



Revisiting the Ecological Vision of Ancient India and the Modern West: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative study of the ecological visions rooted in ancient Indian philosophy and the modern Western worldview, with the aim of critically examining the underlying principles that shape their respective relationships with nature. The ancient Indian worldview, deeply embedded in *Vedic*, *Upanishadic*, and *Jain-Buddhist* traditions, perceives nature (*Prakriti*) as sacred, interconnected, and inherently valuable, promoting a biocentric ethic grounded in *dharma*, *ahimsa* (non-violence), and interdependence. Forests, rivers, animals, and celestial bodies are venerated as living entities, suggesting a spiritual ecology that fosters restraint, reverence, and harmony. In contrast, the modern Western ecological vision, largely shaped by Enlightenment rationalism, Judeo-Christian theology, and the Cartesian dualism of mind and matter, tends to view nature as mechanistic and utilitarian, often leading to anthropocentric dominion over the environment. While scientific advancements have brought progress, they have also contributed to ecological degradation by fostering detachment and control rather than coexistence. By juxtaposing texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Rig Veda*, and Tao alongside modern thinkers like Descartes, Bacon, and Lynn White Jr., the paper explores how these ontologies impact ecological ethics. The study argues that the ecological crisis of the Anthropocene may be better addressed through philosophies that blend ancient spiritual insights with modern ecological science. Hence, the paper calls for a resacralization of nature and a



renewed environmental consciousness grounded in interdependence, humility, and ethical stewardship.

Keywords: Ancient Indian philosophy, modern West, Anthropocene, spiritual ecology, Environmental Ethics.

Introduction

The 21st century has seen an unprecedented ecological crisis, with climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation threatening the survival of life on Earth. This global emergency has prompted philosophers, scientists, and spiritual leaders to revisit humanity's relationship with nature. In this context, ancient philosophies and modern ecological theories offer contrasting yet increasingly converging visions of how humans should coexist with the natural world. Among these, the ancient Indian worldview provides a rich ecological consciousness deeply embedded in spiritual, ethical, and metaphysical traditions. Simultaneously, the modern West, through various intellectual and scientific revolutions, has begun to formulate its own ecological paradigms, notably through the notions of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and the Gaia hypothesis. This paper aims to compare these two traditions, ancient Indian and modern Western ecological visions, exploring their foundational texts, philosophical premises, ethical teachings, and implications for the Anthropocene era. While the Indian tradition sees nature as divine and interconnected with the self and the cosmos, modern Western thought has gradually moved from anthropocentrism toward biocentrism and holistic ecological models. By examining these perspectives side by side, this study seeks to identify shared values, tensions, and pathways toward a renewed ecological ethic grounded in both ancient wisdom and contemporary science.

I. Ecological Vision in Ancient Indian Thought

Ancient Indian philosophy is not merely spiritual or metaphysical in nature; it encompasses a profound ecological consciousness that is intrinsic to its worldview. Nature is not viewed as an external entity to be exploited but as an integral part of the self, suffused with divinity, rhythm, and moral significance. This vision is deeply embedded in sacred texts such as the *Vedas*,

Upanishads, *Bhagavad Gita*, and the teachings of Jainism and Buddhism. Together, these traditions advocate a harmonious and sacred relationship between human beings and the natural world.

A. Vedic Literature: The Sacredness of Nature

The earliest literary expressions of ecological thought in India are found in the *Rig Veda*, dated around 1500 BCE. The *Rig Veda* praises the elements of nature, Agni (fire), Vayu (wind), Surya (sun), and Prithvi (earth), not as inert matter but as living deities that deserve reverence and respect. This hymnal tradition personifies natural phenomena and accords them moral status. For instance, Earth is addressed as a mother in *Atharva Veda* 12.1, which states, “Mata Bhumi Putro Aham Prithivyah” (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12, trans. Griffith, 2008). Such veneration is not merely symbolic. It implies an ecological ethic grounded in the idea of *Rta*, or cosmic order, a self-sustaining rhythm that balances the universe. Disturbing this balance by greed, violence, or neglect is seen not only as immoral but also as a violation of the natural law. The *Yajur Veda* (36.17) offers a prayer that captures this integrative vision: “May there be peace in heaven, peace in the atmosphere, peace on Earth, peace in the waters, peace in the plants, peace in the trees” (*Yajur Veda* 36.17, trans. Griffith, 2008). This worldview inherently discourages environmental exploitation, advocating instead for restraint, reverence, and balance.

B. Upanishads and the Unity of Existence

The *Upanishads*, the philosophical culmination of Vedic thought, delve into the nature of reality and the self. They posit a non-dualistic ontology where all existence is a manifestation of *Brahman*, the ultimate, all-pervading reality. The *Isha Upanishad* opens with the famous verse: “All this—whatever exists in this changing universe—is pervaded by the Lord. Enjoy it with renunciation; do not covet, for whose is wealth?” (*Isha Upanishad* 1, trans. Radhakrishnan, 1994). This suggests a radical ecological view: if the divine pervades everything, then no aspect of nature is devoid of sanctity. The boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, dissolve into an interconnected whole. Such ideas foster a reverential approach toward all forms of life. They establish not merely a utilitarian respect for nature but a deep spiritual and ethical

bond with it.

C. The Bhagavad Gita and Ecological Duty

The *Bhagavad Gita*, though primarily a spiritual and ethical text, contains numerous references that support an ecological ethic grounded in *dharma* (righteous duty) and *lokasangraha* (the welfare of the world). In Chapter 3, Verse 14, the *Gita* outlines a clear ecological cycle: “From food all beings are born; from rain food is produced; from sacrifice arises rain; and sacrifice is born of action” (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.14, trans. Sargeant, 1994). This cyclical vision of causality emphasises the interconnectedness of the natural world and human actions. Sacrifice (*yajña*), in this context, is not limited to ritual acts but encompasses all selfless actions performed in accordance with cosmic balance. Krishna further advises Arjuna that one should perform action not for personal gain but to sustain the cosmic order: “He who does not follow the wheel of creation set in motion lives in sin, delighting in the senses” (*Bhagavad Gita* 3.16, trans. Sargeant, 1994). Thus, the *Gita* places the responsibility of environmental stewardship within the broader ethical framework of human action, reminding readers of their obligation to contribute to the harmony of the universe.

D. Jainism and Buddhism: Non-Violence and Interdependence

Two heterodox traditions of Indian thought, Jainism and Buddhism, also offer rich ecological insights. Jainism is perhaps the most rigorous in its commitment to *ahimsa* (non-violence), extending the principle to plants, water, air, and microscopic life forms. Jain scriptures such as the *Tattvartha Sutra* assert that all beings, sentient or otherwise, possess a *jiva* (soul), and thus merit compassion and protection. Buddhism, while less literal in its metaphysics, emphasises *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), a concept that aligns closely with modern ecological systems theory. According to this view, all phenomena arise in dependence on other phenomena. This ontological interdependence is echoed in the famous verse from the *Dhammapada*: “All beings tremble before violence. All fear death. Comparing others with oneself, one should not kill or cause to kill” (*Dhammapada*, verse 129, trans. Easwaran, 2007). These traditions underscore a compassionate and interdependent worldview, one that regards harming nature as

spiritually and ethically detrimental.

II. Ecological Vision in Modern Western Thought

In contrast to the deeply spiritual and integrated ecological outlook of ancient Indian philosophy, modern Western ecological thought has undergone a gradual transformation. From the mechanistic dualism of the Enlightenment to the holistic and interconnected models of Deep Ecology and Gaia theory, Western approaches to nature have shifted over the centuries. Although they originated from a dominion-over-nature stance, modern Western thinkers increasingly embrace relationality, systems thinking, and environmental ethics. This evolution reflects an ongoing dialogue between science, philosophy, and spiritual ecology.

A. Enlightenment Rationalism and the Mechanistic Worldview

The scientific revolution in Europe, marked by the works of Galileo, Descartes, Newton, and Bacon, ushered in a mechanistic and anthropocentric view of nature. Nature was no longer seen as sacred but as a system of inert matter governed by mechanical laws. René Descartes' dualism separated *res cogitans* (thinking substance) from *res extensa* (extended substance), effectively divorcing humans from the natural world. Francis Bacon famously advocated the domination of nature through empirical science, likening nature to a female body to be bound into service. This framework laid the intellectual foundation for industrial capitalism, colonial exploitation, and ecological degradation. Nature became a resource, not a living system. However, even within the Enlightenment, countercurrents existed. Thinkers like Jean Jacques Rousseau lamented the loss of harmony between humans and nature, prefiguring Romanticism's ecological sensibilities.

B. Romanticism and Transcendentalism: Rediscovering Nature

The Romantic movement in the late 18th and early 19th centuries marked a significant shift in Western perceptions of nature. Poets like William Wordsworth and philosophers like Friedrich Schelling viewed nature as alive, dynamic, and spiritually resonant. Wordsworth's *Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey* (1798) expresses a deep reverence for nature as a moral and restorative force: "Nature never did betray / The heart that loved her" (Wordsworth, 1798). In the

American context, Transcendentalist thinkers like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau reimagined the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) is both a philosophical and ecological text that advocates simple living, self-reliance, and immersion in nature. He writes, "Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads" (Thoreau, 2004). These thinkers prefigured later ecological movements by reintroducing spirituality, beauty, and ethics into nature discourse.

C. Deep Ecology and the Holistic Turn

The 20th century saw a radical departure from anthropocentrism through the development of deep ecology, a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973. Unlike "shallow" environmentalism, which focused on pollution control and resource management, Deep Ecology called for a biocentric perspective that recognised the intrinsic value of all life forms. Naess emphasised the concept of "self-realisation" that expands the individual's identity to include ecosystems, species, and the Earth itself. Naess was deeply influenced by Eastern thought, particularly Gandhian nonviolence and Jain ahimsa. He acknowledged that spiritual traditions of India aligned with the core principles of deep ecology, such as the idea that all beings have the right to live and flourish, irrespective of their utility to humans. Naess argues, "The essence of Deep Ecology is to ask deeper questions about the why and how of our values and actions toward nature" (Devall & Sessions, 1985). Deep Ecology laid the groundwork for further holistic paradigms in environmental ethics, including ecopsychology, bioregionalism, and spiritual ecology.

D. Systems Thinking and the Gaia Hypothesis

The rise of systems theory and ecological science provided empirical foundations for holistic thinking. One of the most influential contributions is the Gaia Hypothesis, formulated by chemist James Lovelock and microbiologist Lynn Margulis in the 1970s. According to this theory, the Earth functions as a self-regulating, living organism that maintains conditions suitable for life. The Gaia Hypothesis resonates with ancient Indian ideas of *Rta* and interdependence, though derived through scientific observation. It has influenced both scientific and spiritual communities

and has led to a resacralization of Earth in Western ecological thought. Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and eco-theologian, expanded on this vision in works like *The Dream of the Earth* (1988), where he called for a new “Ecozoic Era” based on harmony between human and planetary processes. Berry argued that the Earth should be seen not as a collection of objects but as a communion of subjects.

E. Ecofeminism and Environmental Justice

A vital development in modern Western ecological thought is ecofeminism, which critiques the dual domination of women and nature by patriarchal structures. Thinkers such as Carolyn Merchant, Val Plumwood, and Vandana Shiva (bridging both Indian and Western traditions) argue that the exploitation of the Earth is closely tied to gendered and colonial histories. Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature* (1980), traced how the scientific revolution transformed the organic worldview into a mechanistic model, sanctioning ecological destruction. Vandana Shiva, an Indian ecofeminist, criticises Western industrial agriculture and biotechnology as forms of ecological violence rooted in patriarchal science. Ecofeminism not only reasserts the interconnectedness of life but also situates ecological degradation within broader contexts of injustice, power, and inequality.

III. Comparative Analysis of Indian and Western Ecological Visions

A comparative study of the ecological visions of ancient India and the modern West reveals both significant contrasts and intriguing convergences. While they arise from distinct cultural, spiritual, and philosophical foundations, both traditions ultimately endorse a deep sense of interconnectedness and responsibility toward the natural world. This section explores their ontological, ethical, and practical frameworks to assess where they diverge and where they converge in addressing ecological consciousness.

A. Ontology: Sacred Unity vs Evolving Holism

At the heart of ancient Indian ecological thought is a sacred ontology. The *Vedic* and *Upanishadic* traditions assert that the universe is pervaded by *Brahman*, the ultimate reality, and

that all forms of life are manifestations of this divine essence. This sacred unity implies that all beings, animate and inanimate, possess intrinsic value and are interconnected through cosmic law (*Rta*). By contrast, the Western worldview has historically emphasised dualism, a separation of mind and body, subject and object, and man and nature. The mechanistic universe of Descartes and Newton viewed nature as inert and external to the human subject. However, this view has shifted dramatically in the modern era. With systems theory, quantum physics, and ecological science, the West now increasingly embraces holism, recognising the Earth as a dynamic web of interrelated systems. The Gaia Hypothesis, for example, proposes a unified planetary organism, aligning closely with Indian notions of interconnected cosmic order. Thus, while Indian ontology begins with an assumption of unity and sacredness, Western thought evolves toward it through empirical and philosophical inquiry.

B. Ethical Frameworks: Dharma and Ahimsa vs Environmental Ethics

Indian ecological ethics are grounded in dharma (righteous duty), karma (the law of action and consequence), and ahimsa (non-violence). These principles transcend human-centric morality and include duties toward plants, animals, rivers, and even air. The moral universe of Indian philosophy is inclusive and cosmic. For instance, in Jainism, even the smallest organisms are owed moral consideration, leading to strict vegetarianism and practices that avoid unintentional harm. In contrast, modern Western environmental ethics began as anthropocentric, focused on preserving nature for human use, but has since evolved to include biocentrism and ecocentrism. Thinkers like Aldo Leopold, with his “Land Ethic,” and Arne Naess, with Deep Ecology, emphasise the intrinsic value of nature. However, this ethical expansion is relatively recent and often debated in policy and practice. The shift from utilitarian conservation to intrinsic valuation mirrors, albeit more slowly, the ethical stance long inherent in Indian traditions. Moreover, ecofeminism in the West introduces relational ethics, asserting that care, empathy, and interdependence should guide our environmental responsibilities—an ethic that aligns closely with the Indian value of *karuna* (compassion).

C. Perception of Nature: Divinity vs Resource

The divinisation of nature is a hallmark of Indian ecological consciousness. Rivers like the Ganga are not merely water bodies but goddesses, and trees like the *Ashvattha* are sacred. Rituals, festivals, and daily practices reinforce this reverence for the Earth. The sacred is immanent, not separate from the material world. In contrast, Western traditions, particularly post-Christian and post-Enlightenment, tended to secularise nature. Genesis 1:28 has often been interpreted as granting humans “dominion” over nature, which, coupled with Enlightenment rationalism, encouraged resource exploitation. However, the modern West is reimagining nature through a spiritual ecological lens, especially in movements like eco-theology, pagan revivals, and the writings of Thomas Berry and Joanna Macy. This resacralization of nature in the West is a return to something ancient in human experience, something that indigenous cultures and Indian philosophy never abandoned.

D. Human-Nature Relationship: Interbeing vs Stewardship

Ancient Indian traditions endorse a model of interbeing, where humans are not separate from but embedded within nature. The *Bhagavad Gita* and *Isha Upanishad* teach that harming nature disrupts not just ecological balance but spiritual progress. Human identity is defined not in opposition to the world, but as a participatory role within the cosmic whole. Western ecological discourse, by contrast, often frames the human role as stewardship, a concept derived from Christian theology. Stewardship implies management and care, yet still preserves a subtle hierarchy where humans act as overseers. While this is a step away from domination, it is not as integrative as the Indian model, which emphasises equanimity and co-dependence with all beings. Nevertheless, recent Western thought increasingly embraces concepts like “the ecological self” (Naess) and “interbeing” (popularised by Thich Nhat Hanh), signalling a convergence with Indian ideas.

E. From Philosophy to Practice: Ritual vs Reform

In India, ecological awareness is deeply integrated into daily life through rituals, dietary practices, and festivals. Observances like *Van Mahotsav* (forest festival), *Nag Panchami* (worship of snakes), and *Tulsi Puja* (worship of a medicinal plant) reflect ecological reverence at

the grassroots level. These practices may seem symbolic but function as sustained cultural affirmations of environmental ethics. In the West, environmentalism has often taken the form of activism, policy reform, and scientific advocacy. Movements like Earth Day, climate marches, and environmental NGOs reflect this orientation. While effective in mobilising change, they often lack the cultural and spiritual depth that ancient traditions bring to ecological thought. However, hybrid models are emerging: permaculture, nature spirituality, eco-rituals, and contemplative ecology are gaining traction, especially among younger generations seeking both systemic change and personal transformation.

IV. Application in the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene, a proposed epoch where human activity has become the dominant force shaping the planet, demands a radical rethinking of our ecological paradigms. From global warming and deforestation to ocean acidification and species extinction, the crises we face are systemic, existential, and deeply ethical. In this context, the ecological visions of ancient India and the modern West offer complementary insights that can inform a more sustainable and spiritually rooted response to our present predicament.

A. Recognizing the Crisis as Ethical and Spiritual

Contemporary environmental discourse increasingly acknowledges that the ecological crisis is not merely a technological or economic failure, but a moral and spiritual crisis. As Thomas Berry wrote in *The Dream of the Earth*, “The devastation of the planet can be seen as a direct consequence of a spiritual autism” (Kumar, 2002, p. 112). This diagnosis finds resonance in Indian philosophical traditions, which frame environmental degradation as a symptom of adharma (violation of moral duty) and avidya (ignorance of the true self and its unity with the cosmos). Ancient Indian thought emphasises that living out of sync with nature leads to *duḥkha* (suffering), not only for humans but for all beings. In the *Mahabharata*, excessive greed (*lobha*) and disregard for natural limits are repeatedly condemned as signs of *kaliyuga*, a degenerate age marked by environmental and moral decline. Thus, the Anthropocene may be viewed not only as a geological age but as a spiritual inflection point, requiring a shift in consciousness—a

reintegration of the human spirit with the living Earth.

B. Reimagining Development through Dharma and Deep Ecology

Modern models of development, largely shaped by Western industrialisation, prioritise growth, consumption, and efficiency, often at the expense of ecological health and social equity. By contrast, Indian thought provides a dharma-based framework where development is not an end in itself but must serve the common good (*lokasangraha*) and preserve the balance of life. This vision aligns with Deep Ecology's principle of biocentric equality, the idea that all forms of life have equal intrinsic worth. Policies rooted in such perspectives might prioritise small-scale farming, community forestry, renewable energy, and ethical consumption. Vandana Shiva's work on seed sovereignty and biodiversity is a practical example of how Indian ecological values can guide sustainable development. Additionally, the Gandhian ideal of "Gram Swaraj" (village self-rule) anticipates the principles of bioregionalism, a Western ecological strategy that emphasises local autonomy, ecological harmony, and sustainability.

C. Education and Ecological Literacy

One of the key challenges in the Anthropocene is the lack of ecological literacy, an understanding of natural systems and human impact. Here, both Indian and Western traditions can contribute to a holistic curriculum. Indian texts like the *Panchatantra* and *Jataka Tales* offer animal-centric narratives that teach interdependence and moral responsibility toward nature. Similarly, incorporating Western ecological thinkers such as Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and Joanna Macy can provide scientific and philosophical depth to environmental education. Macy's "Work That Reconnects," a methodology for cultivating ecological consciousness, draws on both Buddhist philosophy and systems theory. An ideal educational framework would thus be interdisciplinary, intercultural, and transformative, fostering not just knowledge but a reverence for life.

D. Reviving Ritual, Community, and Spiritual Ecology

In the Anthropocene, individual action is necessary but insufficient. What is required is a cultural

transformation, one that rekindles a sense of belonging to the Earth community. Here, rituals and spiritual practices play a vital role. Ancient Indian customs, such as worshipping rivers, planting trees during festivals, and observing fasting and pilgrimage, are not merely religious acts but ecological rituals that cultivate humility, gratitude, and restraint. These can be reinterpreted and revived as part of a modern ecological ethic. On the Western front, movements such as Creation Spirituality, forest bathing (Shinrin-yoku), and contemplative ecology offer ways to reconnect with the sacredness of nature. Modern eco-monasteries, intentional communities, and spiritual retreats are reclaiming the role of community and contemplation in ecological healing. Such initiatives suggest that the Anthropocene can become an Ecozoic Era, a term used by Thomas Berry to describe a period when human and Earth systems function in mutual harmony.

E. Toward an Intercultural Environmental Ethics

Ultimately, the convergence of ancient Indian ecological thought and modern Western ecological philosophy points toward a pluralistic environmental ethic, one that values cultural diversity, scientific rigour, and spiritual depth. This is not a call to romanticise the past or universalise one model, but to engage in dialogical learning. As philosopher Mary Evelyn Tucker suggests, the future of environmental ethics lies in a cosmopolitan earth consciousness, a new worldview informed by multiple traditions, including Indigenous, Eastern, and Western. By integrating Indian principles of *ahimsa*, *dharma*, and *interbeing* with Western advances in ecology, systems science, and environmental justice, humanity can craft a more resilient and ethical response to the challenges of the Anthropocene.

V. Conclusion

The ecological visions of ancient India and the modern West, though arising from different historical and philosophical contexts, converge on a central realisation: life on Earth is an intricate web of interdependence, and any rupture in this web brings suffering not only to non-human nature but also to humanity itself. While ancient Indian philosophy begins with an assumption of sacred interconnectedness, emphasised through *Brahman*, *dharma*, *ahimsa*, and ritualised reverence, modern Western ecological thought arrives at similar conclusions through

scientific observation, philosophical critique, and ethical evolution. In the Indian tradition, ecology is not a separate branch of thought but an embedded worldview, reflected in every sphere of life, from agriculture and diet to philosophy and spirituality. The West, after centuries of viewing nature as inert and exploitable, is undergoing a paradigm shift, rediscovering holistic models like deep ecology, systems theory, and spiritual ecology.

The Anthropocene demands a synthesis of both traditions. Indian philosophy offers spiritual depth and ethical clarity; Western thought contributes empirical tools, activism, and institutional frameworks. Together, they form a powerful foundation for an intercultural, integrative, and sustainable ecological ethic. In revisiting these traditions, we do not merely engage in academic comparison; we open ourselves to a transformative vision. A vision in which rivers are not resources, but relatives; forests are not commodities, but communities; and humans are not conquerors of nature, but caretakers within a larger cosmic dance.

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