

**ECOCENTRIC PHILOSOPHY IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM: A
KEY PERSPECTIVE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT***** Pooja Agarwal**<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18115934>**Abstract**

Indian Civilization has always given great importance to *jñāna* (knowledge). Deeply rooted in the ancient Indian texts – the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, Purāṇas, Epics and classical philosophies, the Indian Knowledge System offers a holistic, sustainable, and an ethical approach to life that is relevant in addressing contemporary critical issues relating to health, environment, education and technology. The present paper is a genuine attempt to study the significance of nature in the traditional thinking and activities of India with special reference to the ethical principles of *ahimsā* (non-violence), *karuṇā* (universal compassion), *sarva-bhūta-hita* (universal benevolence) etc. which mandates an attitude of reverence towards beings in general and consequently encourages preservation of nature at large. Ecocentrism that is preservation of the environment and the ecological balance independent of human interests has always been at the core of India's thought process. The present paper also reflects on the themes of *karma*, transmigration of the soul and other interconnected themes which fosters deep respect towards all life forms leading to environmental balance and harmony. This paper primarily discusses the viewpoints of the Vedic philosophy along with the non-Vedic traditional systems such as Jainism and Buddhism. References have also been brought in from M.K. Gandhi who championed ecological harmony, in contrast to exploitation and consumerism, in modern times. The paper ends with a concluding note emphasizing the existing relevance of the traditional Indian non-anthropocentric perspective in promoting ecological balance and sustainable living.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Ecocentrism, Ahimsā, Vedic Literature, Environmental Sustainability.

* Assistant Professor in Philosophy, Murshidabad Adarsha Mahavidyalaya

Introduction

Human beings, for long, have dominated and exploited the natural world for their own benefits unless and until the realization dawned upon them that such a continuous exploitation of the natural world and its resources will ultimately lead to the complete destruction of the very existence of life on earth. Hence, to avert such a disastrous effect owing to the depletion of natural resources at an alarming rate, it became necessary for human beings to find out different ways to protect the environment and also to repair the damages that have already been done to it. It was felt that, one such possible way out will be to enumerate the different ethical duties and responsibilities which human beings should discharge for the benefit of the environment which, in turn, will ultimately lead to the development of environmental ethics. According to Singer (2000), "Such an ethic would regard every action that is harmful to the environment as ethically dubious, and those that are unnecessarily harmful as plainly wrong" (p.285). He further asserts, "An environmental ethic would find virtue in saving and recycling resources, and vice in extravagance and unnecessary consumption" (p.285). Environmental ethics, in this sense, is an honest attempt to amend the disturbed relation between human beings and the environment as a whole. Here it needs to be mentioned that prior to the development of the notion of environmental ethics human beings were considered to be the only morally important members of the cosmos, nature having no intrinsic value in itself unless and until its destruction is harmful for human beings in one way or another. However, we can find a completely different viewpoint with regard to the significance of nature in the traditional thinking and activities of India. The concept of

environmental ethics which developed and was put into practice in the western countries in the last century has always been at the core of India's thought process.

India is a land of an extensively rich cultural and civilizational history dating back to ancient times. Indian civilization has always given great importance to *jñāna* (knowledge) as is evident from its vast and diverse repository of wisdom that has developed over thousands of years within the Indian sub-continent across different fields such as philosophy, science, literature, medicine, arts, architecture, mathematics, linguistics, astronomy and governance. In exploring the nature, philosophy and character of Indian Knowledge Systems, Kapoor (2005) writes down, "...India's knowledge tradition is ancient and uninterrupted like the flow of the river Gaṅgā, from the Vedas (Upaniṣads) to Sri Aurobindo, knowledge or *jñāna* has been at the centre of all rational and speculative inquiry in India" (p.11). Further, deeply rooted in the ancient Indian texts – the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, Purāṇas, Epics and classical philosophies, the Indian Knowledge System offers a holistic, sustainable, and an ethical approach to life that is relevant in addressing contemporary critical issues relating to health, environment, education and technology. The ecological ethos of the Indian knowledge traditions and its relevance in promoting environmental sustainability is the core element of discussion in the present context.

The key aspect of environmental sustainability is to ensure a healthy planet where humans and nature can coexist harmoniously. This requires a profound shift in the purely anthropocentric perception of human beings towards nature and the natural world. Nature has an inherent worth beyond its usefulness to humans who should be considered as caretakers,

and not masters, of the planet earth. Indian philosophy perceives human beings as an indistinguishable part of nature. Accordingly, they are treated at par with nature without being accorded any special status over it. The anthropocentric approach, which perceives nature as a mere commodity for human consumption and as having no intrinsic value of its own, is completely alien to the traditions of India where natural objects such as rivers, mountains, trees, and even animals are often revered as personifications of the gods and goddesses. “Millions of Hindus scrupulously worship the sun and believe it is the living God since the sun is the ultimate source of energy for all creatures of the earth.”¹(Kumar et al., 2023, p.159). Apart from this, India is a land of many festivals that celebrates nature. Makar Sankranti, for example, which is celebrated in diverse ways across different states in India, symbolizes gratitude to nature for a bountiful harvest and to invite abundance. Festivals like these including reverence for natural elements highlights India’s deep connection with the environment. In fact one of the earliest articulations of ecological ethics in human history can be traced to the Bhūmi Sūkta (Atharva Veda 12.1). It is a significant collection of devotional *Sūktas* (hymns) dedicated to *Bhūmi* (the Earth). The hymn personifies Earth as a living, nurturing mother with vital organs honoring her fecundity, variety, and nourishing capability while at the same time urging to safeguard her by avoiding activities that cause

harm to her. It suggests, as Vijayasimha (2025) points out, “that damaging soils, rivers, and forests is tantamount to violating the body of a mother” (p.3775). This Vedic hymn by linking all living beings to the earth as their mother can be said to promote ethical responsibility, suggesting that it is the *Dharma* (duty) of human beings to protect the earth and work for the welfare of all beings who dwells on the planet.

Now, this philosophy of ecocentrism, that recognizes the inherent value of nature as a whole and much celebrated in the Indian traditions, primarily gets its motivation from the concept of *ahimsā*. In Indian Knowledge Systems, particularly in Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism *ahimsā* is widely considered a cardinal virtue which rests on the foundational principle that every being is essentially spiritual and accordingly the basic tenet of the theory of *ahimsā* is to refrain from causing harm to beings in general. It needs to be noted here that if negatively the concept of *ahimsā* urges to refrain from causing harm to others, the positive implication of this concept is that it generates the feelings of love and concern for all, which extends far beyond up to the protection of the environment and its natural habitats. This emphasis on the interconnection between *ahimsā* and reverence for nature found in ancient Indian texts and in the enduring cultural practices of India² leads to sustainable applications as, for example, evident in the eco-friendly agricultural practices of ancient India. Agricultural practices

¹ Hindus are the followers of Hinduism (*Sanātana Dharma*), a diverse Indian religion. Unlike other religions which originated within the Indian sub-continent, Hinduism is the oldest and the most pragmatic of all. It is a way of life which has always remained open to science and rationalism.

² The practice of protecting and preserving sacred groves, generally small patches of forests called *tapovans*, by communities associated with their

beliefs that local gods, goddesses, or forests spirits (*vanadevtās*) resides in them and that harming them brings misfortune can be said to be one such cultural practice in ancient India. This contributed significantly to environmental conservation and are still widely practiced in some parts of India often through an amalgamation of ancient practices and modern conservation efforts.

in ancient India relied heavily on techniques like organic farming, crop rotation, indigenous seeds, and water conservation for maintaining soil fertility and ensuring long term harvests sustainably. The demonstration of such ecological wisdom continues to influence modern initiatives in the context of climate change and global sustainability movements. It reminds the present-day modern society to maintain a balance between technological advancement and environmental responsibility. Environmental ethics as outlined in the Vedic texts, the non-Vedic schools of Buddhism and Jainism and the philosophy of M.K. Gandhi will now be concentrated upon.

Core Vedic Concepts and Ecocentrism

According to the Vedas, the oldest and the most revered scriptures of India, human beings are born in debt to five different agencies and they must try to repay these debts to lead a successful life. These five agencies are: Vedic Gods like Indra, Varuṇa, Soma, Agni, Mitra, Viṣṇu and others; the ancient seers; one's forefathers; human beings in general; and all other living beings or nature at large. Human beings are indebted to nature in the sense that our very material existence i.e., the gross human body is composed of *Pañca-Mahā-Bhūtas* or the five great elements i.e., *Prthivi* (Earth), *Jala* (Water), *Agni* (Fire), *Vāyu* (Air), and *Ākāśa* (Space). These five great elements taken together constitutes *Prakṛti* (Nature). In this way human beings are an indistinguishable part of the nature and harming nature is akin to self-harm. According to the Vedas, it is possible for a human to repay the debts of nature by living in harmony with it instead of exploiting and harming it. One who discharges all of one's prescribed duties is said to align one's life with the fundamental eternal

principle of cosmic order, truth, and harmony, *Rta*, that reigns supreme over the whole universe, controls everything and everybody.

Vedas occupy a very important place in the Indian philosophical traditions. Vedic literature is traditionally divided into two parts: Karma-Kāṇḍa and Jñāna-Kāṇḍa. The philosophical thoughts of the Vedas are enshrined in Jñāna-Kāṇḍa, especially represented by the Upaniṣads, also known as "Vedānta", which lays stress on the realization of the ultimate unity of the individual souls with the all-pervading supreme soul, the Brahman. The realization that all things have the same essence removes the barriers that separate us from others. Thus, the Upaniṣadic idea of unity generates love and tolerance and dispels violence and hatred. The expression of oneness is the basis of the greatest ethical virtue as reflected in the traditional Indian thought – "*Ahimsā Paramo Dharmah*" which is applicable towards all forms of life that exists in nature. Ravikanth (2021) correctly emphasizes that "From this [the application of *ahimsā* towards all] the concept of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam has evolved. It means all that is alive from plants to human species belongs to a single family" (p.48). This promotes a shared responsibility for maintaining the health of our planet thereby reinforcing that the well-being of human beings cannot be separated from that of nature's well-being.

Upaniṣads further makes it clear that one who practices perfect *ahimsā* escapes the cycle of rebirths, i.e., to say one can attain *mokṣa*, the liberation, which is considered to be the highest of the four-fold *puruṣārtha* or the four goals of human life – *Dharma* (virtuous life), *Artha* (material prosperity), *Kāma* (sensual pleasure) and *Mokṣa* (salvation or liberation). The beliefs in the "doctrines of *karma*" and the "theory of the transmigration of the soul" can surely be

considered to be the two very important conditions which motivates an individual for practicing *ahimsā* towards all living beings and thereby promote ecocentrism. The law of *karma* is the counter-part in the moral world of the physical law of uniformity. It is the law of the conservation of moral energy. According to the principle of *karma* there is nothing uncertain or capricious in the moral world. We reap what we sow. One who performs good deeds becomes good while on the other hand one who performs evil deeds becomes evil. As is one's desires, so is the resolve, as is the resolve, so is the work one does, and whatever work is done so is the attainment. One cannot change one's previous actions but one may, for sure, influence the future life by performing good actions in the present life. The principle of *karma* provides a metaphysical justification emphasizing that actions causing environmental harm will eventually lead to consequences that will negatively affect the cosmic balance. The doctrine of *karma* is very closely interwoven with the theory of the transmigration of the soul. According to the Upaniṣads, as Sinha (2015) explains, "Transmigration is rebirth of the bound souls in moving and unmoving bodies. The persons who are subject to death die at particular times and are born again in accordance with their merits and demerits..." (p.57). Upaniṣads makes it clear that *Ātman*, the individual soul survives death, and the results of actions, good or bad, follow us even beyond death.

Only one who is fully conscious of the fact that what one does to others will be done to one if not in this life, then in another will be able to practice perfect *ahimsā* in thoughts, words and deeds towards all beings in general. Upaniṣadic doctrine of *karma* has exerted great influence on

ancient Indian thought. Human beings are said to be the architect of their own fates and therefore they should not commit any sin but rather do virtuous deeds. It may not be possible for an individual to experience the results of all of one's actions, positive or negative, in one life; yet the results are not extinguished but are believed to follow the doer of the actions unless and until the doer experiences them in any subsequent birth. Transmigration of the soul which is very deeply embedded in the Indian belief system suggests a soul's potentiality to transmigrate through various forms of life³ - aquatic, plant, reptile, bird, animal and human as per its karmic consequences and thus necessitates reverence for all entities, avoiding any form of *hiṃsā* (violence) towards them.

It goes without mentioning here that apart from the Vedas and the Upaniṣads, our great Epics- Rāmāyaṇa; and Mahābhārata (including Bhagavad-Gītā); and the different Purāṇas and Upa-Purāṇas have also emphasized the intrinsic value of nature through different myths and legends which, however, for the sake of brevity, I refrain from elaborating in the present paper.

Ecocentrism in Non-Vedic Philosophical Systems: Jainism and Buddhism

As has already been said that Philosophy in India has always endorsed the belief in the sanctity of life, human or non-human. Non-Vedic philosophical schools such as Jainism and Buddhism are no exception to this belief system. Both the schools believe that all forms of life have their own respective intrinsic worth and accordingly each of these must be respected. For maintaining the ecological harmony, both Jainism

³ Vedic texts mention 8.4 million (84 lakhs) species (*yonis*) or forms of life.

and Buddhism acknowledged the importance of *ahimsā*.

Jaina philosophy propagates a radical implementation of *ahimsā* hardly found anywhere. The basis of this is its metaphysical belief that humans, animals, birds, insects, mountains, plants, trees, water, air, fire, earth, are all possessed of life. One thing that is common to all of them is the tactual consciousness and accordingly each of these are capable of experiencing pain or suffering. As Sharma (1994) explains that Jainism regards consciousness as the essence of every soul, from the lowest to the highest. According to them, as he further says, “The lowest souls which inhabit material atoms appear to be lifeless and unconscious, but in fact life and consciousness are present in them though in a dormant form” (p.63). Now, of the different mobile and the immobile beings enumerated above, human beings are believed to be the most evolved in the sense that they project the characteristics of complex rational thinking, can introspect, possesses the ability to solve difficult problems etc., and, therefore, as per the prescriptions of the Jaina philosophy, are expected to practice *Jiva-dayā* or the principle of compassion for all living beings in their daily encounter with them. Strict vegetarianism, keeping their mouths always covered with thin masks, avoiding eating at night and sweeping the paths they follow are some of the practices followed by Jaina monks in this regard. Masih (2013) rightly observes that, “It[*ahimsā*] is not only a negative precept, for it also means ‘respect for life, whether in your person or in any living beings’” (p.245). *Jiva-dayā* is nothing but the positive aspect of the doctrine of *ahimsā* which is considered to be the foremost among the *Pañca-Mahāvratas* or the five great vows of Jainism --- i.e., *Ahimsā* (Non-violence), *Satya* (Truth), *Asteya* (Non-stealing), *Brahmacarya* (Abstinence

from self-indulgence), and *Aparigraha* (Non-possession). The observance of *ahimsā* along with the other vows leads to the perfection of human conduct who then strives to act for the protection of the sentient beings and subsequently nature as a whole.

Like Jainism, Buddhism also encourages a way of life that is in harmony with nature. The teachings of Buddhism on Dependent Origination emphasizes that every phenomenon, including nature and human beings, arises in mutual dependence and therefore the result of harming one (nature) is the inevitable harm of the other (human beings). This theory of interdependence in the Buddhist philosophy necessitates the undertaking of a sincere resolve of not harming others, be it another person or any other being as such, accompanied by the cultivation of such positive feelings as *mettā* (friendliness towards all), *karuṇā* (compassion for all), *muditā* (altruistic joy), and *upekkhā* (treating everyone impartially). These two teachings of the Buddhist philosophy i.e., “the genuine practice of *ahimsā*” and “the observance of the four *Brahmavihārās*” very precisely depicts the attitude of human beings towards nature as it should be and can be said to form the corner stone of the ecological ethics of Buddhism. One should not only refrain from causing harm to nature but also express one’s love and concern towards everybody including animals and environment. The positive feeling of *mettā*, for example, inspires us to think that just as we ourselves would like to root out all miseries and become happy, would like to avoid death and live cheerfully, so also all other beings would have the same desires. We should, therefore, bring no injury to any sentient being. Instead, all beings deserve kindness and compassion. The Buddhist philosophy inspires us to develop a harmonious relationship with nature as a whole. Gautama Buddha himself is said to

spent almost all the key events of his life amidst the natural surroundings⁴. He truly loved and appreciated the nature and also encouraged his monastic disciples and laypeople to cultivate the similar feelings of love and appreciation towards it. Such is the eco-friendly ethics of Buddhism.

Ecocentric Attitude of M.K. Gandhi

Gandhi is usually considered to be the greatest apostle of *ahimsā* in modern times. In keeping with the traditional Indian concept of *ahimsā*, Gandhi's philosophy is not restricted to the anthropocentric concerns but rather it asserts that all forms of life as existing in nature stands on an equal footing with the human species. The ecocentric attitude as reflected in Gandhi's philosophy is the outcome of his belief in the Vedāntic ideal of the essential unity of all lives. Datta (1961) says that Gandhi's attitude towards nature gets reflected in his statement "God manifests Himself in innumerable forms in this universe and every such manifestation commands my spontaneous reverence" (pp.49-50).

Gandhi's ecocentric approach was heavily reinforced by the Jaina principle of *Aparigraha* (non-possession) which he interpreted as a call for a voluntary simple and restraint life. Gandhi's observation, "The earth has enough for everyone's needs, but not for everyone's greed", perfectly resonates with the principle of *aparigraha* which criticizes consumerism and material accumulation - the two causes of over-exploitation and waste of natural resources. "Every product we consume requires natural resources and energy to produce, transport, and dispose of. By reducing our consumption to what we actually need, we reduce our environmental footprints" (Philosophy Institute, 2023, para.2)⁵. Gandhi's rejection of greed-driven materialism

and consumerism, that often characterizes modern industrial society, in favour of simple living and minimizing wants encourages sufficiency and self-discipline that fosters contentment which is fundamentally intertwined with care and respect for the environment.

Gandhi further believed that humans are custodians or trustees of the earth's resources rather than owners and that they should responsibly use these resources while at the same time preserving them for future generations and all creatures. Kumar & Shiju (2022) correctly says, "Gandhi's view of nature as a loan from future generations emphasizes the importance of ecological responsibility and sustainability" (p.409). Many modern environmental movements like Chipko movement in India (1970) drew inspiration from Gandhi's non-violent techniques for environmental protection. "The Chipko activists' non-violent approach, including physically hugging trees to prevent logging, was a direct application of Gandhi's concept of *ahimsā* to ecological conservation" (Kumar & Shiju, 2022, p.408). Further it has been observed here in this context that, "The [Chipko] movement highlighted the idea that protecting the environment is an act of non-violence, ensuring that future generations inherit a healthy planet" (p.408). To sum up, a lifestyle of simplicity, minimal consumption and reverence and empathy for all beings, as championed by Gandhi, offers a valuable guidance for promoting environmental sustainability.

Conclusion

From what has been said and discussed so far in this paper, it is clear that the traditional Indian thinking and activities have always manifested an ecofriendly attitude. Nature, here,

⁴ See Nha (2023) for a detailed analysis of the inextricable relationship between Buddha and the natural world.

⁵ See the section of non-possessiveness and environmental stability in this regard.

has never been treated as a means to satisfy the ends of human beings; instead, the intrinsic worth of nature has always been recognized fully, thanks to such age old ancient Indian technique as *ahimsā* which encourages love, compassion and dedication towards all living beings including nature at large (*sarva-bhūta-hita*). In the context of nature and natural resources Indian tradition, undoubtedly, occupies a very important place among the other ancient traditions in view of the fact that while many other ancient cultures, worldwide, revered nature in one form or the other, yet the deep reverence for nature and natural elements, as found in India, interwoven with the everyday rituals, practices and customs ensuring sustainable relationship with the environment, can hardly be found anywhere. This traditional Indian ecocentric attitude is necessarily as well as sufficiently relevant today to foster the feelings of love and care towards nature so much needed for its effective and sustainable protection.

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