



Eco-Consciousness through Indian Philosophy

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Indian philosophical thought conceptualises the environment not as inert but as a dynamic, interconnected system where humans coexist with other living beings. Historically, Indian culture fostered environmental preservation through moral guidelines rooted in ancient scriptures. Indian philosophy perceives nature as a sacred entity deserving reverence. As we navigate modern life, these insights can guide us toward a more sustainable and harmonious existence.

A recent study¹ highlights a concerning surge in extreme weather events during the first nine months of 2024, resulting in over 3,000 fatalities and significant damage to infrastructure and agriculture. The report reveals that extreme weather was recorded on 93 per cent of days, with Madhya Pradesh experiencing the highest

frequency of incidents and Kerala facing the most casualties. Notably, 2024 has already set climate records, including the driest January since 1901 and unprecedented high temperatures. The report emphasises the urgent need for enhanced disaster response systems and calls for climate reparations from high-emission.

In an era marked by environmental crises, the need for eco-consciousness has never been more pressing. The concept of environmental consciousness—an awareness of the interrelationship between human activities and the environment—encourages individuals and communities to adopt sustainable practices. Indian philosophy, with its rich tapestry of thought and tradition, offers profound insights into cultivating this eco-consciousness, emphasising the interconnectedness of all life and the ethical responsibilities humans hold toward nature.

The Philosophical Foundations

Indian philosophical thought conceptualises the environment not as inert but as a dynamic, interconnected system where humans coexist with other living beings. This perspective emphasises understanding and engaging with the holistic natural world, prioritising adaptation as a guiding principle for human – non human interaction. Ancient Indian philosophers advocated for environmental protection as a fundamental human duty, recognising the environment's delicate nature. This cosmic worldview is integral to both oral and textual traditions. While the oral tradition centers on practical application, the textual tradition provides a comprehensive and systematic analysis of the universe.

According to Indian texts, humans, like all material entities, are composed of elements that decompose and return to nature upon death. These nine *tatvas*, or elements, are Earth, Water, Fire, Air, Sky, Time, Directions, Mind, and Soil. Indian mythology describes a phased emergence of these elements: water, earth, and sky first; followed by aquatic animals and birds; then

land; air/wind; and finally, fire. Indian thought perceives the environment as a transcendental given, imbued with life in both biotic and abiotic forms. Interdependence is paramount, precluding isolated existence, and the environment is viewed as a benevolent habitat.

Historical Context of Environmental Ethics in India

Historically, Indian culture fostered environmental preservation and conservation through a system of moral guidelines rooted in ancient scriptures and the teachings of seers. These ethical principles, integrated into daily life, influenced the actions of both commoners and rulers. Even minor environmental issues were addressed with specific solutions. The ancient and medieval periods of Indian history were characterised by a deep reverence for nature. Environmental ethics were not merely theoretical constructs; they were woven into the fabric of daily life, influencing the actions of both common people and rulers. The teachings of various philosophical schools and spiritual leaders provided a framework for sustainable living, advocating for a harmonious relationship with the environment.

Ashoka's edicts, inscribed on pillars and rocks in the 3rd century BCE, offer early historical evidence of India's environmental consciousness. These inscriptions, placed in public and pilgrimage sites, prohibited cutting green trees and outlined punishments for offenders. They reflect an understanding of the link between deforestation and atmospheric pollution and disease. Edict No. V, found in Rampurwa, Bihar (243 BCE), provides detailed environmental injunctions, representing an early historical record of conservation practices.

This edict, dating back to the third century BCE, is remarkable for its early advocacy of conservation ethics. It lists protected species, forbids their slaughter and other forms of harm, and promotes forest conservation, recognising forests as vital habitats. The edict's injunctions regarding fish were likely intended to protect them during breeding season. Its focus on conservation is unparalleled for its time.²

The Sacred Connection with Nature

Indian philosophy perceives nature not merely





as a resource to be exploited but as a sacred entity deserving reverence. The Vedas, the oldest scriptures of India, articulate a worldview where the natural world is intertwined with the divine. This perspective fosters a sense of responsibility towards the environment, urging individuals to live in harmony with nature.

Trees and their associations with Gods & Goddesses:

Ashoka (*Saraca asoca*)- Buddha, Indra, Vishnu, Aditi, etc.

Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) -Lord Vishnu, Goddess Laxmi, Goddess Vana Durga, etc.

Tulsi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*)-Lord Vishnu, Lord Krishna, Lord Jagannath, Goddess Laxmi, etc.

Kadamba (*Neolamarckia cadamba*)- Lord Krishna

Ber (*Ziziphus mauritiana*)-Lord Shiva, Goddess Durga, Lord Surya, Goddess Laxmi

Vata (*Ficus benghalensis*)- Lord Brahma, Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Lord Kal (Yama), Lord Kubera, Lord Krishna, etc.

In contrast, Western traditions often adopt an anthropocentric view, regarding nature primarily as a resource for human use, with little moral consideration for non-human entities. However, a minority perspective within Western thought, known as the stewardship tradition, advocates for responsible care of the earth as a divine obligation.

Indian philosophy also highlights the significance of the non-human world through anthropomorphism, attributing human-like qualities to animals and plants. This is evident in ancient worship practices, such as that of *Pashupati*

Mahadev, and in the moral lessons conveyed through tales like the *Panchtantra*, where animals are depicted with human traits to illustrate ethical dilemmas. The reverence for cows, trees, and the association of animals with deities further underscore the intrinsic value placed on all forms of life within Indian culture.

Indian philosophy is deeply rooted in ancient texts that celebrate the harmony between humanity and nature. It posits that humans are not separate from the natural world but are integral parts of it. This perspective is encapsulated in the concept of *Sṛṣṭi*, which refers to the universe as a living system where all entities—animate and inanimate—interact in a complex web of relationships. In this view, even non-living elements are considered to possess a soul, fostering a sense of respect and reverence for the environment.

We get inspiration from the Buddhist approach of living in harmony with nature. Buddhist love and respect for all living beings show the path to environmental protection. Monks who reside in the trans-Himalayan areas help stop the poaching of snow leopards, which is a highly endangered species. Jainism also promotes ecological harmony and states that "you are that which you intend to torture, hit, or kill." Jainism values all life forms equally and respects both lower and higher life forms. As every animal, plant, and human has a soul, they should be treated with respect.

The Sankhya philosophy introduces the concepts of *purusa* (the observer) and *prakriti* (nature), suggesting that true understanding and harmony can be achieved through self-realisation. The Yoga tradition further reinforces this idea, promoting practices that foster a deep connection with nature and encourage individuals to live in alignment with the natural world.

The *Upanishads*, foundational texts of Indian philosophy, articulate the relationship between humans and the environment through the lens of interconnectedness. They emphasise that the five gross elements—earth, water, fire, air, and space—are the building blocks of life, linking human existence to the cosmos. The *Chandogya Upanishad* states, "The earth is the essence of all beings," highlighting the intrinsic connection between humans and the natural world. This

holistic view encourages a lifestyle that respects and preserves the environment rather than exploits it.

Ethical Dimensions of Eco-Consciousness

Indian philosophical traditions emphasise ethical conduct and responsibilities toward other species. The dual dimensions of humanity's relationship with nature—physical and spiritual—underscore the importance of avoiding harm to the environment. This ethical framework is rooted in principles such as *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *karuna* (compassion), which advocate for the respectful treatment of all living beings.

The ancient Indian shastras have long emphasised the importance of environmental governance, a theme that has inspired many great writers throughout history. One notable example is Kalidasa's play, '*Abhijñānaśākuntalam*,' where the character Shakuntala embodies a deep connection to nature, treating it as a nurturing mother. Her actions reflect a harmonious coexistence with the environment, as she shows affection for every tree and plant, even watering them before quenching her own.

The concept of '*Dharma*', or duty, plays a crucial role in shaping eco-consciousness in Indian philosophy. It encourages individuals to fulfil their responsibilities towards the environment, recognising that their actions have consequences for all living beings. This ethical framework promotes sustainable practices, urging people to consider the impact of their choices on the planet.

The concept of '*Karma*', which emphasises the consequences of human actions, further underscores the need for eco-consciousness. Hindus regard the Earth as a sacred entity, and actions that harm the environment—such as pollution and deforestation—are seen as disturbances to the cosmic equilibrium, resulting in negative *karma*. Indigenous cultures in India have long upheld a deep eco-consciousness, viewing nature as a living entity rather than an object to dominate. This perspective aligns with the animistic beliefs that attribute spiritual essence to all elements of the natural world. The teachings of these cultures resonate with the Vedic tradition, which emphasises peace, harmony, and responsibility toward the environment.

Conclusion

As we navigate the complexities of modern life, the insights offered by Indian philosophy can guide us toward a more sustainable and harmonious existence. The principles of interconnectedness, ethical responsibility, and respect for all life forms are not just philosophical ideals; they are essential for the survival of our planet. In contemporary society, the challenge lies in rekindling this ancient wisdom and integrating it into our modern lives. The root cause of environmental and social crises often stems from a disconnection between humans and nature. To address this, individuals must strive to regain their eco-self, recognising that their well-being is intrinsically linked to the health of the planet. To foster eco-consciousness, we must educate ourselves and others about the rich tapestry of Indian knowledge systems that promote environmental stewardship. By embracing these teachings and integrating them into our daily lives, we can cultivate a culture of respect for nature and ensure a sustainable future for generations to come. □

(Views are personal)

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