

Exploring Environmental Conservation Mechanism in Ancient India

Dr. Sivakumar M V¹, Virendra Kumar²

¹Associate Professor, Department of International Relations and Politics, Central University of Kerala, India.

²Research Scholar, Department of International Relations and Politics, Central University of Kerala, India.

ABSTRACT: The ongoing global environmental crisis, one of the most pressing challenges of our time, points out the shortcomings of modern policy strategies in coping with ecological severity. While contemporary strategies are often looking forward to technological resolutions, they frequently fail to take into consideration the philosophical and ethical dimensions of Environmental sustainability. This study explores ancient Indian environmental conservation mechanisms to assess their applicability to modern environmental problems. Employing a qualitative research design, this study uses historical analysis and interpretative approaches. Primary sources, e.g., Vedic scriptures, the *Mahabharata*, *Arthashastra*, and *Manusmriti*, were analyzed together with existing scholarship that decodes environmental principles within ancient Indian philosophy. The analysis discloses that ancient Indian texts explicitly advocate for ethical environmental practices through the concept of harmony and universal interconnectedness. The findings of this study presented that the concept of sanctification of nature, through the worship of forests, rivers, mountains, and animals, was a practical mechanism for maintaining ecological balance, these traditions brought up a sustainable relationship with the environment by linking practical conservation efforts with spirituality. The study concludes that existing environmental strategies are insufficient as they do not incorporate the holistic, interconnected view found in traditional knowledge. It asserts that going back to these ancient philosophical foundations not only can revitalize the modern conservation strategies with a more serious ethical framework but also can pave the way for a sustainable future that is truly rooted in respect for nature.

KEYWORDS: Environmental Conservation, Ancient India, Nature Worship, Sustainability, Vedas

I. INTRODUCTION

The current state of environmental crisis has led to it becoming a deep-reaching challenge to humankind, which reveals the shortcomings in development models that are obsessed with economic development and technological solutions while neglecting ethical and philosophical dimensions of human-nature relationships. Increased cases of climate change, biodiversity, and ecological degradation clearly indicate that current frameworks are inadequate in ensuring environmental sustainability. These circumstances have brought about a fresh interest among scholars in the search for alternative knowledge systems that uphold harmony, restraint, and moral responsibility towards nature, ancient Indian philosophical traditions abound with such an underexplored facility for the safekeeping of environmental thought, which integrates ecological balance with ethical conduct and social life.

The term environment has its roots in the French word "environ," meaning "circumstances" or "that which surrounds" (Barry, 2007). In layman's terms, the environment encompasses everything that lies in or around the human, animal, or plant, living and nonliving components respectively, thus the environment might be understood not only in the physical context but in the holistic perspective of interrelated systems for influencing the processes of life.

The term for environment in Sanskrit is Paryāvarana (Roy & Roy, 2017). This term is composed of the prefix pari + āvṛana, where the root means "covering" and the earlier prefix means "fully." As a result, it can be referred to as a factor that impacts both living and nonliving things; in other words, it is all around us.

As per an ancient school of thought revealed in the Upanishads, there are five basic elements in the universe: earth, water, fire, air, and space; harmony among these elements and the living world is essential (Tiware, 2010). Any disturbance in the percentage of these elements beyond certain limits can disrupt this balance, leading to problems for living beings. This elemental framework deliberates an early ecological consciousness in which environmental imbalance was scented not only as a natural turmoil but also as a moral and social concern. Humans have had a natural and essential relationship with the environment, seeking to understand it for self-protection and benefit since the beginning of creation. The existence of living things rests crucially on the proper functioning of the environment's various elements.

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The United Nations Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development was the first major environmental conference that took place in Stockholm in 1972, also known as the UN Conference on Environment and Sustainable Development (Handl, 2012). It was the first attempt at an international level to preserve the environment. Since then, the first day of this conference has been observed as World Environment Day (WED), which falls on June 5.

In India, Article 48(a) of the Indian Constitution and Article 51(a) of the Constitution's fundamental duties were added by the 42nd constitutional amendment act of the Indian Constitution. The prioritization of ecological conservation by the Indian state has been constitutionally provided through Article 48A, which emphasizes state-controlled conservation efforts, and through Article 51-A(g), which emphasizes individuals' liability towards the environment (Bhullar, 2022). The Indian Constitution's Article 21 (Right to Life), under which it states that it is a fundamental right to have a clean and healthy environment, is supported by the United Nations Human Rights Council, which in its 48th session held in October 2021, promoted 'the right to a healthy environment as a human right that has been promoted by human rights bodies and environmental groups to safeguard the environment that underlie human health (Sweeney, 2023).

India launched the First Five-Year Plan (1951–1956), a planned economic development program with a primary goal of eliminating unemployment and poverty, shortly after independence (Planning Commission, 1951). However, the strong desire for quick economic expansion resulted in the disregard for environmental factors. The nation's natural resources—forests, water, land, and air—were degraded and polluted. Environmental problems were made worse by urbanization, industrial demands, and other development-related activities. The Indian government in the 1970s came to understand that conservation of the environment is an integral part of industrial policy.

But more importantly, current state of affairs, “it is a red flag situation for humanity”, as identified in the report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), that the alarm bells are deafening, and there is no longer any doubt: human activity has warmed the planet at a rate that is unparalleled in the last 2,000 years or more (Johansen, 2023).

Although the literature is extensive concerning the laws, policies, and technological solutions that address the problem of the environment, very little work has been done in understanding the ethical or cultural roots of environmental conservation as reflected in ancient Indian texts. Much of the literature viewed traditional ecological knowledge in its symbolic or religious aspects rather than as designated mechanisms of environmental regulation. The current study, however, takes up the issue concerning the mechanisms for protecting the environment as mentioned in ancient Indian philosophical traditions, with the aim of understanding the ethical foundations for such practices.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study uses a qualitative research methodology that moves around historical and interpretative textual analysis to look at environmental conservation strategies, i.e., deep-rooted in ancient Indian traditions. Given the nature of the subject, which is normative and philosophical, a qualitative approach is appropriate to explore meanings, values, and ethical principles articulated in the classical texts rather than measuring empirical variables (Creswell, 2014). The texts considered in the context of the current study work include selected Vedic hymns, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita, Manusmriti, Arthashastra, and Puranic texts because these texts are intimately connected to the study of the cosmos, the relations between man and nature, and the human obligation to the natural environment that expresses itself through these texts.

The thematic interpretation approach has been utilized in this analysis, with its concentration on key ideas of harmony with nature, sanctification of nature for its various elements, interconnection, and conservation of resources. Textual passages were examined for their philosophical and socio-cultural mounting to avoid any imposition of anachronistic interpretations, while secondary sources such as commentaries by scholars and related research discussions within modern academia on environmental ethics and traditional knowledge of ecology were utilized for them at the base of applications related to primary sources (Gadamer, 2004).

Triangulation was also employed to beef up analytical rigor through the comparison of interpretations across multiple texts and scholarly perspectives. Without claiming direct policy translatability, this study attempts to identify ethical frameworks and conservation principles conceptual in their potential insights for contemporary environmental discourse.

III. FINDINGS: CONSERVATION OF THE ENVIRONMENT IN ANCIENT INDIAN TEXTS

Results: Conservation of the Environment in Ancient Indian Texts

Ancient Indian texts demonstrate a rather well-developed and ethically oriented understanding of environmental conservation in early Indian civilization. Indeed, as one of the oldest civilizations in the world, India developed philosophical and cultural traditions stressing the harmony between humans and nature. Based on the Vedic texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, the Mahabharata, Arthashastra, and other traditional narratives demonstrates the concept of preserving the environment as an integral part of their daily life through the concept of balance, restraint, and respect for environmental elements is demonstrated. Protection and awareness for the Environment lies incorporated, not in a different aspect but in moral conduct, social duties, and governance practices.

A) Environmental Ethics in the Vedas

The Conservation of the Environment in the “Vedas,” which are the sacred texts of antiquity, has philosophical and spiritual insights that are in some way entwined with ideas on environmental consciousness and reverence for nature. While the Vedas may not explicitly address modern environmental concerns, certain hymns and teachings within them get across a deep respect for the environment and offer ways to live responsibly. Here are some aspects related to environmental protection in the Vedas. Vedic literature, which dates back to about 1500 BC, makes it abundantly evident that God, Man, and Nature are all in perfect equilibrium. Natural forces were revered as venerable things and were thought to be representations of the Lord Himself (Renugadevi, 2012).

The Vedas describe a stunning environment on Earth and command humans not to pollute. The universe is made up of five basic elements, and these elements are referred to in the Rig-Veda as Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Space; all life is based on these five elements, and it is the responsibility of mankind to preserve these (Brown, 1942). The ozone layer, which protects the earth from the harmful radiation of the sun, is the protective layer referred to in the Rig-Veda. The messenger of God prays to the Ashvins in a hymn from the Rig Veda, asking for their forgiveness and defense against any extreme solar flares that might also impact the temperature of the planet. In a Rig-Veda verse, it states, "If you want to enjoy life's fruits and happiness for thousands and hundreds of years, then begin to plant trees in a planned manner (Griffith, 1963)." The Yajur Veda discusses peace and propitiation for all elements of the earth. We ought to view everything with kindness, and nature as a whole ought to regard us with kindness as well. According to the Yajurveda, "the sun is the ultimate source of energy for all living organisms on Earth and the center of the universe, which is full of required energy." The net energy is entirely within the control of the Almighty and moves from the site of production to the place of consumption via plants, animals, people, the air, water, and land. Even while the universe's energy flow and balance are preserved, certain imbalances lead to a number of natural disruptions, including heavy rain, unexpected rain, droughts, floods, warm winters, and cold summers (Goel, 2003). Avoid being avaricious when it comes to natural resources, as the money is not yours to keep.

The most significant source found in the Vedas is the Prithvi Sukta, one of the Atharvaveda's hymns that are frequently cited, which emphasizes that on Earth as a metaphor for all living things. It gives a sense of a strong emotional relationship with the natural world, apart from emphasising its physical attributes (Singh, 2021). The hymn exemplifies a way of life rather than just personification, relating to the moon as a brother, the sky as a father, and Earth as a mother (Griffith, 1916). It describes three regions of the world, both within and beyond the body: the solid earth, mid-space, and heavenly realms. The prithvi sukta gives us the six factors that can sustain earth; satyam brihat (care for self and others), ritam ugram (the cosmic law and rhythm of nature which, if crossed or disregarded, leads to the fierce form of nature), diksha (dedication towards maintaining the balance of nature), tapaha (concentrated effort towards the mission of diksha), brahma (adjective of the ever-evolving dynamic knowledge which has a neutral gender and is derived from the root bhringah, that which grows and evolves with time), and lastly yajna (it is the key concept of vedic script for maintaining and sustaining the environment) (Griffith, 1916).

Yajna is derived from the root word yaj, which means propitiating the divine, communitarian sharing, and sharing of resources, as well as teachings in practice as rituals, offering oneself for the collective good (Thakur, 2014). There are 5 types of yajna that have been prescribed for every householder: brahma yajna, i.e., reading and gathering knowledge for the benefit of humanity; deva yajna, i.e., the rituals that signify replenishing nature; pitri yajna, i.e., respecting and taking care of the elders in the family as well as the society; atithi yajna, i.e., respect for the guests who come into your home; and finally bhuta yajna, i.e., respect for all flora and fauna (Made & Somawati, n.d.).

B) Environmental Conservation in the Puranas

There was a widespread notion throughout the Puranic era that every tree had a particular deity. To safeguard trees, people surrounded them with holy threads and donated water (Renugadevi, 2012). The Narsingh Purana personifies God as a tree. The Varaha Purana recommends frequent plantations as a way to reach paradise. A person does not go to hell if they plant one peepal, one neem, one bar, ten flowering plants or creepers, two pomegranates, two oranges, and five mangos (Dey, 2020). According to the Matsya Purana, planting one tree is the same as leaving 10 sons in the offspring (Narayanan, 1997). According to the Vishnu Purana, God is happy when someone doesn't hurt or kill non-verbal animals or other beings (Jain et al., n.d.). The entire universe is contained in you as its germ at the moment of dissolution, just as the widely dispersed Nargodha (Sanskrit for "banyan") tree is compressed into a small seed; just as the Nargodha germinates from the seed and becomes just a shoot before raising into loftiness, so the created world proceeds from thee and expands into magnitude. The Padma and Kama purana indicate that God resides in trees such as peepal (*Ficus religiosa*), bel (*Aegle Marmelos* Correa), Ber (Indian jujube Correa), neem (*Azadirachta indica*), etc., and that it is forbidden to tear them down (Narayanan, 2001). According to Durga Saptasati, the human race will persist as long as there are mountains, forests, trees, plants, etc. on Earth (Taimni, 1965). According to the Padma Purana, people who sacrifice livestock would ultimately perish.

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C) Environmental Ethics in the Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavat Gita views Nature as a single entity made up of two parts; PARA and APARA (Goel, 2003). Apara is the system's physical component, while Para is its awareness component. Two components come together to make the cosmos, of which the Earth is a minuscule part. Since its awareness component drives its physical aspect, all that is observable is regarded as a manifestation of a single, ultimate totality (Jacobsen, 1996). According to the Gita, a man without Nature is seen as a creature devoid of soul, and Nature is the essence of human civilization. In the Bhagavad Gita world, like a single banyan tree with an infinite number of branches, among which all animal species, humans, and demigods roam (Algeo, 2000). All have their intrinsic values and have particular significance.

D) Environmental Norms in Manusmriti

It might be said that Maharishi Manu offered the first ethical set of laws in history. It makes both overt and covert allusions to the preservation of flora and fauna, along with outlining the penalties for disrespecting and damaging these resources. In addition, it provides a unique taxonomy of plants and notes that certain plants are sentient and have feelings of pleasure and suffering. It was also mentioned that blood or poison should never be thrown into a river, nor should one pee, cough, or toss anything bogus or tainted into the water (Sharma, 2017). The ancient Indians created rules to preserve the environment because they were aware of its different parts. Since these rules adhered to society during a time when there was an abundance of natural resources, they are all educational and should be taken into consideration while addressing the current issue and how best to execute them (Deodikar, 1991).

E) Environmental Governance in Kautilya's Arthashastra

Kautilya's Arthashastra represents one of the most developed early articulations of environmental governance by locating ecological regulation within the more extensive design of state administration and political economy. The text conceives natural resources not only as economic assets but also as a strategic basis for state power and social welfare. A critical institutional mechanism was the formation of Abhayaranya, or protected forest zones, in which animals were granted immunity from hunting and killing (Bithin, 2019). As Abhayaranya or Abhayavna came under special consideration, the motive behind it was that the plants and animals need not fear the act of being slaughtered. These sanctuaries pointed to an early regard for the conservation of biodiversity as a public duty, of especial importance were Hastivana, or elephant forests, which were placed under strict protection by the state, given the central position that elephants occupied in warfare, transport, and royal authority, thereby laying stress on the connection between ecological preservation and national security (Shamasastri, 2020). The Arthashastra also pointed to a detailed legal system that could help to prevent the degradation of the environment. The punishment was clearly spelt out for the destruction of trees, nascent plants, or vegetation in public gardens or holy groves (Chaitya), thereby giving paramount importance to these green zones. The exploitation of resources such as mining and the usage of timber was also managed in such a way that sustainability was guaranteed, with Kautilya himself repeating the importance of the revenue of the state coming from mining, but also maintaining that unbridled usage could result in ill-faring for the economy (Bhat, 2023). Arthashastra equally pays attention to the sophisticated water resource management system. There were comprehensive irrigation laws and had a detailed punishment for any wrongdoing with water bodies, prohibited the obstruction of watercourses, penalized damage to embankments, and regulated water sharing, marking an early recognition of the principles of water balance and the collective need for water resources. Collectively, these measures exhibit a quality of a comprehensive and institutionally informed approach to governance that wove together ecological vision, legal accountability, and provided valuable lessons for the long-term management of resources.

F) Preservation of Pachamahabhutas (Air, Water, Fire, Space, and Earth)

Three words, "Pancha", "Maha", and "Bhuta", make up the Sanskrit word "panchamahabhuta", the word "bhuta," which signifies "having their own existence," is derived from "bhu." Indian scholars, after inquiry into these things, asserted that this universe is composed of five causal components, known as Panchamahabhuta; these are Akasha, Vayu, Agni, Jala, and Prithvi. These all have certain characteristics and functions (Muralivallabhan, 2022). These five components, therefore, comprise all of creation on Earth; not only are plants and animals made of these basic components, but also human beings. According to this theory, humans are composed of five fundamental components found in nature, and when they die, their "body" is nothing more than these elements returning to their natural state. The greater part of ancient literature focuses on the panchamahabhutas' Godliness, Holiness, and Prosperity. According to modern science, Earth's constituent parts are the mantle, core, hydrosphere, lithosphere, and atmosphere. On closer inspection, it is clear that Vayu mahabhuta and akasha are preeminent in the behavior and properties of Vayu in the atmosphere, while Jala in the hydrosphere, Agni in the Mantle and Core, Prithvi in the Lithosphere, and Vayu in all layers of Earth. The properties and functions of Panchamahabhuta are contrasted with those of the earth's constituent parts. The thing that gives the cosmos its life has to be preserved (Prasad, 2016).

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i) Water

All human civilizations came to understand the value and significance of water. In addition to being essential for daily tasks like cooking, personal hygiene maintenance, and agricultural irrigation, it was also a primary means of transportation. Its qualities include being cool to the touch, having minerals and other beneficial components, being clean, and having an acidic base that doesn't go over the fundamental bounds. Water has been referred to as "life" since it is essential for living things to survive. According to the Rigveda, water is like ambrosia. It raises us like our mother. Rain is considered necessary for the safeguarding of the planet in Viṣṇupurāṇa (Sharma & Biswas, 2024). In Viṣṇupurāṇa, it has also been asserted that the rain is the source of water. According to Lord Manu, the water contaminant needs to face consequences. Similar remarks were also given by Kauṭilya in Arthasāstra; residents were deemed responsible for saving water bodies, such as rivers and cisterns.

ii) Air

One of the basic elements for all living things is air. The atmosphere is the Earth's surface. The current state of air pollution poses a threat to human civilization due to its multifaceted nature. In the Indian tradition, Yagya is the scientific method by which the atmosphere's carbon dioxide and oxygen equilibrium is maintained (Kumar, 2019). It is stated in both the Yajurveda and Rigveda that Yagya has been hailed as the most effective way to address environmental degradation and is also supposed to purify the atmosphere by eliminating all pollutants, flaws, and impurities.

iii) Fire

The sun was adored by the ancestors because they knew that without fire, energy, light, and heat, life on Earth would not be possible. The Earth's ecosystem is primarily controlled by solar energy, which also serves to regulate the energy flow in the food chain and supplies the energy required for various nutritional cycles (Dey, 2020). The three primary types of fire were perceived by the ancients as being the sun god in heaven, fire on earth, or prthviagni, and fire in the intermediate area, which was primarily responsible for the development of rains and all other meteorological phenomena. They made the connection between the heavenly events and the environment on Earth, realizing how important it was to their survival.

iv) Space

All five elements have to be protected by human beings as they are the basis of all life. The shield mentioned in the Rig Veda is the ozone layer that protects the Earth from the scorching radiation of the sun (Tiwari, 2010). In one of the hymns of the Rig Veda, the ambassador of God pleads with the Ashvins to forgive and save them from any extreme solar flare that may raise the temperature of the planet (Warrier, 2014).

v) Earth

The terms "land" and "earth" are equivalent in Vedic literature. The Earth is the supreme mother, and all the creations are her children (Dwivedi, 2016). The Rigveda states that the earth provides us with a sweet, honeyed atmosphere, as well as pleasant flora and waterways. According to the Artharaveda, Mother Earth's equilibrium is maintained only by the eternal laws of nature. Mother Earth has uncountable resources for all beings, for instance, food, water, and shelter. As you adore God, honor Mother Earth as well. You owe it to Mother Earth to protect and not hurt her, as she is the source of life for all of her offspring (Brown, 1942).

IV. TABLE 1. KEY FINDINGS ON ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION MECHANISMS IN ANCIENT INDIAN TEXTS

Source	Core Environmental Principle	Key Conservation Mechanisms Identified	Scholarly Interpretation / Finding
Vedas	Harmony between humans, nature, and cosmos	Reverence for natural elements; ritual practices promoting balance; ethical restraint	Environmental ethics were embedded in cosmological order (<i>ṛta</i>), promoting sustainability through moral conduct rather than coercion
Puranas	Sanctification of nature	Worship of trees, rivers, animals; injunctions against deforestation and violence	Cultural and religious symbolism functioned as informal regulatory mechanisms for biodiversity conservation
Bhagavad Gita	Interconnectedness of Para (consciousness) and Apara (material nature)	Ethical detachment; recognition of intrinsic value of all beings	Nature is integral to moral and spiritual life, reinforcing responsibility toward ecological balance
Manusmriti	Normative environmental regulation	Legal penalties for harming flora and fauna; protection	Early legal codification of environmental norms linking

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		of water bodies	ecology with social order
Kautilya's Arthashastra	Institutional environmental governance	Protected forests (<i>Abhayaranya</i>); penalties for ecological damage; water and resource regulation	Demonstrates a state-led, pragmatic model of conservation integrating economy, law, and ecology
Panchamahabhuta Framework	Elemental balance	Preservation of air, water, fire, space, and earth	Presents a holistic ecological worldview emphasizing interdependence and sustainability

V. CONCLUSIONS

The present study has investigated environmental conservation mechanisms embedded in the classical Indian philosophical, religious, and administrative tradition for their relevance in addressing contemporary ecological crises. Through the qualitative and interpretative analysis of the essential classical texts, that is, the Vedas, the Puranas, the Bhagavad Gita, the Manusmriti, the Arthashastra by Kautilya, and the concept of the Panchamahabhuta, it was revealed that environmental consciousness in ancient India was neither incidental nor symbolic, but constituted a coherent ethical and normative system guiding human–nature relations.

It stands clear from the above outcomes that the practice of environmental ethics in ancient India was executed by various mechanisms such as ritual practices, legal injunctions, moral duties, and governance norms. This was necessary to ensure control over the use of natural resources in a way that prevents the destruction of nature. The Sanctification of forests, rivers, animals, and elemental forces made sure of protection through internalization within culture, not solely through external enforcement. More importantly, Kautilya's administrative prescriptions pointed out an early form of environmental governance, while the Panchamahabhuta concept presents a holistic view of ecology from the principle of balance of the basic elements.

Unlike contemporary approaches that give preference to more technocratic and fragmented models, the ancient Indian approach aligns ecological stewardship with ethical conduct and collective well-being, even as these traditions cannot be easily transposed into contemporary policy discourse, their tenets can certainly guide how models for sustainable development might be developed to incorporate notions of ethical accountability and long-term ecological balance. To bring into focus the notions of interconnectedness and moral control, ancient Indian environmental thought offers an alternate epistemology that could enhance contemporary debates related to the environment. Future research could focus more on the potential applications of indigenous models for the formulation of an alternate paradigm based on sustainability in the contemporary era.

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