannot decide whether to suspend operations due to safety risks. Modern leaders can learn from Rama's adherence of ethical duty. Walters and Wadsworth show that workers' participation in safety decision-making ensures that risk management reflects both fairness and inclusivity.¹¹ This echoes the epic's lesson that justice requires shared responsibility in difficult choices. These insights suggest that ancient ethical models remain relevant in guiding modern occupational risk management. Knowledge transmission and training lay the foundation of sustainable occupational safety systems. The epic contains numerous episodes that focus on the transmission of knowledge and mentorship to ensure survival and ethical order. These lessons parallel modern safety training approaches. Information-sharing and cultural reinforcement are critical for building robust organizations. Bandura's social learning theory explains that individuals acquire behaviors through observation and practice. This theory highlights the importance of mentorship in shaping safe practices.¹⁴ Burke et al. further assert that effective safety training programs significantly widen worker knowledge, behavior and injury

prevention outcomes. Training enhances the role of structured learning in occupational safety systems.¹⁵

Rama guides Lakshmana during their exile, and Lakshmana learns about safety and discipline. Then Lakshmana develops skill to recognize the importance of dharma. Brockington notes that dharma in the Ramayana goes beyond personal duty, focusing on principles transmitted through dialogue and example. Such a principle ensures continuity across generations.⁵ In OHS, this resembles training models in which senior workers train younger employees. They bolster safe practices through both instruction and example. Hanuman can leap to Lanka because he knows his strengths. His discipline and skills further make him bold to earn success. The epic itself serves as a historical cultural training text, transmitting ethics and duty through storytelling. In organizational contexts, cultural narratives and safety stories serve a similar role. In workplaces, effective safety training systems are required to institutionalize knowledge transfer. Walters and Wadsworth highlight that workers' participation in safety training enhances trust and compliance.¹¹ These insights mirror Ramayana's narrative method that reinforces repeated storytelling for the protection of values, responsibility, and ethical conduct across generations. Crisis management and recovery play an important role in occupational safety. Their importance is evident in industries where disasters and emergencies are inevitable. The epic depicts a crisis resulting from abduction and exile to war. It also provides models of resilience, planning and recovery. These cases parallel contemporary occupational health and safety practices. Ravana's abduction of Sita unsettles the social and moral order. However, Sita's crisis is addressed and managed based on the principle of dharma. Modern organizations should learn lessons from Sita's process of crisis management to mitigate workplace disaster such as accidents, industrial failures and pandemics. They should mobilize resources to protect workers. Hanuman's reconnaissance mission to Lanka exhibits his rapid response through agility and courage. Goldman and Sutherland assert that Hanuman balances courage with restraint, gathers critical information, and minimizes unnecessary harm. His activities demonstrate his strategic and ethical crisis response.⁸ Rasmussen highlights that risk management in complex systems requires adaptive and proactive strategies, reinforcing the need for flexibility and situational awareness in crisis conditions.¹⁶ After Ravana's defeat, Rama restores Sita and the kingdom. His role champions

recovery and return to normalcy. In safety science, recovery refers to the restoration of systems and ensures psychosocial wellbeing and learning from crisis to prevent recurrence. Dekker argues that resilient organizations adopt a just culture that supports learning from failure while maintaining accountability.¹⁷ These frameworks echo the Ramayana's narrative of renewal after turmoil.

Occupational health and safety center prevention frameworks. Such frameworks can save lives and resources if a timely forecast about probable hazardous cases is undertaken before their manifestation. The epic includes preventive measures such as boundaries, warnings and foresight. Such measures parallel with proactive safety strategies today. The episode of the Lakshmana Rekha—the protective boundary drawn to shield Sita from harm—symbolizes preventive safety measures. Goldman and Sutherland in the Aranya Kāṇḍa assert that Lakshmana gives a warning to Sita to be cautious of the probable harm from enemies. His warning emphasizes the importance of remaining within a safeguarded boundary to avoid unseen danger, thereby illustrating the preventive function of rules and caution.⁸ Sita crosses the boundary, and thus her abduction takes place. The narrative delivers the message that boundaries and rules are designed to prevent exposure to hazards. Hopkins notes that effective safety measures require foresight, with leading indicators that identify vulnerabilities before disasters occur.¹⁸ The Ramayana's emphasis on caution, preparedness and adherence to rules parallels these preventive frameworks. These findings suggest that preventive measures succeed when leaders actively model and enforce safety values, just as Rama upholds dharma in guiding his followers.

Occupational health and safety systems should adopt ethical principles to address the problems of workers in the workplace. The Ramayana's concept of dharma provides universal ethical dimensions. Spiritual ethical dimensions can be substantial to improve contemporary frameworks such as ILO conventions, ISO standards, and WHO guidelines. Brockington argues that dharma's universal dimension propagates across personal, social and institutional levels.⁵ Goldman and Sutherland in the Ayodhya Kanda mention that Rama possesses a leadership attribute. His leadership qualities treat the protection of subjects and the maintenance of moral order as inseparable duties. His ethical responsibility goes beyond personal conduct to institutional obligation.⁸ In workplace safety, this suggests that ethical duty to

protect life transcends legal compliance, extending to all actors in the system. The ILO's 2023 Declaration on Fundamental Principles emphasizes safe and healthy working conditions as a fundamental right.¹⁹ This aligns with dharma's mandate to protect life and ensure justice. Just as Rama and his allies bear responsibility for collective wellbeing, employers and governments are ethically obligated to safeguard workers. ISO 45001:2018 outlines leadership, worker participation and continuous improvement as foundations of OHS management systems.²⁰ Similarly, WHO and ILO emphasize psychosocial protections alongside physical safety.^{14,15} Sattar and Din argue that leadership ethics from Indian epics reinforce these priorities by embedding fairness, protection, and justice as non-negotiable duties.⁷ Integrating dharma into these standards highlights the moral responsibility underpinning technical frameworks. The Vision Zero approach emphasizes preventing all injuries and promoting holistic well-being. Zwetsloot et al. argue that moving from prevention to proactive wellbeing requires cultural transformation.²¹ Embedding dharma into Vision Zero frameworks ensures that safety culture rests not only on risk management but on moral responsibility, justice, and care for all workers.

Conclusion

Occupational health and safety should integrate both technical and ethical principles to make the workplace atmosphere more soothing and comfortable. The modern occupational frameworks provide scientific and procedural foundations; however, they lack cultural values and commitments. Therefore, they must embrace ethical values and norms to develop holistic approaches for the betterment of the workers. The Ramayana's concept of dharma complements modern frameworks through its ethical principles. They can only bolster occupational safety culture by promoting duty, fairness, justice, and collective responsibility. By analyzing episodes of leadership, vulnerability, teamwork, crisis, and prevention, this study concludes that the Ramayana's ethical insights can contribute to mitigating contemporary occupational safety challenges. Modern occupational safety mechanisms become complete after the integration of Rama's integrity, Sita's notion of the protection of the vulnerable, Lakshmana's and Hanuman's collective responsibility and resilience and the preventive safety mechanism of Lakshmana Rekha. These narratives provide

cultural metaphors that enrich modern safety discourse. Integrating dharma into occupational safety culture ensures that safety stems from a moral obligation to respect human dignity. By

bridging ancient ethical wisdom with global safety standards, organizations can cultivate more just, resilient, humane and safer workplaces.

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