



Ecological Consciousness in Ancient Indian Thought

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Abstract

Ancient Indian philosophical and literary traditions contain profound reflections on the relationship between humans and nature. The Vedas, Upanishads, and epic literature articulate a holistic worldview in which the natural environment is regarded as sacred, interconnected, and ethically significant. This study examines ecological consciousness in ancient Indian thought through textual analysis of Vedic hymns, especially the Bhūmi Sūkta (Prithvi Sukta) of the Atharva Veda, environmental references in the Rigveda and Yajurveda, philosophical teachings from the Chandogya and Brihadaranyaka Upanishads, and ecological themes present in the Ramayana and Mahabharata (Atharva Veda, 12.1; Rigveda, 1.90.6; Yajurveda, 36.17; Chandogya Upanishad, 3.14.1). These texts collectively present a non-anthropocentric worldview rooted in the metaphysical concept of Brahman and the cosmic order of ṛta, emphasizing harmony between humans and nature. Normative texts such as the Dharmaśāstras and the Arthaśāstra further institutionalized environmental governance (Kangle, 1960) through regulations on forests, wildlife, and water resources. By comparing ancient ecological principles with modern sustainability frameworks, this paper demonstrates that ancient Indian thought offers early articulations of environmental ethics that remain relevant for contemporary ecological discourse.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics; Ancient Indian Thought; Indian Knowledge Systems; Sustainability; Ecological Consciousness; Dharma; Panchamahābhūtas

Introduction

The accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century manifested in climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, soil degradation, and water scarcity has compelled scholars to revisit traditional knowledge systems that historically promoted sustainable relationships between humans and the natural environment (Capra, 1996; Shiva, 1988). While modern environmental science provides technological and policy solutions to these challenges, there is increasing recognition that ecological sustainability also requires deeper ethical and philosophical foundations. In this context, ancient Indian intellectual traditions offer valuable insights into environmental ethics and ecological consciousness. Ancient Indian thought developed within a cultural and philosophical framework that emphasized the interconnectedness of all forms of existence. Unlike the anthropocentric worldview that has dominated much of modern industrial civilization, the classical Indian worldview is fundamentally cosmocentric and ecological, perceiving humans as integral participants within a broader cosmic order. This order is articulated through the concept of ṛta, the universal principle that maintains harmony and balance in the natural and moral universe. Ṛta governs not only cosmic phenomena such as seasons, rainfall, and planetary movements but also ethical conduct, social order, and ecological equilibrium (Panikkar, 1977).

Another foundational concept shaping the ecological vision of ancient Indian philosophy is Brahman, the ultimate reality that pervades all existence. According to the Upanishadic worldview, the same universal essence is present in humans, animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and the entire cosmos (Radhakrishnan, 1953). This metaphysical unity establishes a profound ethical relationship between humans and nature, as environmental destruction is interpreted as a disruption of cosmic harmony. The earliest expressions of this ecological consciousness can be found in the Vedic literature, particularly in hymns dedicated to natural elements such as the earth (Prithvi), water (Apah), fire (Agni), wind (Vayu), and the sun (Surya) (Rigveda, 1.90.6; Yajurveda, 36.17). These hymns reflect a deep reverence for natural forces and recognize their essential role in sustaining life. The Vedas portray nature not merely as a physical environment but as a sacred manifestation of divine energy. As a result, environmental preservation was embedded within ritual practices, social customs, and ethical norms.

Among the Vedic texts, the *Bhūmi Sūkta* (Prithvi Sukta) of the *Atharva Veda* represents one of the most sophisticated early articulations of ecological awareness. The hymn celebrates the Earth as a nurturing mother who sustains biodiversity, agriculture, rivers, and human civilization. By framing the human–earth relationship in terms of kinship rather than ownership, the text establishes an ethical foundation for environmental stewardship (*Atharva Veda*, 12.1).

Similarly, the *Rigveda* contains numerous hymns that emphasize the sacredness of water, rivers, forests, and atmospheric elements. These hymns highlight the ecological importance of natural forces and acknowledge the dependence of human society on environmental balance. The Vedic ritual system itself, particularly the concept of *yajña*, reflects a philosophy of reciprocity between humans and nature, in which natural resources are utilized responsibly while maintaining ecological equilibrium. The philosophical dimension of ecological thought becomes more explicit in the *Upanishads*, which articulate the metaphysical unity of the universe. Concepts such as *Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma* (“All this is Brahman”) and *Isha Vasyam Idam Sarvam* (“All this is pervaded by the Divine”) emphasize that the entire cosmos forms an integrated whole (*Chandogya Upanishad*, 3.14.1; *Isha Upanishad*, Verse 1). These teachings imply that exploitation of nature violates not only ecological balance but also spiritual harmony.

Ecological themes are further developed in classical Indian epic literature, particularly in the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (*Ramayana*; *Mahabharata*, *Anuśāsana Parva*). These texts depict forests as sacred landscapes that serve as centers of spiritual practice, biodiversity, and moral development. The narratives emphasize the importance of respecting natural habitats, protecting trees, and maintaining harmony between human communities and the environment. Forests such as *Dandakaranya* in the *Ramayana* are portrayed not merely as wilderness areas but as ecological and spiritual spaces where sages live in sustainable coexistence with nature.

In addition to philosophical and literary reflections, ancient Indian texts also contain practical approaches to environmental governance. Administrative treatises such as *Kautilya’s Arthaśāstra* provide detailed regulations regarding forest management, wildlife conservation, irrigation systems, and protection of natural resources (Kangle, 1960). Officials known as *Vanadhyaksha* (forest superintendents) were responsible for regulating forest resources, demonstrating that environmental management was institutionalized within ancient administrative systems.

Furthermore, normative texts such as the *Dharmaśāstras* prescribe penalties for actions that damage ecological systems, including the destruction of trees, pollution of water bodies, and harm to animals. These legal provisions illustrate that environmental protection was recognized not only as a moral duty but also as a social and legal obligation. By examining ecological ideas across Vedic hymns, *Upanishadic* philosophy, epic literature, and classical governance texts, this study aims to demonstrate that ancient Indian thought articulated sophisticated principles of environmental ethics long before the emergence of modern environmental discourse. These principles such as reverence for nature, restraint in consumption, ecological balance, and interdependence of life closely correspond to contemporary concepts such as sustainable development, deep ecology, ecological stewardship, and environmental justice.

In an era characterized by environmental degradation and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, revisiting these ancient ecological perspectives provides valuable philosophical foundations for contemporary sustainability discourse. Ancient Indian ecological wisdom thus contributes not only to the study of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) but also to global discussions on environmental ethics and sustainable living.

2. Ecological Consciousness in the Vedas

The Vedic worldview is deeply ecological. Natural elements such as earth, water, air, fire, and space are revered as manifestations of divine forces that sustain life.

2.1 Reverences for Earth: Prithvi Sukta

The *Bhūmi Sūkta* in the *Atharva Veda* expresses profound respect for the earth.

माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः

(“Mātā bhūmiḥ putro'ham pṛthivyāḥ”)

(*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12)

Translation: “Earth is my mother and I am her son.”

Ecological Interpretation

This verse from the *Bhūmi Sūkta* represents one of the earliest articulations of ecological ethics in world literature. The metaphor of Earth as **mother** establishes an intimate and ethical relationship between humans and the natural world. In contrast to exploitative paradigms that treat nature as property or commodity, this perspective emphasizes kinship, reciprocity, and moral responsibility.

The maternal symbolism conveys several ecological principles:

First, it recognizes the **life-supporting role of the Earth**, which provides food, water, shelter, and ecological stability necessary for the survival of human civilization. Just as a mother nurtures her children, the earth sustains all forms of life through complex ecological processes.

Second, the verse implies **ethical accountability** toward the environment. If humans consider themselves the children of the earth, then environmental destruction becomes morally equivalent to harming one's own mother. This metaphor encourages attitudes of gratitude, respect, and protection toward natural ecosystems.

Third, the Bhūmi Sūkta celebrates the **diversity of ecological systems**, describing mountains, forests, rivers, fertile fields, and various life forms that exist upon the earth. Such descriptions reflect an early recognition of biodiversity and the interdependence of ecological processes.

Thus, the hymn articulates a worldview that aligns closely with contemporary environmental philosophies such as **ecological stewardship and deep ecology**, both of which emphasize the intrinsic value of nature beyond its utilitarian benefits.

Another verse highlights ecological diversity:

यस्यां समुद्र उत सिन्धवो आपः ।

यस्यामन्नं कृष्टयः सम्भभूवुः ॥

("Yasyaam samudra uta sindhavo aapah,
yasyaam annam krishtayah sambhabhuvuh.")
(Atharva Veda 12.1.12)

Translation: "In whom are the oceans and the rivers, in whom food and cultivated crops have arisen."

It recognizes the earth as the foundation of rivers, oceans, agriculture, and human civilization.

2.2 Environmental Harmony in the Rigveda

The *Rigveda* frequently invokes natural elements as divine forces worthy of reverence.

आपो हि ष्ठा मयोभुवाः

ता न ऊर्जे दधातन

("Āpo hi ṣṭhā mayobhuvāḥ,
tā na ūrje dadhātana.")
(*Rigveda* 10.9.1)

Translation: "O Waters, you are the source of joy. Grant us nourishment and vitality."

Ecological Interpretation

This Rigvedic hymn reflects a deep awareness of the fundamental role of water in sustaining ecological and human life. The text personifies water as a benevolent and nurturing force, emphasizing its life-giving properties. The verse highlights the ecological significance of water as the foundation of biological productivity. Water sustains agriculture, supports biodiversity, regulates climate systems, and enables the functioning of ecosystems. By acknowledging water as a sacred element, the Vedic tradition encourages attitudes of respect and conservation. The spiritual reverence for water also implies the importance of maintaining the purity of natural resources. Pollution or degradation of water bodies would disrupt both ecological balance and spiritual harmony. In this sense, the hymn anticipates modern concerns regarding water conservation, watershed management, and sustainable use of freshwater resources.

The Rigvedic perspective therefore integrates environmental awareness with spiritual ethics, illustrating how cultural values can reinforce ecological responsibility.

Another hymn emphasizes harmony between humans and nature:

मधु वाता ऋतायते मधु क्षरन्ति सिन्धवः

("Madhu vātā ṛtāyate, madhu kṣaranti sindhavaḥ.")
(*Rigveda* 1.90.6)

Translation: "Sweetly blow the winds; sweetly flow the rivers."

This verse symbolically represents ecological balance in the natural world.

2.3 Ecological Balance in the Yajurveda

The *Yajurveda* expresses a vision of universal harmony among natural elements.

ॐ द्यौः शान्तिरन्तरिक्षं शान्तिः

पृथिवी शान्तिरापः शान्तिः

ओषधयः शान्तिः वनस्पतयः शान्तिः

("Om dyauḥ śāntir antarīkṣam śāntiḥ,
pṛthivī śāntir āpaḥ śāntiḥ,

oṣadhayaḥ śāntiḥ vanaspatayaḥ śāntiḥ.”)
(*Yajurveda* 36.17)

Translation: “May there be peace in the heavens, peace in the atmosphere, peace on earth; peace in the waters, peace in the herbs, and peace in the trees.” This mantra presents a comprehensive ecological vision of universal harmony. It acknowledges multiple layers of the natural environment cosmic, atmospheric, terrestrial, and biological and emphasizes the need for balance among them.

From an ecological perspective, the mantra reflects an understanding that disturbances in one component of the natural system affect the entire ecological network. The invocation of peace or harmony (*śānti*) symbolizes ecological equilibrium, similar to modern scientific concepts of environmental stability and ecosystem resilience. The inclusion of herbs (*oṣadhayaḥ*) and trees (*vanaspatayaḥ*) highlights the importance of vegetation in maintaining ecological health. Plants regulate climate, support biodiversity, and sustain human life through food and medicine. By invoking harmony for plant life, the mantra implicitly recognizes the ecological significance of flora within the broader environmental system.

This holistic perspective parallels modern ecological theories that emphasize systems thinking, planetary health, and interconnected environmental processes.

3. Ecological Philosophy in the Upanishads

The Upanishads develop a philosophical understanding of environmental unity by emphasizing the interconnectedness of all beings.

3.1 Isha Upanishad: Divine Presence in Nature

ईशावास्यमिदं सर्वं यत्किञ्च जगत्यां जगत्

(“Īśāvāsyam idaṁ sarvaṁ yat kiñca jagatyāṁ jagat.”)

(*Isha Upanishad* 1)

Translation: “All this, whatever moves in this universe, is enveloped by the Divine.”

This foundational Upanishadic statement asserts that the entire universe is permeated by the divine presence. From an ecological standpoint, this idea establishes the **intrinsic value of nature**. If the same divine reality exists within all beings, then the natural environment cannot be treated merely as an object of exploitation.

The verse therefore promotes **ethical restraint in consumption and responsible use of resources**, principles that correspond closely with contemporary sustainability ethics.

3.2 Chandogya Upanishad: Unity of Life

The **Chandogya Upanishad** describes the fundamental unity underlying all existence:

सर्वं खल्विदं ब्रह्म

(“Sarvaṁ khalvidaṁ brahma.”)

(*Chandogya Upanishad* 3.14.1)

Translation: “Verily, all this is Brahman.”

This statement affirms that every element of the universe is interconnected through the same cosmic essence.

3.3 Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: Interdependence of Life

The **Brihadaranyaka Upanishad** emphasizes harmony between humans and the environment:

असतो मा सद्गमय

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय

मृत्योर्मा अमृतं गमय

(“Asato mā sad gamaya,

tamaso mā jyotir gamaya,

mṛtyor mā amṛtaṁ gamaya.”)

(*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 1.3.28)

Translation: While primarily spiritual, the verse symbolizes movement toward harmony, order, and balance - values central to ecological ethics.

This prayer expresses a profound desire for **spiritual awakening, knowledge, and liberation**, seeking guidance from ignorance and suffering toward truth, enlightenment, and eternal peace.

4. Ecological Themes in the Ramayana

The *Ramayana* portrays forests as vibrant ecological systems. Much of the narrative occurs in forest regions such as Dandakaranya, highlighting the spiritual and ecological significance of forests. Rama’s life during exile demonstrates harmony with nature. Forest hermitages function as centers where sages live sustainably while preserving biodiversity. The narrative reflects respect for rivers such as Ganga, mountains, animals, and plant life.

The epic also emphasizes that forests are sacred spaces where human beings develop moral and spiritual discipline.

5. Environmental Ethics in the Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* expands ecological consciousness through philosophical teachings on dharma.

In the *Anuśāsana Parva*, Bhishma emphasizes the value of trees:

दशकूपसमावापी

दशवापीसमो ह्रदः ।

दशह्रदसमः पुत्रः

दशपुत्रसमो द्रुमः ॥

("Daśa-kūpa-samā vāpi,

daśa-vāpī-samo hradah;

daśa-hrada-samaḥ putrah,

daśa-putra-samo drumah.")

(Mahabharata Anuśāsana Parva 58.10)

Translation: "One well equals ten ponds; ten ponds equal one reservoir; ten reservoirs equal one son; and ten sons equal one tree."

This verse from the *Anuśāsana Parva* emphasizes the extraordinary ecological value of trees (Mahabharata, *Anuśāsana Parva*). By comparing a single tree to multiple generations of human descendants, the text highlights the crucial role that trees play in sustaining life. Trees contribute to soil conservation, climate regulation, water retention, biodiversity support, and oxygen production. The verse therefore encourages tree planting and forest conservation as acts of social and ecological responsibility. Such teachings resonate strongly with modern environmental movements advocating afforestation, ecosystem restoration, and biodiversity protection.

6. Environmental Governance in Classical Texts

Ancient Indian texts also describe environmental management.

The *Arthaśāstra* discusses forest administration and wildlife protection. Officials known as *vanadhyaksha* supervised forest resources and regulated their use (Kangle, 1960).

The *Dharmaśāstras* prescribe penalties for cutting trees, polluting water sources, or harming animals, reflecting the ethical obligation to protect nature. Traditional ecological practices such as water harvesting reflect sustainable resource management (Agarwal & Narain, 1997; Centre for Science and Environment).

7. Comparison of Ancient Ecological Principles with Modern Sustainability

Ancient ecological principles align with modern sustainability frameworks such as deep ecology and systems thinking (Capra, 1996; Kapoor, 2002).

Ancient Indian Ecological Principle	Source Text	Concept	Modern Sustainability Parallel
Earth as Mother	Atharva Veda (Bhumi Sukta)	Humans as children of Earth	Environmental stewardship
Panchamahābhūtas	Vedic Philosophy	Balance of natural elements	Ecosystem balance
Yajña (Reciprocity with nature)	Vedas	Mutual nourishment	Circular economy
Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma	Chandogya Upanishad	Unity of all life	Deep ecology
Restraint in consumption	Isha Upanishad	Ethical moderation	Sustainable consumption
Tree planting as a virtue	Mahabharata	Ecological responsibility	Afforestation programs
Sacred groves	Puranic tradition	Community-based conservation	Biodiversity conservation

8. Conclusion

Ancient Indian thought presents a holistic ecological worldview rooted in philosophical, ethical, and cultural traditions. The Vedic hymns emphasize harmony between humans and the natural world, particularly through concepts such as *rta*, *Panchamahābhūtas*, and *yajña* (Shiva, 1988; Capra, 1996). The *Bhūmi Sūkta* of the *Atharva Veda* portrays the earth as a nurturing mother, reinforcing the ethical responsibility of humans to protect nature. The *Upanishads* further deepen this ecological understanding by emphasizing the unity of all existence through the concept of *Brahman*. The epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* illustrate ecological principles through narratives that portray forests, rivers, and trees as sacred elements of moral life. Moreover, governance texts such as the *Arthaśāstra* demonstrate that environmental ethics were integrated into administrative systems. Cultural practices

such as sacred groves further exemplify community-based ecological conservation. These traditions collectively reveal that ancient Indian civilization articulated environmental ethics that resonate strongly with contemporary sustainability frameworks. In an era of ecological crisis, the insights of ancient Indian thought offer valuable philosophical foundations for sustainable development and environmental stewardship.

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