

Integrating Ancient Indian Wisdom with Global Climate Governance

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माता भूमिः पुत्रोऽहं पृथिव्याः, पर्जन्यः पिता स उ नः पिपर्तु

"The Earth is my mother, and I am a child of the Earth. The rain cloud (Parjanya) is my father; may he nourish and protect us." (Atharva Veda 12.1.12)

Abstract

Global warming is the biggest threat humanity is facing today. It refers to the long-term shift that takes place in temperature and extreme weather conditions, such as global warming, deforestation, heatwaves, floods, droughts, etc. To combat environmental problems, India emerges as a norm entrepreneur and has great ancient knowledge that offers a holistic environmental ethic in moral and practical dimensions, and India continuously uses it at the national or international level, for example, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, LiFE initiative, coalition for disaster-resilient Infrastructure, international solar alliance, Panchamrit program, etc. As a strategic autonomous entity, India's growing leadership on the global stage, mainly in COP meetings, among the Global South, is evident through initiatives.

Introduction

As humanity confronts unprecedented environmental challenges in the 21st century, including climate change, biodiversity loss, widespread pollution, and resource depletion. Human beings are both generators and victims of environmental issues, and their actions are interconnected, producing immediate environmental problems such as deforestation, floods, cyclones, droughts, cloudbursts, extreme heat waves, and, especially, climate change and global warming. To combat these problems, solutions are being sought (Ranjan, 2010). In this respect, religious traditions have emerged as an important source of ethical guidance and motivation for sustaining life.

Environmental ethics can be gleaned from ancient Indian texts, including the Upanishads, the Vedas, the Puranas, the Samhita, Kautilya's Arthashastra, and the Manusmriti. These texts all inspire the Hindu declaration on climate change and emphasize reverence for nature, portraying the earth as a mother (In Bhumi Sukta) and promoting various environmental norms such as Ahimsa (non-violence), Dharma (responsibility or accountability towards nature), Panchamahabhuta, Yajna cycle, Aparigraha, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, and Rta (cosmic order and interconnectedness). These praise Earth's sustainability, warn against exploitation, valuing nature, as it sustains life, and that its destruction would inevitably endanger life on Earth (Sonia, 2019).

As various studies demonstrate, ancient Indian environmental thought is not only philosophically rich but also relevant to contemporary sustainability debates and provides foundational principles that are being re-read for statecraft, diplomacy, and sustainability. These continue to influence modern policies and international relations (Das et al., 2025; Singer and Winter, 2023). In this respect India already launched

various programs on international level especially in COP meetings which connected ancient values with modernity such as LiFE (lifestyle for environment) initiative in COP 26 for promoting minimum consumption and advocates behavioral change for sustainable use of nature (NITI Aayog, 2021), promote veganism by Jains or Buddhist diaspora or plant based diets as dharma or karma values, Vasudhaiva kutumbakam (One Earth-One Family-One Future) theme for G-20 presidency derived from Maha Upanishad (kumar, 2024), The International Solar Alliance initiative by India for showing the sun's importance, Suryanamaskara, aparigraha for sustainable and need-based consumption, Dharma or Karma as responsibility towards nature used in global climate financing in a form of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR). Rta emphasizes ecological balance and harmony with nature. These values connect India's ancient environmental knowledge with modern climate mitigation principles.

Keywords – Ancient wisdom, global climate governance, sustainability, diplomacy, CBDR-RC

Methodology

Research design: The research is exploratory, empirical, and analytical in nature. It combines textual analysis with policy analysis to understand the philosophical foundations of India's environmental diplomacy and their relevance to global climate governance.

Data collection sources: This research uses both primary and secondary data.

A. Primary data: This will consist of official interviews, government policy documents and reports, UN and UNFCCC reports, and Speeches by Indian leaders in COP meetings.

B. Secondary data: This data would come from various areas such as -

- Vedic texts, Arthashastra, Manusmriti, Bhagvat Gita (used only environmental aspects and not for religious perspectives.)
- Peer-reviewed journal articles
- Books on environmental ethics, climate diplomacy, and International Relations

India's instance of integrating ancient knowledge with Global climate negotiations

Chattopadhyay (2025) explained that Western doctrine is man-centric. Greek Sophist Protagoras thought that Man is the measure of all things, but ancient Indian texts advocate for non-interference, deep ecology, and harmonious coexistence. They teach that human beings are not above nature but part of it. This study revealed that India has been instrumental in shaping the climate regime from the very beginning. It has played a key role in developing the normative framework of the climate regime, its principles, rules, and norms. The study demonstrates that Sanskrit environmental thought is not only philosophically rich but also relevant to contemporary sustainability debates.

In November 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced India's 'Panchamrit' commitments at COP26, including achieving net-zero emissions by 2070, which consist of the use of non-fossil fuels, renewable energy sources, and promoting net-zero emissions. Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam (one Earth, one family, one future) is also inspired by ancient Sanskrit scripture, the Maha Upanishad, which emphasizes the importance of all life on Earth and in the universe, as well as the interconnectedness of all living beings, first deployed to address climate change and global warming at the Heiligendamm G8 Summit on June 7, 2007. (Sidhu, 2017) Later formally adopted as the overarching national G20 Presidency theme (now a global theme), bridging sustainability, climate action or cooperation, inclusive development, and shared prosperity, like CBDR-RC. This provides a valuable philosophical foundation for the argument that

climate change requires a cooperative, collaborative, and globally inclusive approach rooted in shared responsibility rather than narrow national interests.

Sharma and Sharma (2025) explained that ancient Indian philosophy, when combined with modern science, can guide us toward a more balanced, respectful, and sustainable relationship with our environment. In this way, the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Lifestyle for the Environment (LiFE) initiative at the UNFCCC COP26 in 2021. It draws heavily from ancient Indian values of moderation and harmony with nature (Rta) and Jain philosophy of minimal consumption (Aparigraha). It promotes sustainable or low-carbon lifestyles rather than only technological solutions. (Government of India, 2015). It also promotes sustainable production processes and sustainable lifestyles across the globe. Habits and attitudes are as much a part of the solution as Technology and Finance.

Interestingly, ancient cultures revered the sun as a life-giving deity (Suryadev). To show respect for the sun, India, along with France, took the initiative to launch the International Solar Alliance at COP 21 in 2015. It reflects a long-standing cultural appreciation for solar energy while pursuing contemporary clean-energy goals. This initiative aligns well with India's foreign policy goals, and it presents an opportunity to strengthen India's engagement with the African Union, the nations of the Indian Ocean Rim Association and the countries lying wholly or partially between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. (Tripathy and Barik, 2024) This leadership role strengthens India's global standing and fosters deeper South-South cooperation, paving the way for a more sustainable and prosperous future for all. Like the ISA Coalition for Disaster-Resilient Infrastructure program is also demonstrating its commitment to tackling climate change and renewable energy diplomacy. India launched the program at the UN Climate Action Summit in New York in 2019 to build disaster-resilient infrastructure, reduce disaster and climate risk, minimize damages and economic losses, and support sustainable development, especially in the global South. (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2019)

India promotes eco-friendly building construction, using Vastu Shastra (a part of the Atharva Veda's Sthapatya Veda) and sustainable materials to create sustainable cities, resilient infrastructure, water management, natural farming, and ancient agricultural systems, with the help of modern data analytics. Although CDRI is presented as modern science and technical infrastructure, its emphasis is on cooperation, environmental stewardship, and harmony with nature (The concept of Rta, Yajna cycle), Lokasamgraha (providing global public goods), and Dharma to protect present and future generations, which reflects principles of Indian civilizational values in contemporary climate diplomacy. (Tripathy and Barik, 2024)

India's growing leadership on the global stage mainly in COP meetings is evident through initiatives like the International Solar Alliance (ISA) and the Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure [CDRI], climate justice as a form of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities [CBDR-RC] in Kyoto protocol 1997 and Paris Agreement 2015, Climate financing, technology transfer, and joint implementation from developed countries to developing countries. India also contributed to forming the Green Climate Fund in COP 16 and the "Loss and Damage Fund" in COP 27.

Bhattacharjee (2025), in his study, demonstrates that Environmental conservation in the modern era calls for a collaborative effort that bridges the gap between traditional knowledge systems and contemporary scientific approaches. The integration of Indigenous and local knowledge, rooted in centuries of environmental interaction and stewardship, with global scientific research, can lead to more holistic and sustainable solutions for pressing ecological challenges.

Limitations of the study

Just like other traditional values such as Ayurveda and yoga, environmental ethics or sustainable values also exist in these texts. However, some limitations are applying these to contemporary situations including: interpretation of ancient texts (philosophical, religious, and symbolic uses) can differ among authors; Lack of empirical evidence due to the nature of the books, historical-contemporary developmental context, and limited coverage of ancient texts or their interpretations from Sanskrit to many more languages, etc.

Conclusion

From this analysis, it becomes clear that ancient wisdom provides a unique normative perspective to examine the relationship between human beings and nature. Instead of considering nature only as a source of resources that need to be exploited by human beings, it stresses interconnectedness, balance, harmony, responsibility, and respect towards nature. Principles such as Rita, Dharma, Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, and interconnectedness are applicable in current discussions on environmental sustainability and climate governance. The paper also illustrates that the use of these principles can help to understand India's environmental diplomacy policy.

India's commitment to climate justice, sustainable development, international cooperation, renewable energy, disaster resilience, and the interests of the Global South can be seen as part of civilizational ideas about collective responsibility and harmony with nature. Therefore, in the context of International Relations, inclusion of the ancient perspective expands the scope of the discussion about environmental diplomacy beyond conventional state interests and capabilities.

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