



Climate Change and Ancestral Indian Wisdom: An Assessment of Indigenous Ecological Knowledge

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Abstract

Climate change represents not merely a scientific or technological crisis but a profound civilizational and ethical challenge. As the world confronts the increasing peril of climate change, ancestral wisdom—grounded in Indigenous viewpoints—provides essential insights into the causes of ecological disaster and the routes to resilience. Since time immemorial, Indigenous People have sustained a symbiotic relationship with nature, informed by traditional ecological knowledge that underscores comprehensive stewardship of land, water, and life systems (“Indigenous Science, Climate Change, and Indigenous Community Building: A Framework of Foundational Perspectives for Indigenous Community Resilience and Revitalization,” n.d.). Rooted in the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Traditional Indian knowledge conceives nature (Prakriti) as a living, sacred, and interconnected entity rather than an inert resource for exploitation. Concepts such as *Rta* (cosmic order), *Dharma* (moral duty), *Yajña* (reciprocal sustenance), and *Vasudhaiva Kuṭumbakam* (the world as one family) provide a holistic ecological worldview that emphasizes balance, restraint, and responsibility. Drawing upon Vedic literature, the Upaniṣads, Purāṇas, Dharmasāstras, and classical texts like the Atharvaveda, Manusmṛti, and Bhagavad Gītā, this research paper highlights how the climate catastrophe is interpreted as a consequence of *Pragyāparādha* (intellectual and ethical transgression) and imbalance between human desires and natural limits. Indigenous practices such as sacred groves, illustrate sustainable pathways. These practices reflect an eco-centric ethics that integrates spirituality, social harmony, and ecological oversight. By re-engaging ancestral wisdom, contemporary society can cultivate alternative paradigms of development grounded in moderation, intergenerational justice, and reverence for nature.

Keywords: *Climate Change; Indian Knowledge System; Ancestral Wisdom; Ethical Framework; Sustainability; Etc.*

Introduction

Climate change has garnered appreciable attention in the current era and it remains one of the most important and actively debated subjects. Contemporary international events address, deliberate, and seek answers to the adverse impacts of Climate Change. It has emerged as one of the most critical challenges confronting humanity in the twenty-first century, manifesting in rising global temperatures, erratic weather patterns, biodiversity loss, and increasing ecological vulnerability (Shivanna 2022). Mainstream responses to this crisis are largely grounded in scientific and technological frameworks. While these Western-dominated approaches are indispensable, they often overlook deeper cultural, ethical, and philosophical dimensions of the human–nature relationship (Datta and Starlight 2024).

Ancestral Indian wisdom, in this context offers a valuable indigenous perspective for understanding and addressing the contemporary ecological catastrophe. Indian knowledge traditions, rooted in the Vedas, Upanishads, epics, and dharmic philosophies, conceptualize Nature as a living, interconnected whole governed by *rta* (cosmic order) and sustained through *dharma* (moral duty) (Chandogya Upanishad, 3.14.1). Ethical principles such as *ahimsa* (non-violence), reverence for the *pañca mahābhūtas* (five elements), and practices like

sacred groves and traditional water conservation systems reflect a long-standing ecological consciousness (Berkes, 2018; Malhotra et al., 2001). Caraka and susruta, two ancient masters of Indian medicine (Ayurveda), viewed physiological health not only as a personal issue, but also in relation to the geographical environment, climate, and atmospheric quality (“Ancient Science of Life,” n.d.). Such an indigenous perspective offers critical insights for reimagining sustainable and just ecological futures.

Literature Review

Secondary sources in the forms of books, Research journals, newspaper articles and internet etc. have been used.

Research methodology

It is a kind of desk research. The broad research design employed is exploratory where historical-analytical method has been used with an interdisciplinary approach.

Reference Style

American Psychological Association (APA-7th Edition) has been employed for in-text citation and referencing.

Objectives of the Research

By revisiting ancestral Indian wisdom, this paper seeks to reinterpret climate change not merely as an environmental or technological problem, but as a crisis of values, relationships, and worldview.

Understanding Climate Change

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), an organization of the United Nations tasked with evaluating climate change-related scientific research defines ‘Climate change’ as *“a statistically significant variation in either the mean condition of the climate or in its variability that persists for an extended period of time (typically decades or longer). Climate Change may be the result of natural internal processes, external forcings, or persistent anthropogenic changes in atmospheric composition or land use”* (“IPCC — Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” n.d.)

Climate change is caused due to natural and human factors both however, we can control only the latter and that is why Article 1 of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) defined climate change as a *“change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods”* (“UNFCCC,” n.d.)

Thus, the UNFCCC highlights climate change ascribed to human activities. Yet, the technocratic framing impregnated with anthropocentric approach often ignores the deeper philosophical and ethical causes of ecological imbalance: a worldview predicated on domination, extraction, and separation from nature. Western scholar Lyon white rightly argues that the Western worldview and religious traditions bear the responsibility for the tragic state of environment. He holds, *“...We are superior to nature, contemptuous of it, willing to use it for our slightest whim”*.

Indian Ancestral Wisdom as an Epistemology

Indigenous Indian wisdom systems are not solely religious or ritualistic; they are ecological epistemologies—frameworks for understanding human life within the broader web of living systems.

Concept of Rta and Dharma

The notion of Rta, one of the first concepts of order in Indian philosophy, as expressed in the Rg Veda signifies the cosmic order and the harmony between all elements of creation encompassing humans, animals, plants, earth, sky, and space. Human activities in accordance with Rta were thought to maintain cosmic equilibrium. The Rig Veda asserts: *“Let us speak of those great laws (Rta) which sustain the world...”* (Rig Veda 1.24.8).

Dharma appears in subsequent Vedic, Upanishadic, and Dharmashastric writings as the social and ethical manifestation of Rta. While Rta is cosmic, Dharma is normative and situational. The Mahābhārata states, *“Dharma is that which upholds the world”* (link et al., n.d.). Dharma transforms cosmic order into ethical obligations, directing personal behavior to maintain communal harmony and world equilibrium. This suggests that human conduct must align with cosmic balance. Dharma is understood as duty or righteousness, aligned

with the phrase- *Ko aham! Kut ayatah! (Who am I? From Where I came?)*. Thus it binds a man with morality of cosmic interrelatedness(Mukherjee 2008).

Holistic Cosmology

In the context of Indian culture, the Mother Earth is referred to as *Go* (Sanskrit; Hindi: "Gai") represented as a "cow". The cow provides milk to the earth, which enables the earth to comprehend and experience the sacred power of offspring in the form of life substance(Singh, n.d.-b). The significance of Nature is deeply ingrained in Indian cultural practices, and it is regarded as an eternal element, *"Nature does not need to be controlled or transformed or decorated; she needs to be accepted in her entirety as a whole... She can be loved and celebrated as she is... But she is alive and must not be diminished or reduced"*. (Vivekananda 2019). It is venerated as the Goddess 'Prakriti' whose existence is fundamental for sustaining life on our planet. Mother Nature is revered and integrated into the fabric of human existence in a wide array of geographical locations and subcultures across India. Indigenous Indian traditions portray the world as a living organism. In the *Upanishads*, the entire universe is described as one interconnected being: *"All this is Brahman... from Brahman all this has come, in Brahman all this rests, and into Brahman all this dissolves."* (Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.1).

This view dissolves the Cartesian divide between humans and nature, suggesting that ecological crisis is ultimately a crisis of relationship rather than merely a physical phenomenon.

Non-Anthropocentric Ethics

Unlike dominant Western paradigms that prioritize human needs, Indian indigenous thought attributes intrinsic value to all beings. The *Mahabharata* states: *"O King! Whatever is found on this earth is for the benefit of all creatures who dwell here."* (Mahabharata, Shanti Parva 167.20). This statement promotes ethical restraint and shared stewardship rather than unrestrained exploitation.

Climate Governance in indigenous times

The 'Manusmriti' suggests that a monarch appoint soldiers *"both stationary and patrolling, and spies"* to protect against theft ancient gardens, forests, and groves. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* lays much emphasis on forest and lives integrally attached to forests. Forests preserve trees and vegetation. It captivates everyone. It is exquisite in every regard. It is the natural habitat for animals, birds, and other organisms that thrive in nature. The treatise mentions three types of forests. The duty of the monarch, according to Kautilya, is to preserve the environment, ecology, and other natural resources. It was accomplished by designating duties to various state officials (Sihag 2007).

Indigenous Ecological Practices in India

Traditional Indian communities have employed sustainable practices that reflect their ecological consciousness.

Sacred Groves (Devrais / Devaranya / Kavu)

The Sacred Groves/Forests are important repositories of floral and faunal diversity that have been successfully preserved by local communities. Studies show that sacred groves maintain higher levels of biodiversity compared to surrounding areas (Malhotra et al., n.d.). It exemplifies community-managed conservation initiatives and has the capacity to trap carbon. Tree planting is seen as *Punya*, a 'karmically' beneficial endeavor, leading to annual tree-planting initiatives or *van mahotsavas*.

Water Harvesting and Johads

Traditional water harvesting structures like *johads* in Rajasthan embody ecological intelligence. As an indigenous rainwater management system, *johads* recharge groundwater, support agriculture, and sustain local biodiversity("Agroforestry for Carbon Sequestration in Tropical India | Springer Nature Link," n.d.). Such practices display an embedded understanding of water cycles long before modern hydrology.

Agroecology and Vedic Agriculture

Traditional Indian agriculture emphasized crop diversity, seasonal cycles, soil fertility, and ecological balance. The *Vrikshayurveda*, an ancient Sanskrit text attributed to Surapala, details sustainable practices like crop rotation, organic manuring, and plant protection("Agroforestry for Carbon Sequestration in Tropical India | Springer Nature Link," n.d.). These practices align with contemporary agroecological principles that resist monoculture and ecological degradation.

Climate Change as Breakdown of Indigenous Worldview

The ecological catastrophe of climate change can be seen as a consequence of civilizational paradigms that sever humans from their ecological embeddedness. The rise of industrial modernity advances an extractive logic: nature as inert resource, progress as limitless growth, and technology as a panacea. These assumptions directly conflict with indigenous Indian wisdom. As Vandana Shiva, an eco-philosopher, articulates: *“The root of ecological crisis lies in the fragmentation of knowledge and the denial of connectedness among living beings.”* (“Recovering the Real Meaning of Sustainability | 22 | Environment In Qu,” n.d.).

This fragmentation is mirrored in modern climate governance, which often privileges technocratic solutions (geoengineering, carbon markets) while neglecting the foundational cultural and ethical dimensions of human–nature relationships.

Key Themes in Indigenous Perspectives on Climate Change

Sustainability as Ethical Duty

Sustainability is not merely a technical goal but a moral obligation. Traditional rites, festivals, and agricultural cycles in India were synchronized with ecological rhythms, fostering a sense of gratitude and reciprocity toward Earth (*Prithvi*) and the elements (*Pancha Bhootas*). Wealth and food distribution were essential to human life. Individuals who ate alone and lived for themselves were not ideals. Thus, “panchamahayajna” reached all families. This ceremony required feeding animals, birds, guests, ancestors, slaves, and deities. Thus, food distribution was fair.

Inter-dependent Lifestyle rather than domination

Our forebears had a fundamentally distinct perspective on existence. They successfully adapted their lifestyle to the surroundings. They commemorated life in profound harmony with other beings - *“saha nou avatu”* safeguarding us all together. *“Saha nou bhunaktu”* signifies our desire to experience life collectively. *“saha viryang karavavahai”* may we possess equivalent strength. *“Tejaswinavadhitamastu ma vidvishavahai”* signifies a desire for mutual non-envy and the avoidance of disputes and conflicts. The following Shloka expresses how to understand Indian environmental ethos:

“dyauḥ śāntirantarīkṣan śāntiḥ prithivī śāntirāpaḥ śāntiḥ roṣadhayaḥ vanaspatayaḥ śāntiḥ viswadevaḥ śāntiḥ brahma śāntiḥ sarva śāntiḥ śāntireva śāntiḥ sā mā śāntireḍhi”

(Sukla yajurveda 36-17)

“Let there be balance in the space!

Let there be balance in the sky!

Let there be peace on the earth!

Let there be calmness Let there be!

Let there be growth in the plants!

Let there be growth in the tree!

Let there be grace in the Gods!

Let there be bliss in the Brahman!

Let there be balance in everything!

Let there be peace and peace !

Let such peace be with everyone of us ! ”

Critiques and Challenges

Although traditional Indian wisdom offers significant ethical and ecological insights, its relevance to modern climate change discussions presents certain limitations and obstacles. A significant criticism is the inclination to romanticize indigenous traditions, wherein pre-modern ecological techniques are glorified without recognizing historical limitations, social inequalities, or contemporary economic vulnerabilities faced by indigenous populations (Baviskar 2003). This idealization may diminish indigenous knowledge to mere symbolic narratives instead of recognizing it as a dynamic and changing system of practice.

A secondary problem resides in the incorporation of indigenous ecological values into contemporary policy frameworks. Modern climate governance predominantly depends on measurable indicators, such as carbon metrics and economic cost-benefit evaluations, which frequently neglect relational ideas like *rta*, *dharma*, and the

sanctity of nature (“Recovering the Real Meaning of Sustainability | 22 | Environment In Qu,” n.d.). This epistemic divide may result in the marginalization or exploitation of indigenous knowledge.

Key Findings for Policy implementation

To address climate change effectively, there needs to be an integration of indigenous ecological epistemologies with scientific methodologies.

➤ Policy Recognition and Legal implementation

Governments should recognize indigenous ecological knowledge in climate policy frameworks. For instance, community-managed forests in India have been shown to outperform state forests in conservation outcomes (Agrawal and Chhatre 2006).

➤ Education for Ecological Consciousness

Educational curricula must incorporate indigenous ecological principles, shifting focus from utilitarian environmental science to a relational ecology. This fosters ecological empathy and responsibility among future generations.

➤ Lifestyle for Environment

At COP 26 at Glasgow in 2021 , an annual international event

for dealing with climate change, Prime Minister of Bharat, Narendra Modi gave the mantra of ‘Panchamrit’ and linked the climate crisis with ‘Lifestyle’ (“Press Release: Press Information Bureau,” n.d.). There has to be conscious effort to realize climate-friendly lifestyle both at the local and global level.

Conclusion

Climate change is a civilizational challenge—a symptom of fragmented worldviews that separate humans from the living world. The contemporary trajectory of development, infused with consumerist cultures, remains fundamentally linked to the challenge of Climate injustice. Prime Minister of Bharat, Narendra Modi, while addressing the U.N. General Assembly in 2015 rightly opined,

“When we speak only of climate change, there is a perception of our desire to secure the comforts of our lifestyle, but when we speak of climate justice, we demonstrate our sensitivity and resolve to secure the future of the poor from the perils of natural disasters” (“Full Text of PM Modi’s Speech at UN,” n.d.).

The wisdom of ‘transcendence’ inherent in India’s philosophy urges a call for understanding ‘Kyosei’ (harmonious co-existence) offering a framework for climate-friendly lifestyle (Singh, n.d.-a). As we face accelerating climate destabilization, embracing such indigenous perspectives not as relics of the past but as living, dynamic epistemologies will be crucial in forging pathways toward ecological resilience, justice, and planetary well-being.

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