



CONTEXTUALIZING INDIAN ENVIRONMENTAL PHILOSOPHY IN THE ANTHROPOCENE: A CRITICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The term “Anthropocene” combines the Greek words “anthropos” (human) and “kainos” (new), reflecting a “new age of man.” It suggests that we have entered a period distinct from the Holocene, the epoch that began approximately 11,700 years ago with the end of the last Ice Age. The Anthropocene marks a rupture, a moment where human actions, particularly since the Industrial Revolution, have fundamentally altered the Earth’s biosphere, lithosphere, atmosphere, and hydrosphere. It is a proposed geological epoch signifying human impact on Earth’s geology and ecosystems and demands a reassessment of our philosophical frameworks. Indian philosophy, with its ancient yet relevant ecological wisdom, provides fertile ground for reimagining humanity’s role in the context of ecological issues. This paper explores key concepts in Indian philosophical thought, such as *ṛta* (cosmic order), *dharma* (duty), *ahimsa* (non-violence), and *prakriti* (nature), and evaluates their relevance in addressing the ecological crisis of the contemporary world. Drawing upon classical texts like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Jain* and Buddhist literature, and environmental interpretations of Indian epics, the paper argues for a re-engagement with Indian philosophical traditions in constructing an ethical and sustainable future.



Keywords: Anthropocene, Environmentalism, Nature, Dualism, Biocentrism

INTRODUCTION

The Anthropocene epoch marks a critical juncture in the history of the Earth, an era defined by the magnitude of human influence on natural systems. This unprecedented ecological disruption necessitates a philosophical reevaluation of humanity's relationship with the environment. Indian philosophy, with its holistic worldview and emphasis on interconnectedness, provides profound insights into ecological balance and ethical living. From the Vedic hymns extolling nature to Mahatma Gandhi's socio-ecological vision, the Indian tradition emphasises harmony between human beings and the natural world. Hence, this paper investigates how Indian philosophical principles may play a significant role in addressing the ecological crisis of the present era.

I. Understanding the Anthropocene

The term "Anthropocene" was popularised by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to denote the current epoch in which human activity has become the dominant force affecting the planet's ecosystems and geology. Climate change, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and pollution are among the many consequences of this human dominance. In India, a country marked by deep ecological diversity, rapid industrialisation, and persistent socio-economic disparities, the Anthropocene manifests in complex and often contradictory ways. India's ecological issues, from air pollution and deforestation to water scarcity and biodiversity loss, are symptomatic of a deeper crisis that merges colonial legacies, developmental models, and unsustainable practices. In this context, it is pertinent to mention that Western environmental ethics have often centred on dualisms: human vs. nature, subject vs. object, and mind vs. matter. Indian philosophy, by contrast, suggests a more integrated worldview where these binaries are either softened or dissolved. India's entry into the Anthropocene is thus not simply about human impact in a generic sense, but about historically specific systems of exclusion. Hence, concepts such as **Capitalocene** or **Colonialocene**, often used by critical theorists, are particularly relevant in unpacking India's ecological history.



II. Ṛta and the Cosmic Order

One of the foundational concepts in Vedic literature is *ṛta*, or the cosmic order that maintains harmony in the universe. *Ṛta* governs not just natural phenomena but also moral and ethical conduct. The *Rigveda* frequently invokes *ṛta* as a principle that underlies the regularity of celestial bodies, seasonal cycles, and the responsibilities of human beings: “The truth (satya) and the cosmic order (ṛta) were born of the blazing heat of creation.” (*Rigveda*, 2014). This idea posits a reciprocal relationship between nature and human beings. Violating the cosmic order through overexploitation and greed leads to disharmony and destruction, a concept profoundly applicable to the Anthropocene when environmental degradation results from ethical and spiritual dislocation.

III. Dharma and Environmental Ethics

The global environmental crisis, often framed through scientific and policy discourse, also demands moral and philosophical reflection. In India, the concept of ***dharma***, a foundational principle in *Hindu*, *Buddhist*, and *Jain* thought, offers a rich framework for rethinking **environmental ethics**. Far from being a static code, *dharma* encompasses duties, responsibilities, and the natural order of life, extending beyond the human to include the non-human world. *Dharma*, broadly translated as “duty” or “righteousness,” extends beyond social obligations to include responsibility toward nature. The *Manusmriti*, a classical text, states, “He who injures harmless creatures from a wish to give himself pleasure never finds happiness in this life or the next” (Manusmriti, 1886).

This verse articulates a core principle of **environmental and ethical philosophy**: the moral **condemnation of violence** (*hiṃsā*) toward innocent beings, especially when such acts are committed **for selfish pleasure or gratification**. The verse reflects the foundational idea of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, which is central to *Hinduism*, *Jainism*, and *Buddhism*. It emphasises that harming creatures (e.g., animals, birds, insects, or vulnerable humans) is morally wrong, especially if the intent is selfish pleasure, such as hunting for sport, killing for luxury, or exploiting others for enjoyment. The warning in the second half of the verse “never finds happiness in this life or the next” (Manusmriti, 1886) is based on the doctrine



of karma and rebirth. According to this view, actions in this life directly affect one's future, both immediate and cosmic. Harmful acts, especially those driven by pleasure and disregard for life, accumulate bad karma, which obstructs both present peace and future liberation (*moksha*). In the context of environmental ethics, this verse urges restraint and moral consideration for all living beings.

It resonates strongly with the idea that pleasure-driven consumerism, exploitation of animals, and disregard for ecological harmony ultimately lead to spiritual and societal suffering. Modern acts such as deforestation, animal cruelty, and pollution, when motivated by greed and pleasure, can be seen as contemporary violations of this principle. This aligns with the dharmic worldview, where the interconnectedness of life is sacred. Every action against nature, especially when avoidable and pleasure-driven, disturbs *ṛta* (cosmic order). The *Manusmṛti*, though a controversial and complex text, reflects in this verse a universal ethic of compassion, one that anticipates modern environmental ethics and animal rights movements. This framework underscores the idea that actions must align with the welfare of all forms of life. In the context of the Anthropocene, this suggests that environmental responsibility is a dharmic duty, not a utilitarian choice. Dharma also calls for restraint, moderation, and reverence toward all life forms, countering the consumerism and excess that have contributed to the ecological crisis.

IV. Ahimsa and Interconnectedness

The principles of **Ahimsa** (non-violence) and **interconnectedness** are deeply embedded in Indian philosophical thought and offer a profound framework for understanding and achieving **ecological sustainability**. In a time of escalating environmental crises, from climate change and deforestation to species extinction and pollution, these ancient values can guide contemporary societies toward more ethical, holistic, and sustainable living practices. *Ahimsa*, derived from the Sanskrit root 'hims,' meaning 'to harm,' and the prefix 'a,' meaning 'not,' is the practice of refraining from causing harm to any living being. While traditionally associated with personal ethics and non-violence in social interactions, its ecological implications are vast. *Ahimsa* compels individuals to recognise the "intrinsic value" of all forms of life, not merely as resources but as co-



inhabitants of the Earth. In Jainism, this ethic is most rigorously practiced, where even minute life forms are given consideration. The Jain monk's practice of sweeping the ground before walking exemplifies a spiritual and ecological sensitivity that minimises harm to any life form. This care reflects a worldview where every organism has a right to exist and where violence, even unconscious, is a form of ecological imbalance. Gandhi, who adopted *Ahimsa* as both a personal and political philosophy, saw non-violence as extending beyond humans to include animals and nature. His famous quote, "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated" (Phelps, 2007), encapsulates the ethical and ecological scope of *Ahimsa*. For Gandhi, non-violence meant simplicity, minimalism, and living in harmony with the natural world. A central tenet of Jain, Buddhist, and later Hindu philosophies, *ahimsa* (non-violence) promotes a deeply ecological worldview. Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara of Jainism, says, "All souls are alike; none is superior or inferior" (Jacobi, 1884). Jain cosmology presents a multi-layered universe filled with innumerable *jīvas* (living beings), each deserving of respect and protection. *Ahimsa*, thus, is not merely a moral principle but an ecological imperative. In a world marked by species extinction and habitat destruction, practicing *ahimsa* could mean limiting harm to non-human life through ethical consumption, conservation, and empathy.

V. Prakriti and the Sacredness of Nature

In Indian philosophy, *Prakriti* refers to the natural world or material reality, often described as the primordial substance from which the universe evolves. It is inseparable from the sacred, especially within Samkhya philosophy, where *Prakriti* is seen as the eternal feminine principle, the counterpart to *Purusha* (pure consciousness). This conceptualisation establishes an inherent sanctity in the natural world, not as an object of domination but as a dynamic, living entity deserving of reverence. Ancient Indian texts like the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and *Rig Veda* often reflect this deep ecological consciousness: "The Earth is our mother, and we are her children." (Dwivedi, 1998). Hence, it articulates a worldview where nature is not separate from the self but interconnected, forming a moral and spiritual ecosystem. Trees, rivers, mountains, animals, and even the wind and rain are revered as deities or manifestations of divine forces. This reverence translates into ethical frameworks:



- The concept of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) extends to all sentient beings.
- Rituals such as *Vriksha Vandana* (worship of trees) or *Ganga Aarti* (worship of the river Ganga) reaffirm nature's divinity.
- Indigenous tribal communities in India, such as the *Bhils*, *Gonds*, and *Santhals*, continue to view forests and landscapes as sacred geographies.

In contrast to Western anthropocentrism, where nature has historically been seen as inert or subordinate to human needs, the Indian notion of *Prakriti* promotes a biocentric worldview. This view offers valuable ecological insights, especially in the context of the Anthropocene, where climate change and biodiversity loss signal a rupture in human-nature relations. *Prakriti*, meaning "nature" or "matter," is a vital concept in *Samkhya* and *Vedantic* traditions. In *Samkhya* metaphysics, *prakriti* is the primal energy that, in conjunction with *purusha* (consciousness), gives rise to the material universe. Unlike Western philosophies that often dichotomise nature and spirit, Indian systems view *prakriti* as sacred and dynamic. The *Bhagavad Gita* reiterates the interconnectedness of all life forms: "This entire universe is pervaded by Me in My unmanifest form; all beings exist in Me, but I do not dwell in them." (Sargeant, 1994). Here, Krishna affirms the divine immanence within *prakriti*. Environmental degradation, then, is not just a material crisis but a spiritual one, alienating us from the sacred nature of existence.

VI. Indian Epics and Environmental Symbolism

The Indian epics, especially the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, abound in ecological motifs. The *Ramayana* describes forests not merely as settings but as active participants in the narrative. Rama's exile is not a punishment but a sacred sojourn through forests (*vanavasa*), signifying harmony with nature. The killing of trees or harming of animals is shown to bring misfortune. The *Mahabharata* presents the story of *Arjuna* and *Krishna*, where the former is hesitant to engage in war and the latter instructs him on duty, detachment, and the unity of all beings. The *Bhagavad Gita*, extracted from the *Mahabharata*, can be interpreted through an ecocritical lens where Krishna speaks of *yajña* (sacrifice) as a cosmic process of mutual sustenance: "From food, beings come forth; from rain, food is produced; from sacrifice, rain arises" (Sargeant, 1994). This cyclical vision



suggests a universe sustained by interdependent relationships, disrupted when sacrificial reciprocity is lost, a telling insight for the Anthropocene. *The Mahabharata* emphasises dharma (righteous duty), which includes the duty to live in harmony with *prakriti* (nature). Kings and rulers are judged by how well they protect not just people but also the forests, rivers, animals, and natural balance. Hence, it is pertinent to mention the *Shanti Parva*, where Bhishma tells Yudhishtira, “The Earth must be protected by all means, for she is the mother of all beings” (Vyasa, 2004). This explicit linkage of earth and motherhood reflects a deep ecological ethic rooted in care, respect, and interdependence.

VII. Buddhist and Jain Contributions

Buddhism, with its doctrine of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), affirms that all phenomena arise in dependence on others. This interdependent cosmology aligns well with ecological science and systems theory. The Dhammapada states, “All tremble at violence; all fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill nor cause to kill.” (Dhammapada, 1993). Similarly, Jainism, with its five vows, especially non-violence and non-possession, presents a lifestyle aligned with ecological sustainability. The Jain principle of *aparigraha* (non-possessiveness) advocates for minimalism and respect for all life, a direct challenge to the notion of anthropocentrism.

VIII. Contemporary Interpretations and Movements

Modern Indian thinkers have reinterpreted classical principles for contemporary ecological movements. Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by *Jainism*, *Vedanta*, and the *Gita*, promoted simplicity, self-sufficiency, and trusteeship. He warned against unbridled industrialisation, stating, “Earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s needs, but not every man’s greed.” (Gandhi, 1960-1994). Sundarlal Bahuguna and the Chipko Movement reflected Gandhian ecology by embracing non-violent resistance to deforestation in the Himalayas. The movement embodied the spiritual reverence for trees and the idea that forests are not commodities.



IX. Indian Environmental Philosophy and the Anthropocene: A Synthesis

Indian philosophy does not view nature as external or subordinate to human beings. It presents an ontological framework where the self is part of a larger cosmological fabric. In the Anthropocene, where human activity endangers the planet, Indian thought offers the following actionable insights:

- Reverence for Life: Through concepts like *ahimsa* and *prakriti*, life is seen as sacred and interconnected.
- Ethical Restraint: *Dharma* and *aparigraha* advocate for a lifestyle of moderation and responsibility.
- Spiritual Ecology: Nature is not inert matter but a manifestation of the divine.

Indian philosophy, thus, can bridge the gap between scientific environmentalism and spiritual ecology.

CONCLUSION

The Anthropocene challenges us not only to find technical solutions but also to reassess our values and philosophies. Indian philosophical traditions, grounded in unity, reverence, and ethical living, offer a rich reservoir of ecological wisdom. By revisiting texts like the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Gita*, and teachings from Jain and Buddhist thought, we can envision an alternative mode of existence, one that nurtures rather than exploits and sustains rather than dominates. The Indian philosophical vision does not deny the material world; instead, it calls for a spiritual engagement with the environment, one that may yet guide us toward ecological harmony in the Anthropocene.

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