

Ancient Indian wisdom for sustainable living

मे माता पृथिवी महीयम् ।
Rigveda - 1.164.33

The manipulation of nature by humans to satisfy their needs has been a constant since their existence. However, the contemporary era has witnessed an unprecedented and exponential rise in human dominance over the environment. The current planetary imbalances fuelled by modern lifestyles manifested in climate change, frequent disasters, environmental pollution, biodiversity loss, etc., endangering human lives and natural resources. In this context, the ancient Indian philosophical systems and spiritual traditions that emphasise an intrinsic and harmonious relationship between humans and nature, offer valuable insights for environmental conservation. The advocated ideas of *Dharma*, *Ahimsa* and *Prakriti Pujan* remind us of the need for sustainable living and offer subsequent hope for damage control or environmental recovery.

परस्परोग्रहो जीवानाम् ।
Jain Tattvartha Sutra - 5.21

Dharma (Dhamma in Pali and Prakrit) in ancient Indian thought signifies duty, righteous living, or social order, often linked to the protection of truth, justice, or ethical conduct. It is central to texts such as, the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Bhagavad Gita and Kautilya's Arthashastra. Specifically, from an ecological perspective, the Ayurvedic idea of *Loka-Purusha-Saamyā* highlights the interdependence of all life forms and their environments, while the Vedic concept of *Rita* (natural law/cosmic order) underscores the need for moral action to maintain ecological balance. Vedic as well as Upanishadic traditions emphasize that humans do not have the authority to dominate the Earth but rather have a duty to protect and preserve it, viewing nature as an end in itself deserving of care and respect. Also, the Arthashastra promotes water conservation through irrigation taxes and Padma Purana condemns water pollution. This ethos continued in practice as well. For example, Emperor Ashoka propagated Dhamma to instil moral responsibility in his Mauryan Kingdom. During the 1730 Khejarli sacrifice, 363 Bishnois led by Amrita Devi in Rajasthan gave up their lives to protect trees, which inspired the later movements like Chipko (1973), Uttarakhand and Appiko (1983), Karnataka. Together, these traditions and movements reflect a longstanding belief that protecting nature is an essential part of Dharma and key to sustainable living.

Ahimsa (Ahinsa), or non-violence, signifies refrain-



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OF INDIA



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ing from harm towards all living beings, a principle central to Buddhism and Jainism. It promotes compassion or *karuna* and respect for life in all forms. The Rigveda cautions against the destruction of forests, while the Vishnu Samhita discourages harm to plants and animals. Ashoka's edicts prohibited forest burning, regulated animal slaughter and protected wildlife, even extending to restrictions on agricultural practices harmful to living creatures. The Mauryan period also saw the establishment of veterinary care, with texts like Shalihotra Samhita detailing health treatments for elephants and horses, the important carriers/modes of transportation during war. Later, Akbar encouraged restraint in meat consumption, especially on sacred days. In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi transformed Ahimsa into a powerful tool of resistance during India's freedom struggle.

Prakriti Pujan is a key concept in Hindu thought, where elements like rivers, trees, animals, soil and the sun are revered as sacred. This ethos continues in festivals such as Chhath Puja, Van Mahotsav, Makar Sankranti, Pongal and Bihu. Vedic times perceived water as a symbol of spiritual purification with some hymns addressed to *Varuna*, the God of water. Ancient texts such as Rigveda mentions about

various sources of water, such as lakes, rivers (Sindhu/Indus is mentioned frequently) insisting on their conservation. The Indian culture of pilgrimage prevalent on the riverbanks, such as, *Kumbh Mela*, is probably based on the theory of purification from water derived from these ancient traditions. Ancient Indians prayed to the god of wind for his healing breezes, recognizing pure air as essential for happiness and a long life. Further, forests were regarded as spaces of spiritual solace in the Vedic period where sages meditated for enlightenment. This gave rise to *Aranya Sanskriti* (forest culture), with *Vanaprastha Ashrama* as one of the four stages of life, encouraging retreat into nature for contemplation. The *Aranyakas* are believed to have emerged from these forest traditions.

Spiritual figures such as Buddha and Mahavira attained enlightenment under the trees of Peepal and Sal respectively, while other tirthankaras also associated awakening (*kaivalya*) with trees. In the 15th century, Jambheshwaraji founded the Bishnoi sect (mentioned previously) in Marwar during a severe drought. His followers adopted 29 principles promoting harmony with nature, reinforcing a long-standing tradition of ecological stewardship. Sacred groves, the ancient natural sanctuaries believed to be protected by divine grace, harbour undisturbed biodiversity and support many threatened species. In Jammu and Kashmir, they are associated with figures like *Peer Baba* and *Mata Vaishno Devi*, while in Haryana, traditions around *Nau Gaja Peer* and *Mani Gaja Peer* are tied to the protection of medicinal plants and groundwater recharge. Similar practices on Prakriti Pujan also exist in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand. Crucially, many of these ecosystems have been preserved through the sustained efforts of tribal and local communities, reflecting a deep-rooted culture of conservation.

As climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss push the planet towards an ecological crisis, India's civilisational wisdom offers a roadmap for survival. The ideas of Dharma, Ahimsa and Prakriti Pujan are not merely devotional practices but a coherent ethical framework that places humans within, not above, nature. In ancient Indian thought, ecological balance was a moral responsibility in everyday life - Dharma guided conduct, Ahimsa limited harm and reverence for Prakriti sacralised the natural world. In today's era of deep environmental uncertainty, together these ideas remain powerful guiding principles for ecological resilience, rooted in ethical awareness, collective responsibility and public policy. At a time when unchecked consumption threatens the future of humanity itself, India can lead the way in reviving these values not merely as traditions, but as an urgent ecological imperative.



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Wisdom Word Search

V	P	N	L	B	A	N	A	H	J	K	B
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WORDS TO FIND

Bana, Bayu, Brshtipata, Bastutantra, Dushana, Jalabayu, Jivabaicitrya, Mati, Paribesa, Prakrti

BANA - Forest - A large area covered with trees and diverse wildlife.
BAYU - Air
BRSH TIPATA - Rainfall
BASTUTANTRA - Ecosystem: A community of organisms interacting with their environment.
DUSHANA - Pollution
JALABAYU - Climate
JIVABAICITRYA - Biodiversity
MATI - Soil
PARIBESA - Environment
PRAKRITI - Nature

Note: These terms come from Bengali, one of India's 22 Scheduled Languages.

Marvels of India

THE NADISTUTI SUKTA



Ancient Bharat's Hymn Dedicated to River Ecology
It is the 75th hymn of the 10th *Mandala* of the *Rigveda* that enumerates and praises the river systems of the Vedic civilisation.

The Hymn as a Hydrological Map
At least 19 rivers are invoked, listed from east to west, encompassing major rivers (Ganga, Yamuna, Kubha, Gomati, Krumu etc.) and the region of the *Sapta Sindhavah* (the seven core rivers): Sarasvati, Sindhu (Indus), Vitasta (Jhelum), Asikni (Chenab), Parushni (Ravi), Vipasha (Beas) and Shutudri (Sutlej). The "lost" Sarasvati is documented herein.

Rivers as Living Ecology, Not Mere Resources
Listing interconnected river networks spanning the northwestern Indian subcontinent implies an awareness of hydrological interdependence, i.e. rivers sustaining biodiversity, agriculture and settlement in arid terrains. This portrayal aligns with broader Vedic ecology, viewing rivers not merely as resources but as divine entities integral to a balanced ecology.

How Well the Ancient Indians Knew Their Landscape!
It is a marvel because it shows ancient Indians' precise knowledge of geography and the environment as early as 1500-1000 BCE.

Fable with Moral

The Ruru Jataka

(Jataka No. 482, the Pali Canon)

Ruru was a wondrous deer who lived in a dense forest. His coat gleamed like gold studded with jewel-like spots; his eyes were sky-blue, his hooves and antlers like polished stone. Possessing wisdom earned from past lives, he could speak human speech, yet he avoided people because of their cruel, greedy ways. Still, he felt compassion for all living beings.



revealed Ruru's hiding place and led the king's hunters to the thicket. But when he raised his hand to point him out, his hand fell away as if punished for betrayal.

Cornered by arrows and men, Ruru calmly addressed the king and asked how people had found his forest. The king pointed to the traitorous man. Ruru then declared, "Better to lift a log from the water than to save an ungrateful one," and told how he had rescued the man only to be betrayed. Moved by the story, the king admired Ruru's bravery and was enraged at the man's ingratitude. As the archers prepared to punish the betrayer, Ruru pleaded mercy. The king forgave the man and, honoring Ruru's courage and wisdom, invited the deer to the court.

Ruru accepted, rode into the city in a royal carriage, and spent days delivering thoughtful discourses to the king, queen, and courtiers. After enlightening them, the deer returned to his forest home, leaving behind a lesson about compassion, gratitude, and the deceptive nature of human hearts.

Moral of the Fable: Be forgiving and get rid of your grudges

One day Ruru heard a desperate cry and found a man being swept away by a raging stream. Without hesitation he plunged in, urged the man to hold on, and bore the terrified stranger to safety on the riverbank. Ruru warmed him with gentle nuzzles until he recovered. The grateful man vowed that his life now belonged to the deer and promised to serve him forever. Ruru cautioned the man to tell no one that such a beautiful creature had saved him, warning that humans were merciless. The man swore secrecy and left.

Later the queen dreamed of a golden deer preaching wisdom from a throne. Enchanted by the animal, she commanded the king to capture this deer. The king announced a reward: a rich village for whoever found the animal. The rescued man, tempted by the prize,

Did you know?

India's first elephant conservation laws are more than 2,000 years old. Long before modern wildlife conservation, ancient India had established strict laws to protect elephants. During the Mauryan Empire around 300 BCE, Chanakya's Arthashastra prescribed the creation of protected elephant forests known as Nagavanas. Elephants were considered vital state assets and the battle tanks of the ancient world. Hunting wild elephants was strictly prohibited and those found guilty of killing one could face the death penalty. Ancient India also developed sophisticated knowledge systems for elephant welfare. Texts such as the Palakapyaam provided guidance on

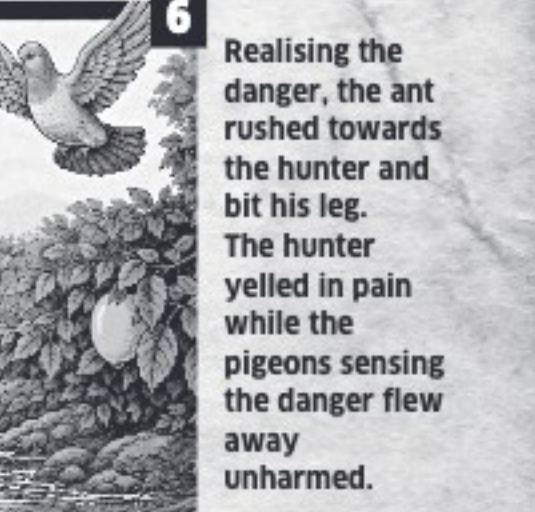
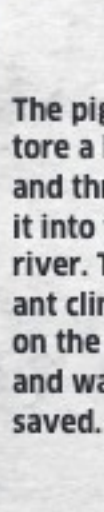


elephant anatomy, veterinary medicine, and disease treatment. Similarly, the Matangaleela explored elephant behaviour, emotional wellbeing, ethical training, and care. More than two millennia ago, India recognised that protecting wildlife was essential for both statecraft and ecological stewardship, making it one of the world's earliest pioneers of wildlife conservation.

QUIZ Environment & Sustainability				
Questions	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
1 Which tribe from Arunachal Pradesh is famous for its grassroots wildlife conservation efforts, actively managing local eco-tourism and partnering with forest authorities to protect vital habitats?	Bugun	Lepcha	Idu Mishmi	Monpa
2 Visitors gather to witness the safe release of baby Olive Ridley Sea turtles into Arabian Sea, promoting community-driven ecotourism and conservation during this festival held annually. On which coast is it held?	Malabar	Konkan	Coromandel	Utkal
3 Which tribe is renowned globally for their traditional skills, helping the Tamil Nadu Forest Department with snake rescues and venom extraction without harming these reptiles?	Toda	Konda Reddy	Muthuvan	Irula
4 The Panzath Nag Festival is a traditional fishing and freshwater spring-cleaning event held annually. Where is this community-led festival held?	Kashmir	Uttarakhand	Himachal	Bihar
5 The Mughal Charbagh (four-quadrant) gardens were designed as micro-climatic sustainability systems. How did they achieve temperature moderation in hot regions?	By using dark volcanic stones that absorbed solar radiation	By dense afforestation of fruit trees at the outer perimeter	Through water channels and cascading waterfalls over white marble	By creating underground vacuum chambers beneath the lawns to trap cold air
ANSWERS: 1 - A, 2 - B, 3 - D, 4 - A, 5 - C				

panchatantra

The Ant and the Pigeon



1 Once upon a time, there was a huge mango tree beside a mighty river. It bore big delicious mangoes. Many pigeons lived on the tree. Under that tree was an anthill.

2 One day, a pigeon noticed an ant drowning in the river. The pigeon wanted to save the little ant.

3 Realising the danger, the ant rushed towards the hunter and bit his leg. The hunter yelled in pain while the pigeons sensing the danger flew away unharmed.

4 The pigeon tore a leaf and threw it into the river. The ant climbed on the leaf and was saved.

5 Now, the ant looked for an opportunity to return the favour. One day he saw that a hunter was aiming his bow and arrow, hoping to catch some pigeons.

MORAL OF THE STORY: One Good Deed Begets Another