

# INDIC SUSTAINABILITY ETHICS: INSIGHTS FROM THE INDIAN PHILOSOPHICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

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## Abstract

Sustainability has long been an essential concept in various global philosophies, emphasizing the need for harmonious coexistence with nature and equitable resource distribution. In the Indian context, this idea is deeply embedded in ancient texts, cultural practices, and political thought, where sustainable living was considered not only an ecological responsibility but also a moral and ethical one. This paper explores the long-standing concept of sustainability in India, rooted in its ancient philosophical, cultural, and political frameworks. Indian philosophy, particularly through the concepts of Dharma, Ahimsa, and ecological balance found in the Vedic and Upanishadic traditions, has long advocated for a harmonious relationship with nature and equitable resource distribution. The Bhakti movement further emphasized social equality and environmental reverence, while leaders such as Shivaji Maharaj and Shahu Maharaj institutionalized these values through policies promoting sustainable agriculture, resource management, and social welfare. By tracing this evolution, the paper argues that sustainability has always been integral to Indian thought, offering valuable insights for addressing contemporary global challenges.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, Indian Philosophy, Bhakti Movement, Cultural Traditions, Political Economy.

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## Introduction

The sustainability discourse is quite often overshadowed by environmentalism or corporate sustainability reducing its scope to a modern reactive phenomenon addressing the contemporary ecological crises. Historians have traced environmentalism to the industrialization of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when rapid industrial growth led to widespread environmental degradation and public health concerns (Guha, 2000). This historical context positions environmentalism as a movement that emerged in response to the immediate need to mitigate ecological damage caused by industrial activities. While environmentalism has significantly contributed to raising awareness about climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, its focus remains largely limited to these ecological dimensions. Similarly, corporate sustainability has come to dominate the sustainability discourse, further narrowing its more holistic dimensions. Corporate sustainability initiatives, framed around frameworks such as ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility), primarily align with the economic priorities of businesses. The concept of 'shared value' (Porter & Kramer, 2011), or the 'triple bottom-line' (Elkington, 1998) approach, exemplify this trend by emphasizing the alignment of sustainability goals with business growth.

The narrowing of sustainability discourse into environmentalism or corporate frameworks like responsible investments and sustainable finance poses a significant risk of limiting its transformative potential as a universal human value. While these approaches address critical aspects of ecological preservation and economic integration, they often emphasize immediate, measurable outcomes over systemic change. This focus can also overshadow the broader ethical principles at the core of sustainability, such as equity, justice, and collective well-being, reducing its potential to inspire societal transformation. Therefore, there is a need to revisit sustainability as a universal human value deeply rooted in ethical, cultural, and philosophical traditions. By reconnecting with these foundational values, sustainability can inspire transformative change, addressing contemporary global challenges while fostering harmony between humanity and the natural world.

The sustainability ethic can be found rooted in ancient practices and philosophical traditions around the world. In the context of Indian philosophical systems, there are several concepts and ideas that articulate sustainability in terms of the harmonious coexistence

of humans, animals, and nature. For instance, the notion of *advaita* or non-duality undercuts the individualistic egoism in the way of perceiving the reality. Similarly, the *Karma* theory also rejects dualism and promotes continuity between all beings. These philosophical worldviews are conducive to a responsible ecological ethic based on interdependence and moral responsibility for one's own actions (Horn, 2006). Thus, the first section of this paper explores foundational concepts in Indian philosophy that promote a deep sense of interconnectedness bearing a possibility to provide a robust ethical framework for sustainability.

The second section focuses on cultural movements which reinforced the sustainability ethic in the public spheres of different times, translating ancient philosophical principles into collective practices. These movements bridged the gap between textual wisdom and societal behaviour, promoting values like interconnectedness, equity, and ecological harmony. For instance, the Bhakti tradition highlights relational values, viewing all beings as extensions of God's creation. It advocates devotional care and love (*Prema*-culture) as remedies for humanity's egocentric exploitation, emphasizing harmonious relationships with nature and God and among the humans themselves. This approach offers a profound ethical framework for sustainability rooted in spiritual and environmental interconnectedness (Wolfenden, 2023). Thus, this section demonstrates how cultural movements like the Bhakti tradition and Gandhian *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all) among others translated India's sustainability ethic into practice.

Building on the philosophical and cultural foundations, the third section explores how sustainability ethics found expression in political and social movements, shaping governance and societal reforms. Leaders like Shivaji Maharaj institutionalized sustainable practices through equitable policies, resource management, and governance rooted in *Dharma*. Later, movements like the Satyashodhak Samaj and the progressive policies of Shahu Maharaj carried forward these ethical ideals. Jyotirao Phule's agro-ecological vision integrated social justice and environmental sustainability, highlighting the inequities in resource access driven by caste hierarchies and colonial policies (Kumar, 2022). Similarly, the Chipko movement exemplified grassroots environmental activism by advocating for sustainable resource use and community participation, reinforcing India's deeply rooted sustainability ethos. These movements exemplify how India's ancient sustainability ethics and principles evolved into actionable frameworks addressing societal challenges.

## Indic Foundations for Framework of Sustainability Ethics

The theme of India's G20 Presidency, *One Earth, One Family, One Future* (Georgieva, 2023), reflected the ethical vision rooted in ancient Indian philosophy, emphasizing interconnectedness, harmony, and collective responsibility, core principles that form the foundation of sustainability ethics. The concept of sustainability is in fact deeply rooted in many ancient traditions, but in the Indian context, it is seen not just as an ecological responsibility but as an ethical and spiritual imperative. The concept of *vasudhaivakutumbakam* (the world as one family), from which is inspired the above slogan, transcends divisions of race, creed, or identity, advocating unity and shared responsibility. Similarly, the principle *ekam sat vipra bahudhavadanti* (truth is one, though expressed in many ways) (Singh, 2013) promotes harmony across spiritual and cultural diversities. Additionally, the ethos of *bahujana hitaya bahujana sukhaya* (for the welfare and happiness of all) (Singh, 2013) underscores compassion not just for humanity but for all living beings and nature itself. Together, these principles reflect a profound philosophy of sustainability where human society and the natural world coexist in mutual respect and balance, promoting enduring solutions to global challenges.

The Prthivi Sukam in the Atharva Veda is dedicated to mother earth, emphasizing humanity's responsibility to protect the environment. It portrays the earth as an extended family, with all beings, human and non-human, treated equally. It advocates for ecological harmony, highlighting the interdependence of all life forms and stressing the need for peace and cooperation. Similarly, the concept of *sarva-bhuta-hita* (the welfare of all beings), is deeply rooted in the idea that *Brahman*, the Supreme Being, is the source of the common good for all creation, human and non-human alike. This ethic underscores the importance of prioritizing the collective welfare over personal gain, which is central to *dharma*. As such, the Hindu tradition encourages actions that promote universal well-being, including environmental protection and care for the vulnerable. This concept is intrinsically connected to *dharmic* ecology, where individuals are called to act in harmony with nature and serve the greater good, emphasizing mutual cooperation and respect (Dwivedi, 2000).

In Hindu philosophy, *dharma* is understood as the righteous path, and *karma*, or the law of cause and effect, reinforces the importance of *dharmic* or righteous actions. According to interpretations of the *Mahabharata* (Dwivedi, 2000), *dharma* implies the general welfare of

all living creatures, promoting peace, justice, and ethical behaviour. It is not limited to human relationships but extends to all of God's creation, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and responsibility. By following *dharma*, individuals can transcend personal desires and contribute to a sustainable, harmonious world. Further, *Karma* entails that every action has a corresponding consequence and a person's actions continue to influence their descendants, environmental harm we inflict today is a prime example of how our actions have far-reaching repercussions. Thus, the connection between *karma* and ecology fosters the understanding that our actions have lasting consequences.

The *purusharthas*, the goals of human life, namely *dharma* (righteousness or right conduct), *artha* (wealth or economic interest), *kama* (satisfaction of sexual, emotional and artistic life), and *moksha* (liberation of the spirit) - integrate all the concepts discussed above. These ideals balance material pursuits with cosmic order through *dharma*. Transcending caste, class, and gender divides, this inclusive ethos harmonizes worldly and spiritual objectives for universal welfare (Jain, 2016). In *History of Dharmasastra*, (Kane, 1997) provides a holistic view of the *Purusharthas*, bridging ancient ideals with contemporary values and positioning them not merely as philosophical constructs but as dynamic, practical guidelines for individual and collective progress.

P.V. Kane regards *dharma* as the foundational principle guiding individual and collective actions, ensuring social harmony and universal welfare. *Dharma* encompasses duties, ethics, and moral obligations, maintaining equilibrium between personal aspirations and societal needs (Kane, 1997). Kane's expositions of *dharma* could be connected to sustainability as it emphasizes responsible actions that uphold ecological balance and intergenerational equity. By advocating respect for nature, fair practices, and compassion, *dharma* aligns with sustainable development goals. Actions rooted in *dharma* avoid over-exploitation of resources and foster harmony with the environment. Kane's interpretation positions *dharma* as a framework that could be seen as suitable for sustainable living, promoting a balanced coexistence of humanity, society, and nature.

*Artha* signifies the pursuit of material prosperity and economic stability, essential for personal and societal well-being. Kane emphasizes that *artha*, regulated by *Dharma*, must be acquired ethically and distributed equitably to prevent greed and exploitation (Kane, 1997). His interpretations of *artha* could be connected to economic sustainability, advocating for responsible management of resources to ensure their availability for future generations.

Ethical governance, fair trade, and social justice are central to this vision. Further, the interpretation could be taken to highlight the importance of wealth as a tool for fostering sustainable development, where economic growth complements environmental stewardship and equitable opportunities for all, ensuring long-term societal stability.

The interpretation of *kama* as the fulfilment of desires, encompassing emotional, sensual, and artistic pursuits stress that guided by *dharma*, it avoids excess (Kane, 1997), thereby supporting sustainable lifestyles. *Kama* could be linked to cultural sustainability by emphasizing its role in nurturing creativity, emotional well-being, and harmonious social relationships. Ethical enjoyment of life's pleasures encourages mindfulness and moderation, preventing harm to others and the environment. Kane's insights are useful in revealing that responsible gratification, rooted in respect for natural and societal boundaries, fosters a balanced way of living. This approach aligns individual aspirations with ecological and cultural preservation, promoting a harmonious and sustainable world.

*Moksha*, liberation from material attachments, is the ultimate goal of life, offering spiritual fulfilment beyond worldly desires (Kane, 1997). *Moksha* encourages minimalism and detachment from excessive consumption, promoting sustainable living through simplicity and introspection. This ideal connects to spiritual sustainability, emphasizing inner contentment as a path to harmony with nature, society and/ or entire cosmos. By reducing dependence on material resources, *moksha* inspires ethical choices that respect ecological limits. This perspective highlights that aligning life's purpose with *moksha* fosters a temperament of environmental responsibility, encouraging individuals to live in ways that preserve the planet's resources for future generations.

Thus, the Indic philosophical framework offers a thoughtful vision of sustainability, deeply rooted in ancient traditions that emphasize interconnectedness, ethical responsibility, and universal well-being. Concepts like *vasudhaivakutumbakam* advocate for collective harmony, while *dharma*, with its focus on *sarva-bhuta-hita* (welfare of all beings), aligns spiritual and ecological duties, urging humanity to act in harmony with nature. The interconnected doctrines of *karma* and *dharma* highlight the lasting consequences of our actions, underscoring the need for environmental stewardship and mutual cooperation. Building on these principles, the *purusharthas* offer a holistic framework for integrating personal aspirations with societal and ecological sustainability. *Dharma* regulates material and sensual pursuits, fostering equitable resource use and mindful enjoyment,

while *moksha* encourages simplicity and spiritual fulfilment, reducing overconsumption. Together, these ideals transcend cultural and temporal boundaries, offering timeless guidance for building a sustainable future. By reimagining these ancient concepts in the modern context, humanity can embrace a vision of “One Earth, One Family, One Future,” fostering harmony with nature, equity among people, and care for future generations.

### Cultural Expressions of Sustainability Ethics

The ancient philosophical principles discussed earlier find their lived expression in the cultural practices and traditions that have evolved over centuries. It is reflected in various movements, traditions, and practices that have shaped the social fabric and the human relationship with the environment. One of the most significant historical and cultural forces that reinforced sustainability in India was the Bhakti Movement. The traditional festivals, sacred groves, and architectural practices also provided frameworks for promoting sustainability in both social and ecological spheres. Through these cultural lenses, India has long upheld values of environmental stewardship, social justice, and harmonious coexistence with nature.

The Bhakti Movement, which spanned from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, played a central role in shaping India’s socio-cultural and ecological consciousness. Bhakti, meaning devotion, was a movement that transcended caste, creed, and gender distinctions, emphasizing a personal connection with the divine rather than ritualistic practices or societal norms. At its core, the Bhakti Movement aimed at social equality and spiritual awakening, advocating for the dignity of all individuals, regardless of their social standing. This egalitarianism, in turn, promoted social sustainability by challenging rigid hierarchical systems such as the caste system.

The interplay between devotion and dissent in the Bhakti Movement offers a compelling lens for understanding social sustainability, especially in its challenge to rigid caste hierarchies and its advocacy for egalitarianism. While Bhakti focused on intense devotion to the divine, it simultaneously fostered radical dissent against societal norms, including caste, gender, and ritualistic discrimination. The *Varkari* movement in Maharashtra, with saints like Jnanadev, Namadeva, Chokhamela, and Tukaram, exemplified this dual aspect of devotion and dissent. Devotion of these saints to God was not just a spiritual pursuit but a form of social protest, pushing for equality and the dignity of marginalized communities. Similarly, the poetry

of saints like Kabir and Raidas challenged Brahmanical authority and upheld the principles of humanism, emphasizing the need for a more just society. This combination of devotion and dissent underscores a vision of social sustainability where spiritual practice and social transformation are deeply interconnected (Ramaswamy, 2014). The radicalism of Bhakti highlights the need for inclusive actions that bridge social divides, resonating with sustainable development principles of equality and justice.

Through its socially inclusive nature and use of the language of the common people, Bhakti served as a catalyst for social reform and the transition from Sanskrit to the local languages. There is a scholarly consensus which emphasizes Bhakti's role in making religious consciousness accessible to non-literate and lower-class communities. The vast array of saints from diverse backgrounds who emerged during the bhakti movement, representing a cross-section of non-elite society, contributed to a collective consciousness that laid the groundwork for social and cultural transformation. The use of local languages in religious and devotional practices thus became an integral part of India's broader cultural evolution, paving the way for greater equality and mass education in local traditions (Hawley, 2015). In *The Quotidian Revolution* (Novetzke, 2016) explores the use of the vernacular language within the bhakti movement claiming that it shifted religious practice, making it accessible to broader, non-literate communities. He argues that this vernacularization played a central role in shaping India's pre-modern public sphere, enabling social reform and greater inclusion in religious consciousness. In these ways, the *Bhakti* movement, through vernacularization, facilitated social and religious inclusivity contributing to the broader ethos of social sustainability, laying the foundation for a more equitable and inclusive society.

The role of *Bhakti* in the shaping of power dynamics as a religious movement was instrumental in contesting and negotiating power, both spiritual and political. The notion of devotion was not simply a personal spiritual journey but also a vehicle for challenging established social orders, including caste hierarchies and gender norms. Bhakti served as both an egalitarian force and a way to interact with political structures. Various forms of Bhakti transcended traditional boundaries of power, creating new spaces for marginalized groups. Its influence went beyond religion, shaping cultural and political identities in profound ways. Saint Niloba's religious practices, in particular, exemplify this intersection of devotion and power, where devotion to the divine often mirrored a subtle resistance to earthly

powers (Hawley & Novetzke, 2019). Thus, the movement opens up critical conversations about the political dimensions of bhakti and its capacity to offer both spiritual liberation and social transformation.

Beyond the socio-political dimensions of the Bhakti movement's sustainability, its aesthetic deeply intertwines human existence with the natural world. The saint-poets saw nature not as separate from the divine but as an extension of it - trees, rivers, and even the sky become metaphors for spiritual unity and devotion. For Dnyaneshwar, the blooming jasmine or the buzzing bee symbolizes divine presence, while Tukaram's minimalist celebration of nature evokes harmony with the cosmos (Dahake & Binnor, 2024). This ecological consciousness, expressed through metaphors and vivid imagery, reflects their understanding of humans as intrinsic to nature. Their verses bridge human and natural realms, offering a vision of peace and unity through kinship with the environment. Such perspectives resonate with contemporary environmental humanities, as they underscore sustainable living and spiritual fulfilment through interconnectedness with nature, a lesson that remains profoundly relevant in addressing modern ecological crises.

Wolfenden studied the concept of Bhakti-Yoga as an environmental ethic, (Wolfenden, 2023) emphasizing the cultivation of a spiritual relationship with nature rooted in the devotional principles of Bhakti. He proposes a framework of *Prema-culture* - a culture of love and affection - that transcends material exploitation and aligns human activity with divine principles. Inspired by permaculture's focus on sustainable living, *Prema-culture* integrates ecological harmony with spiritual realization, advocating for practices that embody relational humility, devotion, and stewardship of the earth. This ethic is premised on understanding the world as God's creation, requiring reciprocal respect and care. Key practices include adopting a vegetarian diet to minimize karmic impacts, shifting from material consumption to spiritual fulfilment, and fostering communities rooted in simplicity, shared values, and God-conscious living. These "anticipatory communities" deconstruct the unsustainable ideologies of growth and consumption, offering pathways to rebuild human relationships with the environment through devotion. Ultimately, Bhakti-inspired environmentalism situates ecological restoration as an outcome of spiritual alignment, underscoring love for creation as integral to restoring the human-divine bond.

Besides the socio-spiritual reformations of movements like Bhakti, the ecological wisdom is found embedded in traditional festivals and maintenance of sacred groves. The *Santal* community's Baha festival,

for instance, exemplifies the integration of cultural reverence and environmental ethics. Celebrated during *Falgun* (February-March), this festival aligns with the reproductive cycle of trees such as *Sal*, *Mohuwa*, and *Neem*, symbolizing renewal in nature. The community abstains from cutting trees or collecting buds, flowers, or branches, ensuring the vitality of these resources. Women refrain from using *Sal* flowers for decoration, and firewood collection is minimized during this time, demonstrating a commitment to ecological preservation. Central to the festival is the sacred grove, regarded as the dwelling of their supreme deity, *Marangburu*. These groves are protected spaces where biodiversity thrives, as the harvesting of plants and harming of animals is strictly prohibited (Mondal & Pandey, 2024). The Baha festival thus transcends ritual, embodying an eco-centric ethos that bridges spiritual devotion and sustainable practices, preserving ecological balance while fostering communal resilience and harmony with the natural world.

Thus, the interplay of cultural, spiritual, and ecological ethics in India reflects a holistic approach to sustainability deeply rooted in tradition and the collective consciousness. The Bhakti movement's egalitarian ethos, devotional aesthetics, and integration of humanity with nature resonate with contemporary environmental ethics, emphasizing harmony and justice. Similarly, traditional festivals and sacred groves embody eco-centric principles, fostering biodiversity and resource conservation while reinforcing community bonds. Together, these cultural expressions demonstrate that sustainability is not merely a modern imperative but an enduring legacy of India's socio-spiritual heritage. As India navigates the challenges of climate change and ecological degradation, these time-tested traditions offer valuable insights and pathways for building a sustainable future. By revisiting such practices, India can align ancient wisdom with modern frameworks, moving towards an inclusive and resilient relationship with the environment that transcends temporal and global boundaries.

### Institutionalization of Sustainability Ethics in Governance

Sustainability was not merely a philosophical or cultural ideal in historical India but a pragmatic concern embedded in the governance structures that followed over a period of time. Leaders like Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, Shahu Maharaj, and Sayajirao Gaekwad exemplified how political leadership could institutionalize sustainable practices that affected both the environment and

the socio-economic fabric of society. These rulers translated their personal commitment to sustainability into formal policies that aimed for social welfare and long-term ecological preservation.

The leadership of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, who symbolized early Indian nationalism, was deeply influenced by the spiritual and social ideals emerging from the Bhakti movement. The Bhakti movement, with its emphasis on devotion, equality, and accessibility to the divine had galvanized the public sphere with a democratic ethos in Shivaji's era. Influenced by these ideals, Shivaji's governance promoted social welfare, religious freedom, and the protection of both human dignity and the natural world. While Shivaji was not directly involved in the Bhakti movement, his respect for religious diversity and focus on the welfare of his people, both in spiritual and material terms, was closely aligned with the social reforms advocated by Bhakti. By institutionalizing practices that promoted the well-being of all his subjects, including religious minorities, and ensuring that governance was grounded in principles of justice, equity, and respect, Shivaji effectively created a social welfare system that reflected the democratic ideals fostered by Bhakti traditions (Apte, 1953). This connection between spiritual devotion and political governance created a lasting framework for Maratha nationalism, one that was rooted in both the social consciousness of the time and the desire for freedom from oppressive forces.

This ethos had a lasting impact on the public sphere. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the figure of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj became an iconic symbol of self-assertion and identity formation, particularly within the context of India's struggle for independence and social reform. Two prominent figures, Jyotirao Phule and Bal Gangadhar Tilak, offered contrasting interpretations of Shivaji's legacy, each of which contributed to the political and social discourse of the time. Phule, a social reformer and advocate for the rights of the lower castes, viewed Shivaji as a hero of the marginalized, particularly in his resistance to Brahmanical orthodoxy. On the other hand, Tilak, a prominent nationalist leader, celebrated Shivaji as a champion of Hindu nationalism (Vartak, 1999). In this way, Shivaji Maharaj's legacy of inclusive governance and social welfare was reinterpreted by Jyotirao Phule as a hero of the marginalized and by Bal Gangadhar Tilak as a champion of Hindu nationalism, shaping divergent yet impactful narratives in India's socio-political discourse.

The administration of Chhatrapati Shivaji reflected a remarkable environmental consciousness, grounded in his deep respect for

nature and its integration into governance. His policies emphasized the preservation of trees, forests, and ecosystems as critical to *Swarajya* welfare. The *Ajnapatras*, key administrative texts of his era, illustrate this ethos. Through the *Ajnapatras*, Shivaji mandated the protection of trees in forts, including those seemingly useless, recognizing their ecological and defensive value. *Kamargi* shrubs, for example, were nurtured as natural barriers, crucial for fort security. His naval policies prohibited cutting trees like mango and jackfruit for shipbuilding, acknowledging their ecological and societal significance. Such trees, grown with citizen care, were seen as essential to environmental and social balance. His approach extended to ethical governance. Trees could only be cut with due consent and compensation to their caretakers. He warned against disrupting nature or causing grief to citizens for short-term gains, understanding the interconnectedness of ecological preservation and societal well-being (Vanarambha, 2021). This philosophy underscores Shivaji's progressive outlook, blending ecological stewardship with administrative acumen.

Together with the Bhakti movement, Shivaji's ethos influenced the social reformer Jyotiba Phule and Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj. Jyotirao Phule's agrarian philosophy emphasized rural agro-ecology, advocating for equitable agricultural practices and ecological conservation. He critiqued the British and upper-class exploitation of Indian farmers, focusing on issues like cattle preservation, soil conservation, and forest management. Phule proposed modernizing agriculture through education and technology while promoting natural soil enrichment via water conservation methods. His visionary approach to sustainable agriculture and rural development highlights his commitment to both social justice and ecological balance, making him a pioneering figure in India's intellectual and agrarian history (Kumar, 2022). Similarly, Rajarshi Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, a contemporary of Phule, was a progressive ruler known for his pioneering reforms in education, social justice, and the upliftment of marginalized communities. He promoted egalitarian policies, reservation in education, and worked to eradicate caste-based discrimination, embodying ideals of social welfare and inclusivity.

Such manifestation of sustainability ethos continued through the Indian independence movement. The Bhoodan movement, led by Vinoba Bhave, aimed to foster a more humane relationship between land and people by encouraging voluntary land donations. It sought to address socio-economic disparities rooted in feudal land ownership, challenging capitalist exploitation of land. However, it struggled to

change entrenched feudal and capitalist mentalities, which limited its transformative impact. The need for an alternative development model focused on sustainable urban growth, vertical city expansion, forest preservation, and direct producer-consumer connections, promoting equity and ecological balance were also the key concerns that surfaced through the movement (Sahi, n.d.). Despite its limitations, the Bhoodan movement highlighted the importance of integrating social justice with ecological sustainability, laying the groundwork for future discourses on equitable development.

Similarly, the Chipko movement is seen to have shaped the ecological perspective wherein forests were defended not merely as economic resources as in the case of Western narratives, but as sacred and life-supporting ecosystems. Chipko is in fact a remarkable instance of women's environmental activism in India, predating global movements like the UN Women's Decade and the 1972 Stockholm Environment Conference. It emanated from the concept of *Aranyani*, the Goddess of the Forest, reflecting the deep-rooted Indic philosophy that venerates forests as sacred and life-sustaining entities. Unlike Western perceptions that often commodify forests as timber, such movements rooted in Indian traditions view them as holistic ecosystems, integral to societal and cultural evolution. The *aranyasamskriti* or forest culture embodies values of diversity, harmony, and sustainability, influencing Indian civilization's ecological ethics (Shiva, 1988). The Bishnoi community's resistance led by Amrita Devi in Rajasthan, where over 300 people sacrificed their lives to protect their sacred *khejri* trees marks the beginning of the Chipko movement. It illustrates how environmental movements in India have been historically fuelled by women's political and moral strength, laying the foundation for contemporary ecological activism.

Therefore, often perceived as a women's movement, it showcases the intersection of gender and environmental justice. Women in the Garhwal Himalayas resisted deforestation not just for ecological reasons but for survival, as forests were integral to their sustenance economy. Their concerns went beyond timber to include water security, soil fertility, and fodder for livestock, highlighting a holistic ecological perspective. This gendered experience of environmentalism underscores the importance of acknowledging women as primary stakeholders in ecological conservation in the Indian context. Their grassroots activism offers valuable lessons in sustainable development, emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental health and community well-being (Shiva, 1988).The

legacy of the Chipko movement demonstrates the need to recognize the collective contributions of women in social and political movements.

The groundwork of the Chipko movement laid by women activists through anti-alcohol movements and local community organization was fundamental. Figures like Sarala Behn, who linked social justice with environmental activism, advocate women's empowerment and sustainable development, bridging the gap between traditional knowledge and ecological ethics. This significant environmental movement in the Himalayas, arising from local resistance to state-led forest exploitation, also indicates the implication of the well rooted sustainability ethos within the Indian context. Rooted in historical struggles for peasant access to forests, it symbolized broader socio-economic issues, such as ecological degradation, economic marginalization, and the critical role of women in environmental activism. By opposing commercial forestry and advocating sustainable resource use, Chipko expanded the popular consciousness, linking ecological preservation with social justice and contributing to ongoing discourses on environmental rights and rural development (Guha, 1994). The movement not only challenged exploitative environmental practices but also emphasized the importance of community participation and equitable resource distribution.

Thus, the sustainability ethos in India reflects a deep historical continuity, blending traditional ecological wisdom with modern social movements, emphasizing the interconnectedness of environmental conservation, social equity, and sustainable development.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, sustainability ethics in India have evolved through a rich confluence of cultural, spiritual, and political movements. At the heart of this tradition lies the deep-rooted Indic philosophy, which emphasizes harmony between humanity, nature, and the divine. The Bhakti Movement, as explored, is just one of many cultural expressions that highlight the intersection of social justice, spiritual devotion, and ecological stewardship, showing how devotion can serve as a powerful vehicle for both spiritual and social reform.

Equally important is the role of governance in institutionalizing sustainability. Leaders like Shivaji Maharaj, Shahu Maharaj, and others demonstrated how political leadership could formalize environmental preservation and social welfare, ensuring long-term sustainability. Their policies reflected a commitment to the

well-being of all citizens, including marginalized groups, and an acknowledgment of the interconnectedness between ecological health and social justice. Further, sustainability ethics in India have been embodied through cultural expressions such as festivals, sacred groves, and traditional agricultural practices, which have long celebrated the bond between spirituality and nature. Practices like the Baha festival of the *Santal* community and the reverence for sacred groves have been crucial in maintaining ecological balance and promoting community resilience, offering modern society valuable insights into the importance of local knowledge and eco-centric rituals.

Hence, sustainability ethics in India are not merely modern imperatives but are deeply ingrained in its philosophical and cultural fabric. As India faces contemporary environmental challenges, the wisdom embedded in its traditions, ranging from Bhakti to governance practices, offers a holistic framework for reconciling ecological sustainability with social justice. Reclaiming and institutionalizing these practices can guide the nation toward a more inclusive, resilient, and ecologically balanced future. Incorporating these sustainability ethics can provide a model for the Global South, offering a way to integrate environmental conservation with social equity. By drawing on ancient wisdom and traditional practices, India can guide the world toward more inclusive, sustainable development frameworks that address both ecological and socio-economic challenges. Through such holistic models, India has the potential to inspire global solutions rooted in cultural resilience, sustainable governance, and spiritual consciousness.

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