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Ramayana as a Geo-Cultural Atlas: An Interdisciplinary Reading of Narrative, Landscape, and Spatial Memory

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Abstract— The *Ramayana* has conventionally been examined as an epic of literary, religious, and ethical significance. This paper advances an interdisciplinary interpretation by positioning the *Ramayana* as a geo-cultural atlas—a narrative system through which landscapes are described, imagined, ritualized, and continuously reproduced across space and time. Drawing from architectural theory, cultural geography, and emerging GIS-based visualization practices, the study examines how epic narratives actively participate in the formation of cultural landscapes rather than merely referencing them. Through selected case studies including Ayodhya, Panchavati, Kishkindha, and Lanka–Ram Setu, the paper demonstrates how textual descriptions, local traditions, and physical terrains converge to generate enduring spatial identities. The research proposes a methodological framework that integrates textual analysis with spatial mapping while critically acknowledging ambiguity and multiple interpretations.

Keywords-- Ramayana, Geo-cultural atlas, Cultural landscapes, Narrative geography, Architecture and GIS

I. INTRODUCTION

Across South Asia, epic narratives have historically functioned as instruments of spatial meaning-making. Among these, the *Ramayana* occupies a distinctive position due to its wide geographical diffusion and persistent cultural relevance. Its detailed references to forests, rivers, settlements, and routes have enabled diverse regions to embed the epic within their physical environments.

From an architectural and cultural-geographic perspective, landscapes are not neutral containers of human activity; they are shaped through memory, symbolism, and repeated use. This paper argues that the *Ramayana* operates as a geo-cultural atlas—a narrative framework that organizes space, assigns cultural value, and enables the transformation of terrain into meaningful place. Rather than seeking to verify the epic as a literal historical map, the study focuses on how its geography has been interpreted, localized, and materialized over centuries

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on the geography of the *Ramayana* spans literary criticism, archaeology, history, anthropology, and cultural geography. Early scholarship largely attempted to correlate epic locations with physical sites, often relying on textual description and traditional belief. Subsequent studies shifted attention toward the processes of sacralization, examining how landscapes acquire religious significance through ritual practice, storytelling, and architectural markers such as temples and pilgrimage routes.

In recent decades, scholars and institutions have employed digital mapping and GIS tools to visualize epic geographies. These efforts highlight both the potential and the limitations of spatializing narrative texts. Rather than producing definitive maps, contemporary studies emphasize interpretive plurality, recognizing epic landscapes as culturally constructed and continuously negotiated.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS & OBJECTIVES

1. How does the *Ramayana* function as a geo-cultural system that produces and circulates spatial meaning?
2. In what ways have historical interpretation, local tradition, and modern mapping practices shaped the understanding of epic landscapes?
3. How can architectural thinking and GIS-based tools contribute to the study of narrative geographies?

Objectives:

- To conceptualize the *Ramayana* as a geo-cultural atlas rather than a fixed historical itinerary.
- To formulate an interdisciplinary methodological framework combining text, landscape, and spatial visualization.
- To demonstrate the applicability of this framework through selected regional case studies.



IV. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts an interdisciplinary methodology integrating architectural analysis, cultural geography, and spatial visualization:

1. *Narrative–Spatial Analysis*: Selected passages from Valmiki's *Ramayana* are examined for descriptions of terrain, movement, and environmental markers. These descriptions are interpreted as narrative cues rather than precise cartographic data.
2. *Cultural–Historical Correlation*: Textual insights are compared with archaeological findings, historical records, regional traditions, and ethnographic accounts to understand how particular locations became associated with epic events.
3. *GIS-Based Visualization*: Identified sites and routes are visualized using GIS platforms to explore spatial relationships and regional patterns. Uncertainty is addressed through layered mapping and flexible spatial boundaries, avoiding claims of singular accuracy.

V. CASE STUDIES

1) *Ayodhya: Narrative Origins and Urban Sacredness*

Ayodhya represents the symbolic origin of the *Ramayana* and exemplifies how narrative geography influences urban identity. Through the interaction of textual reference, ritual practice, and architectural development, the city has evolved into a powerful sacred and political landscape. This case demonstrates how epic narratives contribute to the layering of memory within urban form.

2) *Panchavati: Exile, Ecology, and Ritual Landscape*

Commonly associated with the Godavari basin, Panchavati illustrates how episodic narratives anchor cultural memory within specific ecological settings. Shrines, caves, and festivals reinforce the association between landscape and narrative, sustaining spatial identity through collective practice rather than empirical verification.

3) *Kishkindha: Terrain, Myth, and Regional Identity*

The boulder-strewn landscape around present-day Hampi is widely identified with Kishkindha.

The distinctive terrain resonates with epic descriptions and has enabled the integration of myth into regional identity, tourism, and ritual life. This case highlights the reciprocal relationship between physical geography and narrative imagination.

4) *Lanka and Ram Setu: Contested Geographies and Natural Form*

The location of Lanka remains debated, with interpretations ranging from symbolic to geographic. The chain of shoals known as Ram Setu illustrates how natural formations become culturally charged through epic association. Competing mythological, historical, and scientific readings reveal the layered and contested nature of geo-cultural landscapes.

VI. DISCUSSION

Across the case studies, the *Ramayana* emerges not as a static geographical record but as a dynamic spatial framework. Landscapes are continuously reinterpreted through ritual, architecture, tourism, and political discourse. GIS-based visualization, when used critically, offers a valuable tool for revealing spatial patterns while preserving interpretive openness.

VII. CONCLUSION

Interpreting the *Ramayana* as a geo-cultural atlas allows for a deeper understanding of how narrative, landscape, and society intersect. The epic's geography functions less as a map of the past and more as a living spatial system that continues to shape cultural landscapes. By integrating architectural thinking, cultural geography, and spatial technologies, this study contributes an interdisciplinary framework for analyzing narrative-driven landscapes. Future research may expand this approach through participatory mapping, higher-resolution spatial data, and comparative studies across regions.

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