



RESEARCH ARTICLE



A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF THE CONCEPT OF 'DHARMIC DUTY' AND MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

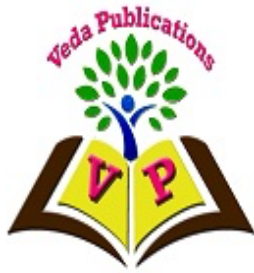
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ABSTRACT



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The concept of *dharma* (duty) in ancient Indian philosophy encompasses a deep-seated responsibility towards maintaining harmony with nature. This study delves into the environmental ethics embedded within Indian religious texts and practices, examining how traditional *dharmic* principles emphasize the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world. Rooted in the Vedic and Upanishadic texts, *dharma* towards nature includes the reverence for ecosystems, the preservation of biodiversity, and sustainable resource use. This paper explores the potential of integrating *dharmic* duty into modern environmental ethics, promoting a moral framework that encourages individuals and communities to act as stewards of the environment. By drawing parallels between ancient *dharma* and contemporary sustainability, the study proposes that a revival of these ecological values can foster climate resilience and inspire a collective approach to environmental conservation. Highlighting the relevance of *dharma* in guiding ethical environmental actions, this analysis contributes to the ongoing discourse on sustainable development by integrating timeless wisdom with modern climate challenges.

Keywords : *Dharma, Environmental ethics, Ancient Indian philosophy, Nature, Sustainability, Climate resilience, Ecological values, Stewardship, Conservation.*



INTRODUCTION

With the growing environmental crisis, there is a need to revisit traditional philosophies that emphasize ecological stewardship. Ancient Indian thought, especially the concept of *dharma*, or duty, provides a wealth of ecological insights. Rooted in moral and spiritual duty, *dharma* implies respect for natural resources, sustainable living, and environmental harmony. This paper aims to examine how the traditional concept of *dharma* can influence modern environmental ethics, encouraging individuals and communities to adopt environmentally responsible practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature reveals a rich discourse on the environmental aspects of *dharma*. However, most studies focus on general principles, often lacking specific discussions on applying these principles in the modern context. Works examining the Vedic and Upanishadic texts highlight the reverence for nature and the importance of ecological balance, emphasizing themes of interconnectedness and stewardship. Research by Guha (2006) and others connects Hindu principles to environmental ethics, though specific actionable frameworks based on *dharma* are rarely explored. Comparative analyses of Eastern and Western philosophies underscore Hinduism's unique emphasis on nature as sacred. However, these studies tend to generalize Hindu beliefs without dissecting *dharma* as a distinct ethical guide.

The research reveals gaps in examining *dharma* as a structured, applicable model for environmental ethics. Few studies focus on how *dharma* can be

operationalized to address climate change and sustainability challenges, a gap this paper aims to bridge.

RESEARCH GAPS

Several critical research gaps emerge from the existing literature. While there is extensive exploration of *dharma*'s moral implications, there is limited research on applying *dharma* principles to modern environmental policies and practices. Although *dharma* is recognized as an environmental ethic, it is not systematically integrated into contemporary sustainability frameworks. Most discussions are theoretical, lacking specific examples of *dharma* environmental practices in modern communities.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How does the concept of *dharma* define human responsibility towards nature in ancient Indian philosophy?
2. Can *dharma* offer a structured framework for addressing modern environmental issues?
3. How can principles derived from *dharma* be applied to current sustainability initiatives?
4. What are the obstacles in integrating traditional ecological ethics into contemporary environmental policies?

OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the concept of *dharma* as an ecological ethic in ancient Indian philosophy.
2. To explore the relevance of *dharma* principles for addressing modern environmental issues.



3. To propose a model for incorporating **dharmic** principles into contemporary environmental ethics and sustainability frameworks.
4. To analyze potential challenges and limitations in implementing traditional ethics within modern contexts.

RATIONALE AND RELEVANCE

The philosophy of *dharma* offers a valuable perspective in a time of environmental crisis, with its intrinsic call for a balance between humans and nature. Reinterpreting *dharma* for the climate change era could inspire individuals and policymakers to adopt ethical and sustainable practices. This paper also fills a significant gap by suggesting actionable frameworks based on ancient Indian thought, aiming to bring a much-needed cultural and philosophical perspective into the sustainability discourse.

THE CONCEPT OF DHARMIC DUTY IN INDIAN PHILOSOPHY

The Sanskrit term 'dharma' derives from the root 'dhri,' meaning to uphold or sustain. Dharma is a multidimensional concept that encompasses moral, social, and cosmic duties. In the context of environmental ethics, dharma can be interpreted as the duty to maintain harmony with the natural world. The Manusmriti, Mahabharata, and other classical texts elaborate on how human actions should align with the preservation of natural order ('Rta').

In Vedic traditions, nature is revered as sacred, with elements like rivers, forests, and mountains regarded as divine entities. For instance, the Rigveda contains hymns extolling the Earth ('Prithvi Sukta') and urging its protection. The concept of 'Pancha

Mahabhutas' (the five elements) underscores the interconnectedness of all life forms, reinforcing the dharmic imperative to safeguard natural resources.

Ahimsa and Aparigraha : Ahimsa (non-violence) and Aparigraha (non-possessiveness) are central tenets of dharmic duty that have direct environmental implications. Ahimsa mandates non-violence towards all living beings, advocating for practices like vegetarianism and biodiversity conservation. Aparigraha discourages over-consumption and aligns with principles of sustainable living.

MODERN ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS : CORE PRINCIPLES AND CHALLENGES

Intrinsic Value and Ecocentrism : Modern environmental ethics emphasizes the intrinsic value of non-human entities, advocating for an ecocentric worldview. This perspective challenges anthropocentric ethics that prioritize human interests over ecological well-being.

Sustainability and Intergenerational Equity : The Brundtland Report (1987) popularized the concept of sustainable development, stressing the need to meet present needs without compromising future generations. Environmental ethics further explores the moral obligations of current societies towards future life forms.

Environmental Justice : Modern ethics highlights issues of environmental injustice, such as unequal resource distribution and the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on marginalized communities. These concerns echo dharmic ideals of equity and fairness.



INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN DHARMIC DUTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Shared Values of Harmony and Balance : Both dharmic duty and modern environmental ethics advocate for harmonious coexistence. Dharmic teachings emphasize maintaining cosmic balance ('Rta'), which parallels the ecological equilibrium sought by modern sustainability initiatives.

Responsibility to Future Generations : Ancient Indian texts, such as the Mahabharata, underscore the need to consider the long-term consequences of actions, aligning with modern concerns about intergenerational equity.

Reverence for Nature : While modern ethics often derives value from scientific and philosophical reasoning, dharmic traditions imbue nature with sacredness. This spiritual reverence can inspire deeper ecological commitment.

DIVERGENCES BETWEEN DHARMIC DUTY AND ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Anthropocentrism vs. Ecocentrism : Dharmic traditions sometimes reflect an anthropocentric bias, wherein nature's value is linked to its service to humanity. In contrast, modern environmental ethics often adopts an ecocentric stance, valuing nature independently of human utility.

The Role of Spirituality : Dharmic duty is inherently spiritual, whereas modern environmental ethics is largely secular. This divergence can influence the strategies and motivations underlying environmental action.

Application and Adaptability : While dharmic principles are timeless, their application may lack

specificity in addressing contemporary challenges like industrial pollution and climate change. Modern ethics provides detailed frameworks and policies tailored to these issues.

CASE STUDIES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Community-Based Conservation : Traditional Indian practices, such as 'sacred groves' and community-managed water systems, exemplify dharmic principles in action. These practices offer lessons for modern initiatives like participatory resource management.

Policy Implications : Integrating dharmic values into environmental policies can foster a culture of sustainability. For example, India's National Green Tribunal reflects a dharmic commitment to environmental justice.

Global Relevance : The dharmic approach has influenced global discourses, such as the inclusion of 'ecological balance' in the Earth Charter. Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi have also inspired global movements for sustainability.

CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

Contextual Limitations : Dharmic duty, rooted in ancient agrarian societies, may not fully address industrial and technological challenges. Modern ethics must supplement dharmic teachings with contemporary insights.

Cultural Misappropriation : There is a risk of oversimplifying or misinterpreting dharmic concepts in global environmental discourse. Careful contextualization is essential to preserve their integrity.



Implementation Gaps : Translating dharmic ideals into practical policies and actions remains a challenge. Bridging this gap requires interdisciplinary collaboration and public awareness.

The concept of dharmic duty offers a profound ethical foundation for addressing environmental challenges. Its emphasis on harmony, responsibility, and non-violence complements modern environmental ethics, enriching global efforts to achieve sustainability. However, integrating these ancient principles with contemporary frameworks requires careful adaptation and contextual understanding. By fostering a dialogue between dharmic duty and modern ethics, humanity can cultivate a more holistic and inclusive approach to ecological stewardship.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Ancient Indian texts provide various references that imply a *dharmic* duty toward nature. This duty encompasses respect for all living beings, sustainable use of resources, and the protection of biodiversity. This section explores key texts that highlight the environmental dimensions of *dharma*.

The Vedas, among the oldest texts in Indian philosophy, emphasize the sanctity of nature. The Rig Veda, for instance, contains hymns that celebrate the earth (*Prithvi*), air (*Vayu*), and water (*Apas*), presenting them as divine forces essential for life. These elements are not just resources but are regarded as sacred, deserving of respect and preservation.

The Upanishads further develop this idea of interconnectedness, viewing humans as part of a larger cosmic order. The Isha Upanishad's famous

verse, "This universe is the creation of the Supreme Being meant for the benefit of all His creations," implies that resources should be used sustainably, without overexploitation, reflecting an early vision of ecological balance.

The *dharmic* approach to environmental ethics, emphasizing duty and reverence towards nature, provides a compelling moral framework for addressing modern ecological challenges. By exploring traditional Indian philosophy through an environmental lens, this study highlights how the principles of *dharma* can inspire sustainable and ethical practices in individuals and societies today. Although obstacles exist in the practical implementation of these values, integrating *dharma* into contemporary environmental ethics presents an innovative approach to fostering a sustainable future. Future research could focus on empirical studies and community-level case studies to further explore *dharmic* applications in environmental ethics.

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