

# Cultural Stewardship: The Role of Temples in India and Shrines in Japan in Promoting Environmental Sustainability

Md Shoaib

Gujarat University, India

## Abstract

In recent years, the convergence of religion and environmental sustainability has garnered increasing attention, with sacred places serving an important role in fostering ecological awareness and conservation. In both India and Japan, two countries with significant spiritual dimensions, temples and shrines have emerged as important actors in environmental stewardship. In India, temples often linked with deities and elements of nature, have been supportive of ecological principles, even from their inception. Many sacred places have existing water conservation techniques, living holds of sacred trees, and sustainable building features that have proven to be dependable, for centuries. In Japan, Shinto is connected to the worship of nature, and shrines have typically emphasized the sanctity of nature and the importance of living respectfully in the nature around them. This paper will examine the ways that temples in India and shrines in Japan have contributed to environmental sustainability. It will explore their historical connections with nature and how these sacred places can contribute to ecological conservation in the 21st century.

**Keywords:** Hinduism, Temple, Shrine, Environment, Sustainability, Shinto

## Introduction

Cultural stewardship, which can have roots in religious practice, is an important facet of a responsible, sustainable world. Temples in India fall into this stewardship role, shrines in Japan have it, too - temples, shrines and all sacred spaces have stewardship of the natural world, especially if these are spaces of worship as well. Followers and visitors alike are encouraged to take on stewardship or role of responsibility for the outdoors they encounter at these sacred sites.

The temples of India have special standing in that these institutions have a long history of preserving natural resources along with vast centuries of ecological knowledge<sup>1</sup>. Many Hindu temples support sacred groves, sites of trees and other living entities recognized as sacred. Sacred groves are protected areas of forest and represent biodiversity. The sacred groves and temples in regard to religion are cared for, and for that reason, remain not only respected by many, but preserved, especially in manned locations. If these areas are of no concern - then we should be aware of the intrinsic value of the forest area as the sacred groves often remind us of species that may be vulnerable. The same thing can be found in the sacred or

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<sup>1</sup> Koka, V. & IJHS. (2023). Temples as institutions of environmental ecology: A pathway to sustainable coexistence. In *International Journal of Home Science* (Vol. 9, Issue 2, pp. 228–229).  
<https://www.homesciencejournal.com/archives/2023/vol9issue2/PartD/9-2-45-117.pdf>

temple tanks and ponds located at and/or near temples, and also within other aquatic ecosystems - sometimes not temple. While temple infrastructure requires water and the temple ponds sometimes hold the world of other organisms, resembling a local reservoir for forest felines, reptiles and amphibians and all in between. The temple tanks and ponds also fulfil the necessity of the local community acknowledging the balance of human and natural systems.

In Japan, Shinto shrines also relate to the balance of human nature with the backdrop of Japanese cosmology coupled with Shinto tradition - the fastening of Shinto to nature enables an inherent reverence of nature, surrounded by trees and forests. Shinto shrines also show distinct and often magnificent natural features, such as mountains, waterfalls where there is a collaborative relationship. The phrase '*chinju no mori*', translating to 'shrine forests', illustrates not only the continued preservation of green spaces within an increasingly urban world, it also illustrates their role as useful ecological corridors - they provide a space for a variety of species to survive and uphold urban biodiversity. The existence of shrine forests displays an ability to maintain sacred places is indicative of ongoing engagement in purposeful stewardship, well before modern conservation frameworks were in place.

Indian temples and Japanese shrines have progressed into next-level platforms for environmental education and sustainability, drawing on ancient wisdom to prompt meaningful responses to modern environmental dilemmas. Many religious organizations, for example, are undertaking tree planting, waste reduction and recycling, and renewable energy initiatives. The impact of these activities is a decreased institutional carbon footprint, and acts as a model for other nearby eco-systems. Religious extensions, temples and shrines are spaces for ecological education and informing devotees, from workshops, seminars, and campaigns, of perceived inconsistencies between their own behaviours. Many religious forums deal with environmental values in messaging of faith and ritual. Faith based messages that support spiritual conscious intent to care for the Earth, influences behaviours of respect for Earth.

To conclude, religious sacred spaces engage in the intersection of building faith and community more frequently than other organizations, meaning they have unique potential to advantage this social capital to respond to the challenges facing the environment using the practices of ecological spirituality. Furthermore, because of their sacred nature, they are positioned to reach people more personally, which is a very real possibility for them to adopt sustainable habits or actions in future. Additionally, the communal aspect of religious rituals creates a natural forum for collective action regarding environmental issues, from community clean-up days to consortia of conservation programs.

The investigation into the multi-layered iconic roles of the temples in India and shrines in Japan as cultural stewards for environmental sustainability, identifies an amalgamated experience of tradition, faith, and ecological sensibility. The analysis of how faith-based institutions combine traditional ecological knowledge and contemporary conservation practices for shaping ecological relationships to nature and inspiring collective action for environmental stewardship is crucial. Further, by connecting traditional views of nature with the current scientific literature on humans and the environment a potential revelation in the role of sacred spaces for sustainable development can exist while honouring identities and nature.

As humanity faces a rising tide of environmental crises, the activity of these faith-based institutions emphasizes the cultural and spiritual aspects of creating sustainable relationships with nature. Their practice reinforces the argument that transformative environmental stewardship not only requires empirical understanding, technical solutions, and materials change, but to transform intrinsic beliefs about Earth, self, and relationship. When temples and shrines return who and what people are as sacred – rather

than solely human; these faith-based institutions can engender a more holistic, culturally relevant form of Environmentalism with the potential to influence lasting behavior change in relation to the Natural World.

### **Hindu and Shinto Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship**

The Hindu and Shinto traditions provide distinctive and deep views on the role environmental care plays, based on the specific cultural and faith alignments of these ancient traditions. They provide unique pathways of examining, and practices for sustainability and caring for the environment.

Hindu faith scripture affirms environmental focus by personifying nature and natural elements, or more accurately, considering natural elements divine or as Gods. Rivers, mountains and forests, are not mere resources to exploit, but personalities with divinity worth equally spiritual and sacred effort to maintain, preserve and protect<sup>2</sup>. There is a discussion a Hindu could have with their own emotive and spiritual connection to nature, and thus with environmental conservation and protection, as an act of devotion and an extension of their spiritual practice.

Shinto, Japan's original religion of the indigenous people, offers environmental ethics similarly. In essence, Shinto holds that nature is sacred, *kami* (spirits or deities) dwell within nature, including things like trees, mountains, rivers, and even rocks<sup>3</sup>. It is an animistic belief system that creates deep respect and reverence for nature, which leads followers to keep themselves in harmony with nature. Shinto shrines often reside in a beautiful part of the natural environment to remind people of the sacredness of the place and that these places should be preserved.

Both Hinduism and Shinto traditions endorse what we call sustainability or mindful consumption based on the idea that nature has an inherent value other than just its utility. These traditions endorse living with nature, which entails taking only what one needs and giving back to nature through both conservation and respect.

Both traditions reveal useful insights and perspectives on today's environmental ethics and conservation practices. The world is now faced with climate change, biodiversity loss, and depletion of resources as a part of global society, allowing this ancient wisdom from our human past to offer possible frameworks to our current reconstructive relationships with nature. Both Hinduism and Shinto became pathways to opening our attribution of human quality to the sacred and indicate our ethical consideration in our relations and stewardship role with nature rather than just the scientific or economic value.

The perspectives offered by Hinduism and Shinto can be transferred to today's environmental discussions and inspire a more holistic and culturally rich engagement with ecological concerns. Both traditions highlight interconnectedness, respect for nature, and thinking for a longer than short-term time and can be the catalyst for new innovation and possible pathways to a sustainable reality with our environment.

### **Temples in India as custodians of ecology**

Temples in India have long served as custodians of ecology, playing a vital role in preserving biodiversity and promoting environmental conservation. These ancient structures, steeped in cultural and spiritual significance, have inadvertently become crucial centres for ecological preservation<sup>4</sup>. Their role extends

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<sup>2</sup> Green Temples Guide, p-43

<sup>3</sup> *Shinto, Nature and ideology in contemporary Japan: Making sacred forests*. (2017c).  
<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474289962>

<sup>4</sup> *How do Indian temples promote environmental conservation?* (2023, June 26). Retrieved August 2, 2025, from  
<https://ogod.in/2023/06/26/how-do-indian-temples-promote-environmental-conservation/>

far beyond religious practices, encompassing a holistic approach to environmental stewardship that has endured for centuries.

Many ancient temples are surrounded by sacred groves, which are protected areas of forest that harbour a rich variety of flora and fauna. These groves, considered divine and inviolable, have safeguarded numerous plant and animal species over centuries. The religious reverence associated with these areas has ensured their protection from human encroachment and exploitation. As a result, these sacred groves often serve as biodiversity hotspots, preserving endemic and rare species that might have otherwise faced extinction.

The ecological importance of temple complexes extends to water conservation as well. Temple tanks and ponds contribute significantly to water conservation efforts, serving as crucial reservoirs during dry seasons and helping to maintain groundwater levels. These water bodies, often built with intricate engineering techniques, act as natural rainwater harvesting systems. They not only provide water for temple rituals but also support local ecosystems and communities, especially during periods of water scarcity.

The practice of offering flowers, fruits, and other organic materials in temples also promotes the cultivation of local plant species. This tradition has indirectly contributed to the preservation of indigenous plant varieties, many of which have medicinal or cultural significance. The demand for these offerings has encouraged local communities to maintain gardens and orchards, thereby supporting local biodiversity and traditional agricultural practices.

Furthermore, many temples incorporate eco-friendly practices in their daily rituals, such as using natural materials for decorations and avoiding plastic. These practices set an example for devotees and visitors, promoting environmental consciousness and sustainable living. Some temples have taken this a step further by implementing waste management systems, using renewable energy sources, and organizing awareness programs on environmental conservation.

The architectural design of many Indian temples also reflects a deep understanding of ecological principles. The use of natural building materials, the incorporation of ventilation systems that reduce the need for artificial cooling, and the integration of the built structure with the surrounding landscape all demonstrate an inherent respect for the environment.

In recent years, some temples have actively engaged in reforestation efforts, creating green belts around their premises. These initiatives not only enhance the aesthetic appeal of the temple surroundings but also contribute to carbon sequestration and provide habitats for local wildlife.

The role of temples in ecological conservation extends to the realm of traditional knowledge as well. Many temples serve as repositories of ancient wisdom related to herbal medicine, sustainable agriculture, and harmonious coexistence with nature. This knowledge, passed down through generations, often finds practical application in the management of temple lands and resources.

By intertwining religious beliefs with ecological preservation, Indian temples continue to be significant bastions of environmental stewardship in modern times. They serve as living examples of how cultural institutions can play a crucial role in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. As India grapples with issues of rapid urbanization and environmental degradation, the ecological model presented by these temples offers valuable lessons in sustainable development and conservation.

In conclusion, the ecological role of Indian temples is multifaceted and profound. From preserving biodiversity in sacred groves to promoting water conservation through temple tanks, from encouraging the use of organic materials to serving as centers of traditional ecological knowledge, these ancient

institutions continue to be relevant in the modern context of environmental conservation. Their enduring legacy of environmental stewardship provides a unique blend of spiritual and ecological values that can inspire and inform contemporary conservation efforts.

### **Shrines in Japan and cultural stewardship**

Shrines in Japan play a significant and multifaceted role as custodians of ecology, preserving natural landscapes and fostering a deep, enduring connection between humans and the environment. These sacred spaces often encompass vast forests, ancient groves, and pristine water bodies, serving as sanctuaries for a diverse array of flora and fauna<sup>5</sup>. The concept of chinju no mori, or sacred shrine forests, exemplifies this ecological stewardship, as these areas are meticulously protected from development and urbanization, maintaining rich biodiversity and ecological balance.

Shinto beliefs, which form the foundation of many Japanese spiritual practices, emphasize the inherent sacredness of nature. This philosophical underpinning further reinforces the ecological importance of shrines, instilling a sense of reverence and responsibility towards the natural world among worshippers and visitors alike. Many shrine grounds house ancient trees, some of which have stood for centuries or even millennia, providing crucial habitats for various species of birds, insects, and small mammals. These venerable trees also contribute significantly to carbon sequestration, playing a vital role in mitigating climate change at a local level.

The ecological impact of Japanese shrines extends beyond their physical boundaries. The rituals and practices associated with these sacred sites often promote environmental awareness and respect for nature among visitors and local communities. Seasonal festivals and ceremonies celebrate the changing of seasons, the harvest, and other natural phenomena, reinforcing the interconnectedness of human life with the natural world. This cultural emphasis on nature appreciation has helped preserve traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable practices in many communities.

Furthermore, shrines often serve as green oases in urban environments, providing much-needed natural spaces for city dwellers. These areas offer opportunities for recreation, relaxation, and connection with nature, contributing to the physical and mental well-being of local populations. The presence of shrines and their associated natural areas also helps to regulate urban microclimates, reducing the heat island effect and improving air quality in densely populated areas. Many shrines actively engage in conservation efforts, partnering with environmental organizations and local governments to protect endangered species, restore degraded habitats, and educate the public about ecological issues. Some shrines have implemented sustainable management practices for their forests and grounds, showcasing how traditional spiritual values can align with modern conservation goals.

The economic value of shrine ecosystems is also increasingly recognized. These areas provide essential ecosystem services such as water purification, soil stabilization, and pollination support for nearby agricultural lands. Additionally, the natural beauty of shrine grounds attracts tourists, contributing to local economies while promoting eco-tourism and sustainable travel practices.

As Japan faces environmental challenges such as deforestation, habitat loss, and climate change, the role of shrines as ecological guardians becomes ever more crucial. These sacred spaces serve as living examples of long-term environmental stewardship, offering valuable lessons for sustainable coexistence

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<sup>5</sup> *Shintō's sacred forests and Japanese environmentalism*. (2023, July 1). nippon.com. Retrieved August 2, 2025, from <https://www.nippon.com/en/views/b05214/>



between human society and the natural world. Through their preservation of natural spaces, promotion of ecological values, and embodiment of traditional environmental wisdom, Japanese shrines continue to serve as vital guardians of the environment in an increasingly urbanized and technologically driven world. Their enduring presence reminds us of the profound connections between spirituality, culture, and ecology, offering a model for environmental conservation that integrates respect for nature with human needs and aspirations.

### **Comparative analysis of temples in India and shrines in Japan**

A comparative analysis of temples in India and shrines in Japan reveals intriguing parallels in their roles in environmental preservation, showcasing how religious structures can serve as powerful catalysts for ecological conservation. Both Indian temples and Japanese shrines often function as guardians of natural spaces, with sacred groves surrounding Indian temples and forested areas enveloping Japanese shrines. These protected zones act as biodiversity hotspots, preserving local flora and fauna and creating microcosms of ecological balance within often urbanized or agricultural landscapes.

In India, many temples maintain water bodies like temple tanks, which serve multiple purposes. These tanks contribute significantly to groundwater recharge, helping to maintain the water table in arid regions. They also provide crucial habitats for various aquatic species, from fish to amphibians, and serve as stopover points for migratory birds. The presence of these water bodies often creates a cooler microclimate around the temple, benefiting both the local ecosystem and human visitors.

Similarly, Japanese shrines frequently feature purification fountains and natural springs, emphasizing water conservation and the spiritual significance of clean, flowing water. These water features not only serve ritual purposes but also contribute to local hydrological cycles and provide habitats for water-dependent organisms. The careful maintenance of these water sources reflects a deep-rooted cultural understanding of water's importance in both spiritual and ecological contexts.

Both cultures imbue trees with spiritual significance, leading to the protection of ancient specimens and encouraging reforestation efforts. In India, certain tree species like the Banyan, Peepal, and Neem are considered sacred and are often found in temple complexes. These trees, some of which are centuries old, serve as keystone species in their ecosystems, providing food and shelter for a wide range of animals and insects. In Japan, the presence of massive, ancient trees near shrines is common, with these trees often wrapped in sacred ropes (shimenawa) to denote their spiritual importance. This reverence for trees extends beyond individual specimens to entire forested areas, contributing to the preservation of woodland ecosystems.

The architectural designs of both Indian temples and Japanese shrines often incorporate natural materials and sustainable building practices, reflecting a harmonious relationship with the environment. In India, temples are frequently constructed using locally sourced stone, which not only reduces transportation-related environmental impacts but also creates structures that blend seamlessly with their surroundings. The use of natural cooling techniques, such as strategic placement of water bodies and the creation of shaded areas, demonstrates an intuitive understanding of environmental design principles.

Japanese shrine architecture similarly emphasizes the use of natural materials, particularly wood, which is often left unpainted to age naturally. This practice not only creates visually striking structures but also allows for easier repairs and replacements, reducing long-term resource consumption. The placement of shrines within natural settings, often requiring minimal alteration of the landscape, further underscores the Japanese approach to integrating human structures with nature.

Both Indian temples and Japanese shrines often serve as centers for environmental education and awareness. Many temple and shrine authorities organize tree-planting drives, cleanliness campaigns, and awareness programs about local biodiversity. These initiatives help to instill a sense of environmental responsibility in devotees and visitors, extending the impact of these sacred spaces beyond their physical boundaries.

The economic aspects of temple and shrine tourism also play a role in environmental conservation. The desire to maintain these sites as attractive destinations often leads to better preservation of surrounding natural areas. This creates a positive feedback loop where environmental conservation enhances the spiritual and aesthetic appeal of the sites, which in turn drives further conservation efforts.

While the specific religious practices and beliefs differ significantly between Indian and Japanese traditions, the underlying ethos of respecting and preserving nature emerges as a common thread. This shared value demonstrates how diverse cultural and religious traditions can converge on the critical importance of environmental stewardship. As the world grapples with pressing environmental challenges, the role of religious institutions in fostering ecological consciousness and driving conservation efforts becomes increasingly relevant.

In conclusion, the parallels between Indian temples and Japanese shrines in their approach to environmental preservation offer valuable insights into the potential of religious and cultural institutions to contribute to ecological conservation. By blending spiritual practices with environmental stewardship, these sacred spaces serve as models for sustainable interaction between human society and the natural world, providing lessons that extend far beyond their cultural contexts.

#### **Few examples of temples in India promoting environmental sustainability**

**Table 1**

<b>Temple in India</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Environmental Sustainability measures</b>
Sri Puram Golden Temple	Tamil Nadu	Rainwater harvesting, biogas generation, harnessing solar energy
Swaminarayan Akshardham Temple	New Delhi	Water recycling, solar and wind energy
ISKON, Govardhan Eco Village	Maharashtra	Organic farming, water conservation, solar power
Vaishnodevi Temple	Jammu Kashmir	Solid waste management, green transport
Ambaji Temple	Gujarat	Tree plantation, use of solar energy,
Golden Temple	Punjab	Use of solar energy, No plastic waste

## Few examples of shrines in Japan promoting environmental sustainability

Table 2

Shrines in Japan	Location	Environmental Sustainability measures
Ise Grand Shrine	Mie Prefecture	Forest management, recycling, organic farming
Tadasu no Mori at Shimogamo Shrine	Kyoto	Biodiversity Conservation, Water resource protection
Meiji Jingu Shrine	Tokyo	Long term forest management, Promotion of native species, creation of self-sustaining urban forest
Kumano Nachi Taisha	Wakayama Prefecture	Preservation of sacred forests, Disaster-resilient Restoration, Conservation of ecosystem

## Conclusion

In conclusion, temples in India and shrines in Japan play a crucial role in promoting environmental sustainability through cultural stewardship. These sacred spaces serve as repositories of traditional ecological knowledge and act as catalysts for environmental conservation efforts. By integrating religious beliefs with ecological practices, they inspire devotees to adopt sustainable lifestyles and foster a deep connection with nature. The green initiatives implemented by these religious institutions, such as waste management, energy conservation, and reforestation programs, demonstrate their commitment to environmental protection. Furthermore, their influence extends beyond their physical boundaries, shaping community attitudes and behaviours towards sustainability. As society grapples with pressing environmental challenges, the continued involvement of temples and shrines in promoting eco-friendly practices offers a promising avenue for fostering a more sustainable future, rooted in cultural values and spiritual traditions.

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