



ANCIENT WISDOM FOR MODERN SUSTAINABILITY: ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS IN HINDUISM AND JAINISM

Sanjoy Paul ¹ & Dr. Vinay Kumar Tiwari ²

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Author Details: ¹ Research Scholar,
Department of Philosophy,
Mansarovar Global University,
Bhopal, India; ² Assistant Professor,
Department of Philosophy,
Mansarovar Global University,
Bhopal, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Vinay Kumar Tiwari

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Abstract

Environmental ethics in Hinduism and Jainism stem from deeply ingrained philosophical and religious principles that emphasize harmony between humans and nature. The concept of dharma in Hinduism serves as a moral and ethical guideline, ensuring social and cosmic order, which extends to environmental responsibility. The Vedas and Smritis provide the foundational moral ideals in Hindu tradition, advocating for duty (dharma) and right action (karma) as essential for sustainability. The Bhagavad Gita underscores the importance of selfless action (karma yoga) and world welfare (lokasamgraha), reinforcing social and environmental ethics. In the Ramayana, Valmiki's depiction of nature and its destruction highlights ecological sensitivity and reverence for life.

Jainism, on the other hand, bases its environmental ethics on the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), which extends beyond human interactions to all living beings and ecosystems. The Jain doctrine encourages sustainable living, non-violence in speech and thought, and minimal harm to the environment. Jain ethics also emphasize truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya), and self-restraint (brahmacharya), ensuring ethical relationships and responsible resource usage.

This paper explores the philosophical underpinnings of environmental ethics in Hinduism and Jainism, analyzing their historical and scriptural foundations. It highlights the relevance of these ethical systems in addressing modern ecological concerns and fostering sustainability. The study argues that traditional Indian thought provides valuable insights into contemporary environmental ethics, promoting a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature.

Keywords: *Environmental Ethics, Hinduism, Jainism, Dharma, Ahimsa, Sustainability, Karma, Bhagavad Gita, Ramayana, Social Ethics*

1. Introduction

The relationship between humans and nature has been a central concern in various philosophical and religious traditions across the world. In India, environmental ethics are deeply intertwined with spiritual beliefs and practices, particularly in Hinduism and Jainism. These traditions offer a comprehensive moral framework that emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life forms and the ethical responsibility of individuals to maintain ecological balance.

Hinduism, one of the oldest religious traditions, derives its ethical principles from sacred scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and Ramayana. The concept of dharma (duty/righteousness) serves as a guiding principle for ethical conduct, extending to environmental preservation. The Vedic notion of rta (cosmic order) underscores the belief that human actions should align with natural harmony to prevent ecological disruption. The Bhagavad Gita reinforces the importance of duty towards society and nature, advocating for selfless action and sustainable living.

Jainism, founded on principles of non-violence (ahimsa), truth (satya), non-possessiveness (aparigraha), and self-discipline (tapas), promotes an ethical lifestyle that minimizes harm to all living beings. Jain ecological ethics emphasize the importance of interdependence among all life forms, advocating for vegetarianism, sustainable resource use, and environmental conservation. The Jain commitment to ahimsa extends beyond human interactions to include non-violence towards plants, animals, and even microorganisms, making it one of the most ecologically conscious religious traditions.

This paper explores the moral foundations of Hindu and Jain environmental ethics, their philosophical perspectives on sustainability, and their relevance in contemporary ecological discourse. By examining sacred texts, ethical doctrines, and traditional practices, this study aims to highlight the enduring wisdom of Indian thought in fostering environmental responsibility and sustainable living.

2. Sources of Moral Ideals in India

In India, the primary sources of moral ideals have traditionally been the Vedas and Smritis, particularly the Dharmasastras like that of Manu. These texts are viewed as the ultimate authorities on morality. The Vedas (also known as Srutis, or “that which is heard”) are considered superior to the Smritis (the “remembered” laws and teachings), and in cases of conflict between the two, the verdict of the Vedas prevails.

Beyond these sacred texts, other sources such as conscience and reason also play a significant role in moral guidance. The inner conscience is considered an important source for determining what is morally right or wrong. This aligns with the notion that right will, the sincere desire to act ethically, serves as a guiding force. In modern Indian philosophy, figures like Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo have emphasized the role of conscience as a crucial moral authority. Gandhi, in particular, placed great emphasis on individual conscience as the final arbiter in matters of morality, viewing it as a deeper form of self-awareness and alignment with truth.

In the spiritual traditions of Jainism and Buddhism, reason is also granted a central role. In Jainism, the use of reason is essential to understand the validity of teachings and to practice right faith. The three jewels – right faith, right knowledge, and right conduct – highlight reason as necessary for discerning and following the path of righteousness. Similarly, Buddhism encourages personal questioning and inquiry, with Buddha himself advocating for the use of reason to dispel doubts and solidify one’s understanding of moral teachings, such as the Four Noble Truths.

In modern Hindu thought, particularly in the works of Swami Vivekananda and Gandhi, reason is also valued in moral considerations, though they saw reason more as a complement to the spiritual insights found in the Vedas and Smritis rather than the sole source of morality. For them, morality is based on higher principles that transcend purely rational understanding.

Thus, while the Vedas and Smritis remain the foundational sources of morality in Indian tradition, other elements like conscience, reason, and social reasoning (guided by the wisdom of enlightened individuals) also contribute significantly to moral discourse. These diverse sources illustrate the rich, multifaceted approach to ethics in India, where authority-based and reason-based morality are harmoniously integrated.

3. Ethics: Its Meaning in Indian Tradition

In Indian tradition, ethics is deeply intertwined with the concept of *dharma*, a term that goes beyond mere moral guidelines to encompass the very foundation of cosmic order and human conduct. The word *dharma*, derived from the root *dhr* (meaning “to hold together” or “to sustain”), refers to the principle that maintains societal and cosmic balance. In essence, *dharma* represents the ethical duties and responsibilities that each individual must follow to contribute to the harmony and stability of both society and the universe.

The concept of *dharma* is most prominently explored in the Vedas and *Dharmasastras* (law codes), where it is often linked to the highest truth and cosmic law. In these texts, *dharma* is not only associated with ritualistic practices but also with moral conduct. The Vedas stress the importance of performing rituals such as sacrifices, which are believed to sustain cosmic order. These duties, tied to one’s caste (*varna*) and life stage (*ashrama*), form the basis of what is called *varnashrama dharma*. Each person is expected to perform their prescribed duties based on their social role and life stage, with the belief that fulfilling these obligations leads to rewards such as prosperity, heavenly realms, or an improved rebirth.

However, *dharma* is not confined solely to caste duties and rituals. It also encompasses *sadharana dharma*, or universal moral virtues, which apply to all individuals regardless of their social position. These virtues include principles like truthfulness (*satya*), compassion (*daya*), non-violence (*ahimsa*), self-control, and respect for all beings. These ethical guidelines form the essence of what it means to live a righteous life and are seen as integral to achieving *moksha* (liberation). In this broader sense, *dharma* aligns ethical behavior with spiritual progress, leading individuals toward ultimate liberation.

Thus, in Hindu philosophy, ethics is not just about following societal norms or rituals; it is about aligning one’s actions with a greater cosmic order that connects personal duty to universal principles. It is through the practice of *dharma*, both as specific duties and universal virtues, that individuals achieve spiritual growth, societal harmony, and liberation.

4. Ethics in Vedic Period

Indian ethics traces its origins to the Vedas, particularly the Rig Veda. One of its central ethical concepts is *rta*, the unifying principle of order and moral law that governs the universe. *Rta* serves as the foundation for two other key concepts: *dharma* (duty) and *karma* (the moral law of action and its consequences). While *dharma* generally signifies duty, *karma* highlights the moral principle that actions have appropriate rewards and punishments. These principles are deeply rooted in the Vedic worldview, where the ethical order is tied to devotion to the gods, worship, and the proper performance of sacrifices. Vedic ethics is thus predominantly god-oriented, with the ultimate goal being eternal happiness in heaven through adherence to ritual and moral order. In contrast, the Upanishads mark a significant shift in Indian ethical thought. The highest goal is no longer the pursuit of happiness or heavenly rewards but liberation (*moksha*) – freedom from the cycle of birth and death and the realization of the self’s unity with Brahman. The ethics of the Upanishads is therefore *atman-centric* and intellectualistic, focusing on self-realization rather than ritualistic or societal obligations. The Upanishads critique the efficacy of Vedic sacrifices in attaining

liberation, emphasizing inner transformation and the pursuit of wisdom. This philosophical individualism in the Upanishads places less emphasis on social and moral duties, focusing instead on the metaphysical goal of self-realization. However, moral conduct remains essential for liberation. The avoidance of evil and the cultivation of good are key ethical teachings in the Upanishads. For instance, the Katha Upanishad warns that impurity leads to repeated births, and wisdom is associated with moral purity. A wise person ceases to sin, avoids evil, and through their wisdom, nullifies the negative effects of past actions.

Thus, while the Vedic ethics is ritualistic and god-centered, the Upanishadic ethics shifts to a more introspective and self-centered approach, emphasizing inner wisdom, moral purity, and the identification of the self with the ultimate reality, Brahman.

5. The Concept of Dharma and Environmental Ethics

The concept of dharma is one of the most important concepts in Indian philosophy. The word dharma is derived from the root Dhri. Dhri means to uphold, sustain and support. The word Dhri denotes “that which holds together the different aspects and qualities of a being or an object into a whole”. In the commonsensical term the term dharma has been translated as a religious code. However, dharma is translated in several ways and accordingly it assumes different meanings. Dharma is thus translated as righteousness, as duty and as a system of morality. Except this the term dharma also means the essential nature of any object. It is the essential nature of an object without which the existence of that object does not have any sense. It may be thus said that the true nature of a human being is to act in accordance with dharma. Similarly it is the true nature of a tiger to kill and eat another animal to satisfy its hunger and the true nature or dharma of water is to flow downwards.

As it is derived from the Sanskrit root dhri, it means to sustain, support and uphold. Therefore the term has many meanings. The meanings are:

- (a) It is the basic foundation of all moral pronouncements. Therefore, it signifies the truth.
- (b) It implies an individual's duty and responsibility towards other individuals, and other animate and inanimate beings.
- (c) It connotes right conduct.
- (d) It also symbolizes authority. Therefore, it implies the behaviors that are permitted by the society.

The oldest sense of the word dharma in the Vedic period is *ṛta*. *Ṛta* stands for the cosmic order. The term explains the natural laws, cosmic order, rightness and the universal harmony in nature in which all things in the world have occupied a proper place and function. But there is a difference between the word dharma and *ṛta*. Dharma characterizes the personal actions that either disturbs or maintains the cosmic order. But *ṛta* is a cosmic and impersonal law of nature. So there is a relationship between these two concepts. Therefore, dharma is the system of activity that guides the world in such a way that *ṛta* is not violated.

6. Social Ethics in The Gita

The Bhagavad Gita indeed touches upon important social and environmental ethical principles. By emphasizing concepts like Lokasamgraha, it directs individuals to consider the welfare of society as a whole, ensuring that one's actions contribute to the well-being of all. Dharma calls for a responsible engagement with the world, fulfilling one's duty without selfishness or harm to others. Karma Yoga, or the path of selfless action, encourages individuals to work with dedication but without attachment to personal outcomes, aligning individual progress with collective betterment.

In terms of environmental ethics, the Gita speaks to a holistic view of the universe, where everything is interdependent. The teachings highlight the importance of living in harmony with nature, acknowledging its sacredness, and acting with respect toward all living beings. Non-violence (*ahimsa*), often associated with Gandhi's philosophy, originates from such spiritual teachings and plays a key role in fostering social harmony and environmental stewardship.

Moderation and self-restraint, as emphasized in the Gita, are also crucial in maintaining balance – whether in consumption, lifestyle choices, or interaction with nature. By following the principles of the Gita, one can live in a way that ensures a sustainable and ethical relationship with the world around us, advocating for peace, respect, and the preservation of the environment.

7. The Concept of Nature in Ramayana

Valmiki, the revered author of the *Ramayana*, was profoundly connected to nature. According to legend, before becoming a sage, he was a hunter. Guided by the *saptarishis*, he embraced asceticism, residing in the forest, where he developed a deep reverence for the natural world. This connection to nature is reflected throughout the *Ramayana*, making it not only an epic of duty and devotion but also a text rich in ecological wisdom.

The inspiration for the *Ramayana* itself arose from Valmiki's firsthand experience of nature's suffering. One morning, while at the banks of the Tamasa River, he witnessed a hunter kill one of a pair of *krauncha* birds. The sight of the surviving bird's sorrow deeply moved him, and in his grief, he uttered the first poetic verse:

Maa Nishada Pratistham Tvamagamahsāsvati Samaa
Yat Kraunchamithunaadekam Avadhi Kaamamohitam

This verse is a poignant caution against human interference in nature and the destruction of its beings for selfish desires. Valmiki's reaction reflects an early articulation of environmental ethics, emphasizing compassion and coexistence with all life forms.

The *Ramayana* itself is deeply embedded in nature, with significant portions of the epic unfolding in forests. The exile of Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana takes place in the *Dandaka* and *Panchavati* forests, where they live in harmony with sages, animals, and nature. The text vividly describes rivers, mountains, and forests, portraying them as sacred entities. Lanka, ruled by Ravana, is depicted as a land of great natural wealth, yet his arrogance and disregard for dharma ultimately lead to destruction, illustrating the consequences of violating nature's balance.

Through its narrative, the *Ramayana* conveys a message of ecological sensitivity, emphasizing the sanctity of nature and the ethical responsibility of humans to protect it. It aligns with Indian environmental ethics by promoting reverence for forests, wildlife, and the interconnectedness of all life forms.

8. Social Ethics in Jainism

Non-violence in Society:

Ahimsa, or non-violence, is the cornerstone of Jain ethics and its application extends to all aspects of social life. In Jainism, non-violence is not limited to physical harm but also includes non-violence in speech and thought. Jains believe in minimizing harm to all living beings, including humans, animals, and even microorganisms. This principle guides social interactions, encouraging peaceful coexistence, compassion, and respect for others. In practice, it leads to a commitment to non-violent conflict resolution, vegetarianism, and a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment.

Environmental Ethics:

Jainism advocates for a deep respect for nature and all forms of life, rooted in the principle of Ahimsa. Environmental ethics in Jainism emphasize the interdependence of all living beings and the importance of maintaining ecological balance. Jains are encouraged to live in harmony with the natural world, minimizing their ecological footprint and protecting the environment. This includes practices such as sustainable living, reducing waste, and refraining from activities that cause harm to ecosystems. The reverence for life in all its forms leads Jains to advocate for environmental conservation and ethical treatment of animals.

Interpersonal Relations:

Jain ethics in interpersonal relations are guided by principles such as truthfulness (Satya), non-stealing (Asteya), and chastity (Brahmacharya). Truthfulness is considered essential for building trust and maintaining harmony in social interactions. Non-stealing involves respecting the property and rights of others, fostering honesty and fairness in economic and social dealings. Chastity, or self-control in matters of sexual conduct, is seen as important for maintaining purity of mind and body, and ensuring respectful and ethical relationships. Together, these principles promote integrity, respect, and ethical behavior in all social interactions.

Conclusion

This exploration of Hindu and Jain philosophies reveals a rich tradition of environmental ethics deeply rooted in their core principles. Both traditions, while distinct in their approaches, converge on the fundamental understanding of the interconnectedness of all life and the importance of living in harmony with nature. Hinduism, through the concepts of dharma, rta, karma, and lokasamgraha, emphasizes the moral obligation of humans to maintain cosmic and social order, which extends to environmental stewardship. The Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana further illustrate these principles through the ideals of selfless action, compassion for all beings, and reverence for nature. Jainism, with its unwavering focus on ahimsa, elevates non-violence to the highest virtue, encompassing all living beings and promoting a lifestyle that minimizes harm to the environment. The Jain emphasis on sustainable living, respect for all life forms, and ethical conduct provides a powerful framework for ecological responsibility.

The insights offered by Hinduism and Jainism are not merely historical or religious; they hold significant relevance for contemporary environmental challenges. Their emphasis on interconnectedness, duty, non-violence, and ethical consumption provides valuable guidance for navigating the complex relationship between humanity and the natural world. By integrating these traditional wisdoms with modern scientific understanding, we can develop more holistic and sustainable approaches to environmental conservation and ecological balance. The ethical frameworks of Hinduism and Jainism offer not only a critique of anthropocentric worldviews but also a pathway towards a more harmonious and sustainable future for all. They remind us that environmental ethics is not just about policy or technology; it is fundamentally about cultivating a deep respect for life in all its forms and recognizing our place within the intricate web of nature.

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