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Ecological Tenets in Sanatana Dharma: A Scriptural and Historical Analysis of Sustainability

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ABSTRACT

Background: The escalating global ecological crisis has spurred a search for diverse philosophical and ethical frameworks to guide humanity toward sustainability. While often overlooked in mainstream environmental discourse, Sanatana Dharma (Hinduism) possesses a rich, continuous tradition of ecological thought deeply embedded in its core tenets and scriptures.

Objective: This article analyzes the foundational ecological principles within Sanatana Dharma by examining its primary scriptures and relevant historical scholarship. The aim is to articulate a coherent philosophical framework and assess its relevance for addressing contemporary sustainability challenges.

Methods: The study employs a qualitative, thematic analysis of foundational Hindu texts, including the Vedas [2, 7], Manusmriti [3], Puranas [4, 5], and the Mahabharata [1, 8], as cited in the provided reference list. This textual analysis is contextualized through a review of secondary scholarship on Indian environmental history [9, 10, 11] and the intersection of religion and ecology [12, 13, 14, 15].

Results: The analysis reveals several core themes: the perception of nature as a manifestation of the divine (Prakriti); the Earth revered as a goddess (Bhudevi); the fundamental interconnectedness of all life governed by a cosmic law (Dharma); and a set of ethical injunctions promoting non-violence (Ahimsa), moderation, and reverence for natural elements. Scriptural evidence, such as hymns to the Earth in the Atharva Veda [7] and injunctions against pollution in the Matsya Purana [4], substantiates these principles. The Bhagavad Gita [6] further illustrates the cyclical relationship between human action and natural processes.

Conclusion: Sanatana Dharma offers a profound, non-anthropocentric worldview that emphasizes cosmic balance and ethical responsibility. Its principles provide a valuable and actionable framework for informing modern environmental ethics, policy, and practice. This ancient wisdom tradition presents a compelling alternative to purely utilitarian approaches, enriching the global discourse on sustainability by grounding it in a holistic sense of the sacred.

Keywords: Sanatana Dharma, Hinduism, Environmental Ethics, Sustainability, Religion and Ecology, Dharma, Prakriti.

INTRODUCTION

It's become impossible to ignore the fact that the 21st century is being defined by an ecological crisis. The challenges we face—climate change, biodiversity loss, resource scarcity, plastic-choked oceans, and soil

degradation—aren't just technical problems waiting for a technological fix. They point to a much deeper issue with our values and how we, as a species, see our place on this planet. Because of this, scholars and policymakers have started looking for different ways of thinking, for

worldviews that can challenge the anthropocentric and purely utilitarian mindset that has dominated for centuries and, arguably, gotten us here. This search has led many back to the world's religious traditions, which have shaped human ethics and our view of nature for thousands of years [13]. Among these, Sanatana Dharma, or Hinduism, stands out. As one of the oldest living traditions, it offers a surprisingly sophisticated and deeply ingrained ecological awareness that feels incredibly relevant today.

Sanatana Dharma isn't a single, rigid religion with a clear starting point or a single holy book. The very name, Sanatana, means "eternal" or "perennial," suggesting a set of truths and principles that are timeless. It's more of a family of diverse philosophies, spiritual paths, and cultural practices that have grown and evolved over millennia on the Indian subcontinent. At its very heart is the idea of Dharma. It's a tricky word to translate into a single English equivalent, but it points to a cosmic law, a natural order, a sense of righteous duty, and the very structure that holds the universe together. The goal of life, in many ways, is to align oneself with this Dharma. Nature, called Prakriti, isn't just a backdrop for human activity or a storehouse of resources to be inventoried and exploited. It's seen as sacred, alive, and as a direct expression of the divine. You can see this idea woven all through the scriptures, from the ancient Vedas to the great epic, the Mahabharata, and the philosophical Puranas. The Earth is not a rock floating in space; she is a goddess, Bhudevi. Rivers are not just water systems; they are life-giving goddesses. Mountains are abodes of the gods, and trees are objects of veneration. This way of seeing the world naturally leads to a sense of respect and responsibility for nature, making ecological harmony feel less like a modern chore and more like an ancient, sacred duty.

Even with this rich history, there's a lot we still don't know or fully appreciate in the mainstream academic and policy worlds. The field of religion and ecology is growing [13], and some great work has been done on specific aspects of Hindu environmentalism [12, 14, 15]. Often, this scholarship highlights visible examples like the Chipko movement, where villagers hugged trees to prevent deforestation. But we're still missing a thorough study that really connects the dots between these actions and the deep-seated philosophical principles in the scriptures that might inform them. So much of the conversation stays either very local, focusing on one community, or very abstract, discussing high philosophy without connecting it to practical ethics. What we need is a study that bridges

that gap—connecting the scriptural foundation to its historical context and its real-world application. This article is an attempt to do just that.

So, what are we trying to accomplish? This article has three main goals. First, we want to pull out and analyze in detail the key ecological ideas from some of Hinduism's most important scriptures, showing that these are not isolated verses but part of a coherent worldview. Second, we'll look at what historians have to say about these ideas, exploring how they might have played out in the material culture and daily life of pre-modern India [9, 10, 11]. And third, we'll make the case that this ancient framework is incredibly relevant to our conversations about the environment today, offering a much-needed alternative to purely materialistic and short-term thinking.

What this paper suggests is that Sanatana Dharma provides a complete and integrated worldview that is profoundly ecological. We see it in the scriptures, in the ethical rules, and in historical practices. By emphasizing that everything is connected, that nature is divine, and that living rightly is a moral imperative, this tradition gives us a powerful and practical framework for sustainability. It pushes us beyond a human-centered perspective and grounds our ethics in a sacred, cosmic order, offering not just a list of rules, but a vision for a more balanced and beautiful way of living with the world.

METHODS

To get to the heart of these texts, we used a qualitative approach, focusing on interpretation, a method known as hermeneutics. This method is a good fit for digging into complex religious scriptures, where meaning comes from symbols, stories, and metaphors, not just literal statements. It acknowledges that we are reading ancient texts from a modern standpoint and that the act of interpretation itself is a dialogue between the past and the present. Our goal was to identify, analyze, and contextualize the core ideas about nature, sustainability, and environmental ethics found within the selected texts, understanding them on their own terms and then exploring their relevance for us today.

The main part of our work involved a close, thematic reading of key Hindu scriptures. We chose texts that are foundational to the tradition and have a lot to say about ecological thought, sticking to the sources in our reference list. We looked for any passages—direct or indirect—that talked about nature, laid out rules for environmental

behavior, or described the relationship between people and the non-human world. The specific texts we examined were:

- The Atharva Veda [2, 7]: As one of the four primary Vedas, this text is unique for its focus on hymns, spells, and practices related to everyday life, making it a rich source for understanding how early Vedic people related to their physical environment. Its famous Prithvi Sukta (Hymn to the Earth) is a cornerstone of our analysis.
- The Mahabharata: This epic poem is a vast repository of philosophy and ethics. We focused on the Shanti Parva [1] and Anushasana Parva [8] for their detailed discourses on Dharma, ethics, and the duties of individuals and rulers, which often touch upon the treatment of all living beings.
- The Manusmriti [3]: As one of the most influential Dharmaśāstras (treatises on righteous conduct), this text provides a window into the legal and social framework of classical Hinduism, including specific rules and penalties related to environmental conduct.
- The Matsya Purana [4, 5]: The Puranas are a collection of texts that use myths, legends, and genealogies to convey complex philosophical ideas to a wider audience. The Matsya Purana is particularly notable for its surprisingly detailed and stringent rules against the pollution of water bodies.
- The Bhagavad Gita [6]: A part of the Mahabharata, this text is one of the most important and beloved scriptures in Hinduism. We focused on its philosophical explanation of how human action (karma) is tied to the cosmic cycles that sustain the world.

Of course, you can't understand ancient texts in a vacuum. To make sure our interpretations were well-grounded, we also dove into contemporary academic research. This helped us in two ways: it gave us the historical context for the scriptures, and it allowed us to connect their themes to modern scholarly debates. We looked at three types of sources. First, we read leading works on India's environmental history by scholars like Upinder Singh [9], Michael H. Fisher [10], and Ranjan Chakrabarti [11]. These historians gave us a critical perspective on how well the scriptural ideals actually matched reality, helping us avoid a purely romanticized view of the past. Second, we engaged with scholarship that deals directly with Hinduism

and ecology from authors like R. Vijyalakshmi [12], Lance E. Nelson [14], and the collection edited by Findly, Chapple, and Tucker [15]. These works provided some really useful ways of thinking about Hindu eco-theology and helped shape our thematic analysis. Finally, we consulted broader works like the Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology [13] to help place our study within the larger academic conversation about the role of faith traditions in addressing the environmental crisis.

Our analytical process was straightforward. We started by reading the scriptural passages carefully, highlighting any mention of nature or environmental ethics. Then, we organized these references into categories to see what patterns and concepts kept showing up. From there, we synthesized these patterns into the major themes that really seem to define the ecological outlook of Sanatana Dharma. These themes—the sanctity of nature, interconnectedness, ethical living, and historical context—became the backbone for our Results section. By weaving together a close reading of the primary texts with insights from modern scholarship, we were able to build a pretty comprehensive picture of Sanatana Dharma's perspective on sustainability.

RESULTS: Ecological Themes in Sanatana Dharma

What emerges from a close reading of these texts is a consistent and surprisingly sophisticated ecological framework. It doesn't use the language of modern science, of course. Instead, it talks about the environment through the language of theology and ethics—of divine presence, cosmic order, and moral duty. We found that the ideas generally fall into four main themes: (1) nature is sacred, a manifestation of the divine; (2) all of life is interconnected through a cosmic order (Dharma) that depends on reciprocity; (3) there's a clear set of ethical rules for living sustainably; and (4) we can see evidence of these ideas in historical practices.

3.1. Theme 1: The Sanctity of Nature as a Divine Manifestation

One of the most basic ideas in the Hindu worldview is that nature isn't just a thing; it's an expression of the divine. This gives the natural world a sacred value that has nothing to do with how useful it is to people. You see this most clearly in the way the Earth is personified as a goddess, Bhudevi or Prithvi. If we look at the Atharva Veda, we find the Prithvi Sukta, an incredible 63-verse hymn to the Earth. It's

one of the earliest and most powerful pieces of ecological writing in the world. The hymn doesn't talk about the Earth as a resource; it talks about her as the mother of all life, the source of all food, the very ground of our being. The poet says, "Mighty art Thou, supreme, O Earth... On whom the trees, the lords of the forest, stand ever firm, the all-nourishing, all-supporting Earth" [7]. The relationship is one of a child to a mother: "O Earth, my mother, set me securely in a place of bliss" [7]. This framing makes exploiting the Earth feel like harming your own mother—a pretty strong deterrent. The hymn even asks for the Earth to be protected from harm, saying that anything taken from her should be allowed to grow back quickly: "Whatever I dig from you, Earth, may that have quick growth again. O purifier, may we not injure your vitals or your heart" [2].

This sense of the divine isn't just limited to the Earth. It extends to all of nature, or Prakriti. In Hindu philosophy, Prakriti is the raw material of the universe, often seen as a divine feminine power, or Shakti. The world we see is a dance between this active, material principle and a conscious but passive principle (Purusha). What this means is that the physical world is inherently sacred—it's the body of the goddess. This is why so many natural features are revered. The river Ganga isn't just water; she's a goddess who purifies. The Himalayas aren't just mountains; they're the home of the gods. Certain trees, like the Banyan and Peepal, are sacred, and entire forests were often set aside as protected, sacred groves. The Puranas, like the Matsya Purana, are full of stories and rules that reinforce this, talking about the spiritual merit you gain from planting trees and the sin of harming them [4]. Seeing the divine in nature like this is a core part of Hindu ecological thinking. It encourages an attitude of reverence and care, not one of control and exploitation [14].

3.2. Theme 2: Interconnectedness, Cosmic Order (Dharma), and Reciprocity

A second idea that you find everywhere in the Hindu worldview is a deep sense of interconnectedness. Everything—gods, humans, animals, plants, even rocks—is part of a single cosmic whole. And what holds it all together is the universal law of Dharma. This isn't just some abstract philosophy; it's meant to be a lived reality that guides how you act. The universe is imagined as a giant web where everything depends on everything else. If you pull on one thread, the whole web trembles. So, harming another being or a part of nature is really harming yourself and upsetting the cosmic balance. In the Shanti

Parva of the Mahabharata, it's said that Dharma exists for the good of all creatures, and it advises, "whatever is not conducive to social welfare, or what you are likely to be ashamed of doing, never do" [1]. This idea of well-being naturally includes the non-human world, since you can't really separate the health of a society from the health of the environment it depends on.

This idea of interconnectedness is also expressed through the concept of Yajna, which is often translated as "sacrifice" or "offering." At its core, Yajna is about the universal cycle of giving and taking that keeps the cosmos running. The Bhagavad Gita explains this cosmic cycle beautifully. Lord Krishna says, "From food, beings are born; from rain, food is produced; from Yajna, rain comes into being; and Yajna is born of action" [6]. This verse lays out a clear cycle of ecological reciprocity. Human actions (karma), when they are done in a spirit of selfless offering (Yajna), maintain the cosmic cycles that bring rain, which grows the food that feeds everyone. Yajna, then, is a blueprint for a symbiotic relationship between people and nature. When we do our part without being selfish, we support the cosmic order, and nature, in turn, supports us. But when we act selfishly and break this cycle, it leads to ecological and social disaster. This idea turns everyday actions into sacred duties and frames human life as a constant, active participation in keeping the world in balance. It's a powerful theological argument for sustainability, suggesting that our own well-being depends on us playing our part in the larger web of life.

3.3. Theme 3: Ethical Precepts for Sustainable Living

From these big ideas about a divine, interconnected world flows a whole set of ethical rules designed to guide people toward a more sustainable way of life. The most important of these is Ahimsa, or non-violence. We often think of Ahimsa as just not hurting other people, but in its full sense, it applies to all living things. The Anushasana Parva of the Mahabharata goes all in on this, declaring, "Ahimsa is the highest Dharma... Ahimsa is the greatest gift... Ahimsa is the greatest happiness" [8]. This powerful emphasis on non-harm creates a strong ethical basis for protecting the environment. It discourages killing animals, cutting down forests, and doing anything that causes unnecessary harm to the natural world.

This general principle of Ahimsa is backed up by a lot of specific rules you can find in Hindu legal and ethical texts (the Dharmaśāstras). The Manusmriti, a very influential

lawbook, has clear rules about how to treat the environment. It says that you should be fined for damaging trees, with the amount of the fine depending on how useful the tree is [3]. It also has rules about water pollution, telling people not to relieve themselves in water or throw trash into it. The Matsya Purana is even more specific about protecting water. It says that a wise person should never pollute a body of water and even lists ten specific sins related to water, like blocking a spring or selling a pond [4]. It then lays out specific penances for people who do pollute water, showing how seriously this was taken [5]. The text even says, "One should protect water as a mother protects her son" [4]. These clear rules against deforestation, animal cruelty, and pollution show a very practical concern for the environment that was built right into the legal and social system. On top of that, virtues like selfless action (nishkama karma) and non-possessiveness (aparigraha), which are central to texts like the Bhagavad Gita, offer a spiritual counterpoint to our modern consumer culture, pushing for a life of moderation and contentment instead.

3.4. Theme 4: Historical Context and Environmental Practices

The ecological ideas in the scriptures weren't just theories; they often showed up in the way people lived in ancient and early medieval India. Now, we have to be careful not to imagine some perfect, eco-friendly past [11], but there is a good amount of historical and archaeological evidence for a widespread culture of environmental awareness. As the historian Upinder Singh puts it, in pre-modern India, religion, society, and the environment were all deeply intertwined, and "sacredness was an important aspect of the relationship between people and their landscape" [9]. A great example of this is the tradition of sacred groves. These were patches of forest that were dedicated to a local deity and considered off-limits. Inside these groves, all life was protected. You couldn't cut down trees, hunt, or even gather plants. These groves became little biodiversity hotspots and living pharmacies of medicinal plants—a kind of early, community-run nature preserve.

You can see a similar kind of ecological wisdom in traditional water conservation systems. Building tanks, wells, and complex irrigation canals wasn't just an engineering project; it was seen as a religiously virtuous act. The Matsya Purana praises the act of digging a pond, saying it brings ten times more spiritual merit than performing a great sacrifice [4]. This kind of religious

encouragement led to the creation of vast water-harvesting networks that helped communities and farms get through the dry seasons. As Michael H. Fisher points out, throughout Indian history, both rulers and regular people invested a lot in water infrastructure because they understood that a stable society depended on managing this crucial resource carefully [10]. The historical reality was certainly complicated, and there were times of environmental damage. But these traditional practices, which grew out of the scriptural worldview, show a long and real history of sustainable living. They demonstrate that the ethical and theological ideas of Sanatana Dharma were turned into real, community-level actions that helped maintain a relatively balanced relationship with the natural world for a very long time [9, 10].

DISCUSSION

Putting these pieces together, a clear picture emerges: Sanatana Dharma contains a coherent, deep, and multifaceted ecological framework. When you combine the themes of nature's divinity, the interconnectedness of all life, a strong set of environmental ethics, and a history of sustainable practices, you get a worldview that is fundamentally eco-centric. This is quite different from the dominant Western paradigms that have often created a sharp divide between humans and nature, treating nature as something for us to use. The Hindu perspective, instead, places humanity within a sacred, cosmic whole. Nature isn't an "it" to be conquered; it's a "Thou" to be respected. This non-anthropocentric starting point is probably the tradition's most important gift to the modern search for a workable environmental ethic. It changes the whole basis for why we should care about the environment—it's not just about our own self-interest, but about a sacred duty to uphold the cosmic order (Dharma).

The relevance of this ancient way of thinking to our current situation is hard to overstate. The idea of the Earth as a divine mother (Bhudevi) offers a powerful emotional and spiritual alternative to the cold, modern view of the planet as just a pile of resources. As we face climate change, this perspective encourages a relationship of care and reciprocity, not one of extraction and exploitation. The concept of interconnectedness, as expressed through Dharma and Yajna, directly challenges the fragmented, mechanical worldview that modern industrial society is built on. It suggests that our ecological crises are actually moral and spiritual crises. They stem from acting in ways that ignore our place in the web of life. This framework can

give modern environmentalism a deeper sense of meaning and purpose [12, 15]. What's more, the ethical rule of Ahimsa (non-violence) provides a clear moral reason to protect biodiversity, respect animal rights, and shrink our collective environmental footprint. The emphasis on moderation and not being possessive is a direct challenge to the hyper-consumerist culture that is driving so much resource depletion. These aren't just quaint ideas from the past; they are practical ethical guidelines that can shape our lifestyles, our communities, and even our public policies [12].

Integration of Key Insights

The true power of this ancient framework lies in its ability to diagnose our modern environmental ailments not just as technical problems, but as symptoms of a deeper spiritual malaise. When we apply its core principles to today's crises, the connections are startlingly clear.

Consider, for example, the widespread pollution of rivers, particularly in India where many are held as sacred. The Matsya Purana explicitly forbids the defilement of water, equating the protection of water bodies with a mother's protection of her son [4] and outlining specific penances for such acts [5]. Yet today, many of these same sacred rivers are treated as sewers for industrial effluent, agricultural runoff, and urban waste. From a Dharmic perspective, this is not merely an issue of poor environmental regulation; it is a profound act of adharma (unrighteousness). It represents a cultural and spiritual failure to recognize the divine in nature, a direct violation of the sacred relationship that these texts sought to codify. The problem, this framework would suggest, is not a lack of technology to clean the rivers, but a lack of reverence that allows them to be polluted in the first place.

Similarly, we can analyze the global crisis of consumerism and resource depletion. The modern economic model is predicated on endless growth and the stimulation of limitless desire. This stands in stark contrast to the ethical precepts of moderation, contentment, and non-possessiveness (aparigraha) that are central to texts like the Bhagavad Gita [6]. The ecological consequences of this consumer culture—from mountaintop removal mining for raw materials to the mountains of plastic waste choking our oceans—can be seen as the large-scale, material manifestation of a society that has abandoned these virtues. The framework of Sanatana Dharma would diagnose this not as an economic necessity, but as a collective spiritual

sickness rooted in greed and an inability to find fulfillment in non-material values.

Finally, let us look at the catastrophic loss of biodiversity that marks our era. The principle of Ahimsa, as articulated in the Anushasana Parva, is not a passive suggestion but the "highest Dharma" [8], extending to all forms of life. The current mass extinction event, driven by human activities like habitat destruction, is therefore the largest act of collective himsa (violence) in human history. The clearing of a forest for a monoculture crop, which displaces and kills thousands of species, is not just an economic trade-off from this perspective; it is a profound moral failure, a transgression against the interconnected web of life that Dharma seeks to protect. These examples demonstrate that the ecological framework of Sanatana Dharma is not a relic of the past. It is a potent ethical lens that can help us understand the root causes of our current predicament: a deep-seated disconnection from the sacredness of the natural world and a collective failure to live in a state of balance and reciprocity.

Critical Nuances and Limitations

It's important, though, that we don't get carried away and paint an overly romantic picture of the past. As several historians have rightly pointed out, there can be a big difference between philosophical ideals and what people actually do [11]. The scriptures contain beautiful ecological messages, but that doesn't mean Indian history has been free of environmental damage. Things like population growth, political conflicts, and economic needs have led to deforestation and resource exploitation at different times. Also, the Hindu tradition is incredibly diverse. The way people have interpreted these texts and the importance they've placed on certain ideas have changed a lot depending on the region, the community, and the historical period. And in modern times, some of these ideas have been twisted for political reasons, which can hide the core ethical teachings. So, we have to be realistic and understand that simply turning to this tradition isn't a magic bullet for all our environmental problems.

This study has its own limits as well. We focused on a handful of well-known, classical Sanskrit texts. We haven't even touched on the vast number of vernacular and regional traditions, many of which have their own rich ecological wisdom. A study that involved going out and talking to contemporary Hindu communities to see how they live out, argue about, and adapt these principles would

be a fantastic follow-up to this text-based work. Still, by focusing on these foundational texts, we've been able to show that a strong, coherent, and long-lasting ecological vision lies at the very heart of the Sanatana Dharma tradition. And that vision offers some invaluable resources as we try to figure out how to deal with the immense challenges of our time.

CONCLUSION

To wrap things up, this article has taken a systematic look at the core ecological ideas within Sanatana Dharma, drawing from its key scriptures and placing them in conversation with historical and modern scholarship. We found four central themes that kept reappearing: the idea that nature is inherently sacred, the principle that everything is interconnected through Dharma, a clear set of ethical rules for sustainable living, and a history of environmentally aware practices. Together, these ideas create a non-anthropocentric and holistic framework. It's a way of seeing the world that places humanity as just one part of a sacred cosmic order, with a moral responsibility to help keep that order in balance.

The main argument of this paper—that Sanatana Dharma offers a deep and practical framework for sustainability—seems to be well-supported by the evidence from the texts and from history. The tradition's focus on respecting the Earth, on the give-and-take relationship between human actions and the well-being of the cosmos, and on the ethical demands of non-violence and moderation provides a powerful alternative to the dominant paradigms of exploitation and consumerism. This ancient wisdom pushes us beyond a purely technical or economic view of environmental problems and reframes sustainability as a spiritual and ethical calling.

The implications of this are pretty significant. As the world searches for a more effective and meaningful global environmental ethic, the principles of Sanatana Dharma could be a vital part of the conversation, contributing to dialogue between different religions and cultures. They offer a time-tested vision that can inspire and inform modern movements for ecological justice and sustainable development. By grounding our environmental responsibilities in a sense of the sacred, this tradition offers not just potential solutions, but a deeper reason to care in the first place.

Of course, there's more work to be done. Future research

could build on this textual foundation by getting out into the world. We need ethnographic studies to see how these ideas are actually being used and debated by Hindu communities and environmental groups today. More historical research could also uncover regional differences in ecological practices and how they've changed over time. By continuing to explore the depths of this tradition, we might just find some of the wisdom we so desperately need to navigate the ecological challenges of the 21st century.

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