



HINDU FORUM BRITAIN

Hindu Vision for Climate Action

Hindu Forum Britain

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The extent and pace at which human beings are destroying life on earth in the last two centuries is so grave that it is scarcely credible. Human activities have radically altered the composition of the atmosphere, massively disrupting the climate. In the 2014 book the *Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*, Elizabeth Kolbert illustrates the mounting evidence that we are bringing about the sixth mass extinction, where diversity of life is dramatically contracted.

The collective impact of our species is so severe that the term ‘Anthropocene’ has become a part of common parlance. The Anthropocene, widely popularised in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, regards the influence of human behaviour on Earth's atmosphere in recent centuries as so significant that it constitutes a new geological epoch. This epoch is dated either from the rise of agriculture or from the start of the industrial revolution¹.

Anthropogenic climate change is perhaps the most profound and complex challenge to have confronted the human race².

The stakes are massive, the risks and uncertainties severe, the economics controversial, the science besieged, the politics bitter and complicated, the psychology puzzling, the impacts devastating, the interactions with other environmental and non-environmental issues running in many directions³. It affects and is affected by all human societal systems and structures - social, political, economic⁴ and religious. The industrial, scientific, and technological revolutions have ‘progressed’ at unimaginable rates over the last two centuries and continue to do so in the name of modernity and growth, yet in their wake they are also causing massive destruction of nature, other species, indigenous populations, city dwellers and planet⁵. There is an urgent need to change human perception and behaviour if we are to deviate from the 6th mass extinction⁶.

As we approach, the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26), to be held in Glasgow in November of 2021, the concern continues to rise. COP26 is a call to world leaders, countries and citizens to reconvene, revisit and ‘accelerate action towards the goals of the Paris Agreement and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change,’ it is an urgent clarion call for climate action and long term solutions from both government and non-state actors⁷ and will provide the

¹ Chakrabarty, D., Anthropocene Time. *History and Theory*, 2018 57: 5-32.

² Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. *The Oxford handbook of religion and ecology*. OUP USA, 2006, pg.2

³ Dryzek, John S., Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, eds. *The Oxford handbook of climate change and society*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁴ Dryzek, John S., Richard B. Norgaard, and David Schlosberg, eds. *The Oxford handbook of climate change and society*. Oxford University Press, 2011.

⁵ As climate change and environmental collapse become more perceptible through extreme and noticeable changes of weather patterns that lead to more intense and more frequent flooding, drought, forest fires, as pollution rises; the oceans become ridden with waste and plastic, the land filled with consumer waste, and toxic gases permeate the air, as the loss of biodiversity increases with more and more species becoming extinct and ecosystems collapse, concern continues to rise. Many scholars and scientists predict that the problems caused by the ‘Anthropocene’ are leading human beings on the path of societal and environmental collapse that will usher in the 6th mass extinction.

⁶ Kolbert, Elizabeth. *The sixth extinction: An unnatural history*. A&C Black, 2014.

⁷ <https://ukcop26.org/>



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opportunity ‘to set a new, ambitious direction for the coming decade, and establish the right environment to deliver on commitments made and the institutional arrangements needed to ensure those commitments are met’⁸. If we are to make the changes required in the time forecasted, radical solutions that are inclusive for all present and future life on earth and the earth itself need to be put into practice. These solutions require a holistic discussion that is based on human beings’ essential values and vision of themselves, of nature⁹ and the human’s place in it. It is unlikely that such solutions can come from a business-as-usual attitude or substituting one unstable practice with a ‘greener’ solution¹⁰. Rather, they require a radical shift in thinking and living by human beings in our global and societal institutes, structures, and measures. Change comes from taking a different course of action. Action is underpinned by the meaning that is attributed to a thing. Meaning, for a good many people, is derived from their cultural and metaphysical views of the world and their place in it. Faith organisations play a key role in these discussions because they are said to greatly influence an adherent’s worldview and behaviour. In his seminal paper, ‘The Historical Roots of Climate Change,’ historian Lynn White Junior argued that ‘what people do about their ecology depends on what they think about themselves in relation to the things around them’¹¹.

White’s 1967 catalysed a plethora of discussion that emerged into two subfields; Religious Environmental Ethics and Religion and Ecology¹², that have explored many aspects of the religious relationship, attitudes, values, ethics, and practices with and towards nature within the major faith traditions, indigenous beliefs and outside of those traditions¹³ and interfaith ideas.

Within Environmental ethics, there are three prominent ecological movements: ‘radical,’ ‘deep’ and ‘shallow’. Shallow ecologists are of the view that we must protect nature and avoid environment degradation for the sake of human benefits. It is a view based on anthropomorphism. They believe that nature exists for the convenience of human beings. On the other hand, deep ecologists want to preserve the integrity of biosphere for its own sake, irrespective of the possible benefits to human beings that might follow. Radical ecology is the view that environmental problems can only be solved by a radical revision of attitudes and values, rather than through economic and political reform¹⁴.

The religion and ecology subfield has explored religions influence the human relationship with the environment not only in their metaphysical and conceptual understandings of the universe and its workings (for example the concepts of dominion, stewardship, interconnection, dharma, ahimsa, the way etc) but also its ethical ideas that influence behaviours and lifestyle choices that directly affect the environment (childbearing decisions, use of contraceptives, belief in climate change, treatment of natural resources etc)¹⁵. The Yale Forum of Religion and Ecology published a series of publications that included 10 of the major faith religions and indigenous ideas. Religious and spiritual institutions offer

⁸ Dasgupta, Partha. The Economics of Biodiversity: The Dasgupta Review. *HM Treasury*, 2021, pg.3

⁹ Here we are defining nature as all the elements that inhabit and make up the earth.

¹⁰ Dasgupta, Partha. The Economics of Biodiversity, 2021, pg. 6

¹¹ White, L., 1967. The historical roots of our ecologic crisis. *Science*, 155(3767), pg.1205

¹² Jenkins, Willis. "After Lynn White: Religious ethics and environmental problems." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 37, no. 2 (2009): pg.284.

¹³ Grim, John, Russell Powel et al. Religion and ecology. Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹⁴ <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100400793>

¹⁵ Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. The Oxford handbook of religion and ecology. OUP USA, 2006, pg.2



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perspectives on the nature of truth, and the moral place of human beings in the natural order and the role of woman¹⁶ that can offer another dimension to the issue by appealing to the public at an emotional, intellectual, and spiritual level through textual authority and religious praxis. By working alongside other actors, a new ethic encompassing humans, their metaphysics and nature may help drive the change that is so urgently required.

The Hindu¹⁷ response has been adequate as scholars discuss the reverential and interconnected metaphysical and moral ideas that underpin the Hindu view of nature and the cognitive dissonance that seems to occur when it comes to action.

In this paper we look at some of the causes of climate change, Hindu thought on nature and the environment, Hindu climate action past, present and future. The paper ends with suggestions of how the Hindu community can take further steps to increase their climate action, in accordance with traditional ideas, externally at home, work/school and the temple and personal *sadhana's* (spiritual practices).

Environmental crisis – causes

Environmental crisis is a term used to describe the sum of the ecological issues humans face today. Scholars have looked at the history of the environmental crisis¹⁸ and have provided essential context and background in order to find sustainable, long-lasting solutions rather than short term fixes. Climate change is a complex phenomenon, with varied and unequal causes and effects. Although the crisis appears to be physical in the form of global warming resulting in massive weather changes that cause drought, unpredictable forest fires, flooding, melting of the poles etc, the ozone layer hole, acid rain, tropical forest clearance, greenhouse effect, loss of biodiversity, rapid pollution build-up etc, the causes and solutions lie much more in people's attitudes, values, and expectations¹⁹.

The Global West and the Global East have contributed to the ecological crisis in different ways and are affected by it with disproportionate and unequal consequences. The principal causes of the climate crisis stem from the anthropogenic and colonial attitudes adopted over the last 300 years that has put human rationality and conquest at the centre of all functioning²⁰. This attitude was particularly dominant during the Industrial revolution where developments in technology and the emergence of free market economies has led to the perceived need for unlimited growth which led to even more rapid industrialisation that has given a greater ability to use natural resources for their own ends. Quests for resources and power, rapid progression of economies, science and technology has also given rise to over-

¹⁶ Gardner, Gary. "Invoking the spirit." *Worldwatch paper* 16 (2002): 4.

¹⁷ The term Hinduism is an umbrella term for some of the schools of philosophy, rituals and practices that have emerged out of the Indian subcontinent. The term Hinduism is a complex one. Originally used by Persians to denote the religious ways of people who lived on the other side of the Indus River, today it is the accepted designation of a vast array of religious beliefs and practices of most of the Indian population. As in the case of every world religion, it is more accurate to speak not of a single Hinduism, but rather of a rich multiplicity of Hinduisms. David Haberman in Jenkins, Willis J., Mary Evelyn Tucker, and John Grim, eds. *Routledge handbook of religion and ecology*. Routledge, 2016.

¹⁸ Hamilton, Clive, François Gemenne, and Christophe Bonneuil, eds. *The Anthropocene and the global environmental crisis: Rethinking modernity in a new epoch*. Routledge, 2015.

¹⁹ "Environmental crisis." *Oxford Reference*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095753543>.

²⁰ Pouchepadass, Jacques. "Colonialism and Environment in India: Comparative Perspective." *Economic and Political Weekly* 30, no. 33 (1995): 2059–67.



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consumption and huge growth in populations. The rapid increase in population in recent centuries has in turn led to more of a rise in human use of natural resources.

Today the effects of this extant worldview are being felt in the collapse and destruction of the planet's ecosystems and inhabitants. The domination of and disconnection between humans and "nature" legitimises the capitalist ethic of unlimited economic growth²¹. This has given rise to a new kind of "religion" in contemporary society — that of unrestrained and encouraged consumerism, market governance, and rapid development in the name of progress and civilisation:

Economic growth is the religion of the modern world, the elixir that eases the pain of social conflicts, the promise of indefinite progress. It offers a solution to the everyday drama of human life, to wanting what we don't have. Sadly, at least in the West, growth is now fleeting, intermittent. On one hand, this new religion serves us with 'progress' and 'modernity' and, on the other hand, it has and is giving rise to ~~so~~ environmental damage. Humans require a radical re-consideration of this one-sided relationship with the environment.²²

The economic and political policies that use growth as a measure of success and happiness have long been criticised²³, however suitable alternatives have not been implemented²⁴. The emergence of free market economies, in which economic factors play a central role in decision-making about production, consumption, use of resources, and treatment of wastes has put the emphasis on profit before people and planet. The idea that unlimited growth can come from limited resources is an economic and political fallacy that is unsustainable and has caused and continues to cause the destruction and catastrophes that are arising with greater frequency today²⁵.

The globalisation and industrialisation of countries, the introduction of fast foods and the 'American (or Western) way of life' in the late 20th century, massive market campaigns that promote homogenised societies that promote materialism, short-termism²⁶ and modernity is a modern-day colonisation of people's minds. This big business in the form of global processed food and genetics companies, big pharma etc exploit local communities and indigenous lands. For example, large companies such as Monsanto who have sold farmers hybridised seeds and fertilisers in an attempt to create dependency²⁷ or Vedanta Resources whose constant endeavour to encroach on indigenous land to exploit it for its raw materials²⁸ - the prime motive is short term profit through exploitation rather than care of the local land and people, long-term sustainability, or health.

In developed nations populations are changing because of a decrease in the age of death which means even though the family structure is not large, people are living longer. In developing countries populations are growing

²¹ Baidur, M., 2015. *Nature in Indian philosophy and cultural traditions*. Springer., 2015, pg.17

²² Cohen, Daniel. *The infinite desire for growth*. Princeton University Press, 2018, pg.1

²³ Kapoor, Amit, and Bibek Debroy. "GDP is not a measure of human well-being." *Harvard Business Review* 4 (2019)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Parayil, G., "Sustainable Development: The Fallacy of a Normatively-Neutral Development Paradigm." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (1998): 179–94. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24354222>.

²⁶ Short-termism is the practice of considering only the immediate advantages of particular actions. Short-term time horizons have become the norm by which people, companies, and countries make decisions.

²⁷ Shiva, Vandana. *The Fight Against Monsanto's Roundup: The Politics of Pesticides*. Simon and Schuster, 2019.

²⁸ <https://www.survivalinternational.org/about/vedanta>



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because of lack of education, family planning awareness and women's agency over their bodies²⁹ and more stringent religious beliefs that command humans to go out and propagate..

The symptoms of these causal attitudes of the environmental 'crises are many. According to the UNEP Global Environment Outlook 2000 report: there will be a billion cars by 2025, up from 40 million since 1945; a quarter of the world's 4630 types of mammals and 11% of the 9675 species of bird are at serious risk of extinction; more than half of the world's coral is at risk from dredging, diving, and global warming; 80% of forests have been cleared; a billion city dwellers are exposed to levels of air pollution that threaten human health; the global population will reach 8.9 billion in 2050, up from 6 billion in the year 2000; global warming will raise temperatures by up to 3.6°C, triggering a 'devastating' rise in sea level and more severe natural disasters; and global use of pesticides is causing up to five million acute poisoning incidents each year³⁰.

Today, the prevailing meaning or attitude attributed to "nature," in the middle and upper classes across the globe, is that it is a separate entity and a resource that primarily exists to meet human needs and desires. Natural resources are regarded as freely available for people to do whatever they like with.³¹

This attitude has "happened" in such a way that it seems normal and in line with modernity and progress. And is spilling over to other cultures through globalisation via shared business, enterprise, and media.

But now in the twentieth century, the materialistic orientation of the West has equally affected the cultures of the East. India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan have witnessed wanton exploitation of the environment by their own peoples, despite the strictures and injunctions inherent in their religions and cultures. Thus, no culture has remained immune from human irreverence towards nature. How can we change the attitude of human beings towards nature?³²

A different approach and a more integrated way of engaging with "nature" is urgently required.

²⁹ Dasgupta, P., "The Population Problem: Theory and Evidence." *Journal of Economic Literature* 33, no. 4 (1995): 1879–1902. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2729316>.

³⁰ UNEP: Portney, Paul, R. 2000. "Environmental Problems and Policy: 2000-2050." *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14 (1): 199-206.

³¹ "Environmental crisis." *Oxford Reference*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095753543>

³² Dwivedi, O. P., and Roger S. Gottlieb. "Satyagraha for conservation: Awakening the spirit of Hinduism." *This Sacred Earth: Religion, Nature, Environment*. Edited by Roger S. Gottlieb. New York: Routledge (2004): pg. 145.



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Hindu thought on nature and the environment.

‘Hindu’ beliefs and practices are diverse and pluralistic³³. There are many schools of philosophy and different practices that rose to prominence at different times and in different places across Bharata³⁴ that are followed in the pursuit of Self-realisation and/or of living a *dharmic* life.

The Vedas, Upaniṣads, Purāṇas and other Indic texts are alive and rich with references of the divinity manifest in and expressed through many aspects of nature³⁵. The interconnected nature of all material existence; that all matter is made up of the five great elements (*mahābhūtas*) and that these elements are the constituents of everything in existence (including humans) can be found in the earliest Upaniṣads (Chāndogyaopaniṣad 6-6.2-6, Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, 2.5.1). Reverence and understanding of the subtle dimensions of the elements can be found in hymns such as the *Nadistuti sukta*³⁶ “hymn of praise of rivers”, is hymn 10.75 of the *Rigveda* and the *Prithvi Sukta*³⁷ of the *Arthavaveda* a 63-verse hymn³⁸ eulogising the Earth as a Mother describing her glories and attributes amongst other verses that sanctify other aspects of nature.

Daily mantras are recited by millions of Hindus in reverence of the rivers, mountains, elements, trees, animals, and earth. For example, the *Gayatri* mantra, a prayer that reveres the sun for its qualities of kindness, illumination, detachment, and selflessness³⁹, is chanted by Brahmins twice a day at sunrise and sunset, has gained popularity in yoga and meditation spaces around the world. Indeed, the *Samudra Vasane*⁴⁰ is a morning prayer recited before a person’s feet touches the ground to ask forgiveness from Mother Earth for stepping on her.

The Puranas are folklore or a collection of myths and traditional lore that deify nature in a way that their significance and importance can be passed on from generation to generation. For example, some are related to rivers such as the Ganges⁴¹, Saraswati⁴² and Yamuna⁴³. The rivers are depicted as goddesses that symbolise purification,

³³ Before identifying how the Hindu tradition conceptualises the human-nature relationship, it is important to recognise that there is no single text that defines all of Hinduism and its practices. The religion is a multifaceted one, with multiple perspectives on the human-nature relationship that do not apply to all Hindus. Nevertheless, Hindus do tend to see such diverse views as complementary, believing there is a level of underlying unity in all that diversity.

³⁴ Clémentin-Ojha, Catherine. "India, that is Bharat...": One Country, Two Names." *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 10 (2014).

³⁵ Krishna, N., *Hinduism and nature*. Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2017.

³⁶ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/rigveda/rv10075.htm> The Nadistuti sukta sings the glory and power of the 10 rivers that were present at that time. It illustrates the reverence and subtle understanding of the power and nature of rivers.

³⁷ The Prithvi Sukta is also known as the Bhumi Sukta. It is found in the 12th section of the Atharva Veda and is said to be composed by Rishi Atharv.

³⁸ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/av/av12001.htm>

³⁹ Jain, P., *Dharma and ecology of Hindu communities: sustenance and sustainability*. Routledge, 2016, pg.184

⁴⁰ Samudra Vasane prayer is found in the Skanda Purana.

⁴¹ Ganga is the goddess of Purity and Purification as people believe bathing in Ganges removes sins and helps in gaining Moksha.

⁴² Saraswati is the goddess of knowledge, music, speech, and arts. The Saraswati river is mentioned in the Rigveda. It is believed that the river dried up and is no longer visible to see.

⁴³ Yamuna is the goddess of life and the twin of Yama, lord of dead.



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knowledge, and life. Each have symbolic, pedagogical stories built around them and are perceived to be sacred in place⁴⁴ and symbolism⁴⁵.

In Indic religions all aspects of nature are sacred, from the forests and groves, gardens, waterbodies, plants, seeds, animals, mountains, pilgrimage centres⁴⁶.

The metaphysical and conceptual constructs of the interconnectedness of nature are debated amongst the different schools of thoughts. However, there are underlying principles that can be clearly seen that lend themselves to an inherent Hindu ecotheology. Haberman uses the term *sarvatma-bhava*, which is founded on the worldview that everything is sacred. This idea informs much environmental activism within Hindu culture⁴⁷. Pankaj Jain uses the term *Ishavasyam* – whereby divinity is omnipresent and takes infinite forms⁴⁸.

There are verses in the *Bhagavadgīta* that speak of the interconnectedness of all aspects of nature (BhG3:14-16) and have informed scholars and activists alike. There are also verses that illustrate the causes of this interconnection and ideas that highlight the reason for the disconnection. This can be found in the idea that the constituents of *prakṛti* (nature or everything material), the three *guṇa*'s (*sattva* – purity, harmony, balance, *rajas* – activity, passion and *tamas* – inertia, ignorance), pervade the physical and psychological composition of every being and object in the material world. The *guṇa*'s influence every aspect of life including: the preference of food consumed; to the way *yajña* is performed, the reasons *tapas* (austerities) in terms of the use of the physical body, speech are performed and mind, and the motivation by which charity is given (BhG17:7-22). As well as how knowledge, action, the performer of action, intelligence, resolve, and happiness are acted upon and received (BhG18:7-12, 19-39). In terms of our introductory analysis of the disconnection of humans and nature in today's context of climate change and ecological destruction; this can also be attributed to the predominance of *tamas* and *rajas* in modern societies – i.e., active, passionate, individualistic, and ignorant to change or even to see the connections between our attitudes and actions and the long-term destruction they have and continue to cause. The *Bhagavadgīta* offers practical guidance and wisdom of ways to live in balance and harmony with nature through the spirit of *yajña*, *lokasaṃgraha* and selfless action.

Another central concept in pan-Indic⁴⁹ thought is Karma⁵⁰. Karma is the law of cause and effect, whereby every selfish action has a reaction or a consequence and there is a causal relationship between past and present action and the future that spans subsequent lifetimes⁵¹. Karma, in some schools of thought, is closely linked to the concept of reincarnation or rebirth. The law of Karma and reincarnation assumes there is continuity of life between humans, plants and animals, and the intimate interconnection among all of creation. The remedy for selfish action is Karma Yoga, to

⁴⁴ For example, the river Ganges is believed to be a sacred place where believers can purify by removing their sins by touching or consuming the water. The river is an essential site for worshipping rites and rituals in India.

⁴⁵ The river Saraswati is no longer a geographical place, but she has come to represent knowledge, culture, and the arts.

⁴⁶ Krishna, N., 2017.

⁴⁷ Haberman, David L. "Devotional love of the world." *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology* (2016).

⁴⁸ Jain, Pankaj. "Ten key Hindu environmental teachings." *GreenFaith*. Org, 2010.

⁴⁹ These values or concepts are found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Their meanings, importance, and scope vary between the various traditions that originated in India, and various schools in each of these traditions.

⁵⁰ An early rendition of the causality of Karma is found in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 4.4.5–6.

⁵¹ Coward, H., 1998. The ecological implications of karma theory. *Purifying the earthly body of God: Religion and ecology in Hindu India*, SUNNY Press, 1998, pp.39-49.



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act selflessly for the benefit of all. These laws present a framework whereby selfish actions will result in karmic consequences until the final or ultimate goal: *jivanmukti*, *moksha* or arrival at the Supreme Being is attained.

Ahimsa is another ideal that is related to the concept of Karma and rebirth. It means non-harming and is found in the vedic texts and the *Dharmasūtras*⁵². It is also found in the yoga sutras as one of the five *Yamas*⁵³ (moral codes). Ahimsa is a rule of conduct that condemns the harming or injury of living beings. It is connected to the idea that all kinds of violence in thought, word, and deed, entail negative karmic consequences. To harm another (person, animal, or plant) is in some schools, to harm God's cosmic body of which each person is a part. Thus, it is equivalent to harming oneself which, on the grounds of logic and self-interest at the highest level and reverence for the Divine, would not be considered the right thing to do⁵⁴.

Within its very conceptual frameworks, Hinduism has a code of environmental ethics embedded in it. The interconnected nature of the cosmos means that humans can not consider themselves above nature but rather a part of it, nor can they claim dominance over any other life form⁵⁵. Humans have some level of freewill beyond the animal and plant kingdom that allows them to make choices. Those choices can either be dharmic or adharmic (unrighteous).

Dharma is the eternal law of the cosmos, inherent in the very nature of things. It is one of the most important and overarching principals within the corpus of doctrine and praxis of pan-Indic thought. Etymologically, the word dharma is derived from the root '*dhr*' meaning 'to sustain', 'to uphold' or 'to support'⁵⁶ and is often interpreted as righteousness, duties, virtues, the right way of living. "Dharma exists for the welfare of all beings. Hence, that by which the welfare of all living beings is sustained, that for sure is dharma."⁵⁷

In Hinduism, dharma is seen as the cosmic law both upheld by the gods and expressed in right behaviour by humans, including adherence to the social order⁵⁸. Sanātana Dharma translates approximately to "eternal law" or, less literally, "eternal way."⁵⁹ Although popularised by Swami Dayānanda Sarasvatī, in response to Christian criticisms of Hindu practices, it is a concept found in texts such as Yājñavalkya-smṛiti where absolute dharma includes purity, good will, mercy, and patience. Later texts such as Vāmana Purāṇa list the ten limbs of the eternal dharma as non-injury, truth, purity, not stealing, charity, forbearance, self-restraint, tranquillity, generosity, and asceticism⁶⁰.

⁵² Dharmasūtras is The collective name for the four extant works of this type: the Āpastamba, Gautama, Baudhāyana, and Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtras. Johnson, W. J. "Dharmasūtras." In A Dictionary of Hinduism. : Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁵³ *Yamas* are the first limb of the Ashtanga Yoga practice. There are 5 *Yamas*; *Ahimsa* (non-harming), *Brahmacharya* (sense-mastery), *Satya* (truthfulness), *Aparigraha* (non-hoarding) and *Asteya* (non-stealing)

⁵⁴ Coward H. (2003) Hindu Views of Nature and the Environment. In: Selin H. (eds) *Nature Across Cultures. Science Across Cultures: The History of Non-Western Science*, vol 4. Springer

⁵⁵ Krishnan, V., 2017.

⁵⁶ Bowker, John. "Dharma." In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*. : Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁵⁷ *Mahabharata*, Shanti Parva, 109.10

⁵⁸ Knowles, Elizabeth. "Dharma." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.: Oxford University Press, 2005.

⁵⁹ Bowker, John. "Sanātana dharma." In *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* : Oxford University Press, 2000.

⁶⁰ Ibid.



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Dharma, in the context of the human-nature relationship, protecting the environment has thus been considered by some to be an expression of dharma⁶¹ where every person must act for the general welfare of the earth, humanity, all creatures and all aspects of life.

According to the Shatpath Brahman (1.7.2 1-6)⁶² a person is born with five dharmic *rins* (debts) to repay in their lifetime. *Deva Rin* (debt to the Devas) that is repaid by performing religious rituals in worship of the *Devas* (gods). *Rishi Rin* (debt to the rishis and sages) pays back the debt owed to the ancient sages, rishis and teachers who pass down knowledge by studying, acquiring, sharing, and adding to the existing knowledge base. *Pitri Rin* (debt to the ancestors), clears the debt to our ancestors who have propagated their lineage and are the cause of the individual birth by righteous procreation and performing rituals in their remembrance. *Nri Rin* (debt to fellow humans) acknowledges the debt to humanity at large and is repaid by treating others with respect and offering help when needed. Lastly, *Bhuta Rin* (debt to plants, animals, and nature) which is repaid by gently placing food on the ground of animals, insects, crows etc. Through performing these acts and services to pay of these debts, the individual becomes more aware of his/her interconnectedness with each aspect and provides moral and ethical direction which sustains and cares for all beings⁶³.

Pankaj Jain's study of the Chipko and Bishnoi communities illustrates that their sensitivity to the environment is an expression of their devotion to the divine and the positive environmental impact is an important by-product of their inherent religious belief, value and attitude towards nature and the environment⁶⁴ as it shaped Chipkos people perception of nature as sacred and its protection is as valuable as their own.

These are only a handful of examples of how the Hindu scriptures lends themselves to a harmonious and balanced way of life both internally and externally. Scholars such as Cristopher Chapel, O.P. Dwivedi, Vandana Krishnan, Pankaj Jain to name but a few, have brought out the ecological sensitivities that lie within the textual and ritual practices found in the Hindu tradition.

Scholars have critiqued these ideas in a number of ways. Gerald Larson cautions about the dangers of indiscriminate use of philosophical texts as a generic resource for environmental philosophy⁶⁵. These texts, as is the case with all faith traditions, do not speak directly to the contemporary environmental crisis. They were written at a time when there was not a 7.5 billion population, in very different geographical landscapes⁶⁶ and when anthropogenic behaviour was not so intensely affecting the biosphere. There must be contextual rigour and sensitivity when mining these textual ideas for environmental solutions. However, that is not to say that these texts are of little or no use, on the contrary scriptural texts that have stood the test of time, reason and intuition contain wisdom and knowledge that is applicable to humans in every time and space.

⁶¹ Pankaj Jain, "10 Hindu Environmental Teachings", *The Forum on Religion and Ecology at Yale*, April 10, 2011, <http://fore.yale.edu/news/item/10-hindu-environmental-teachings/>

⁶² Shatpath Brahman (1.7.2 1-6): <https://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/sbr/sbe12/sbe1231.htm>

⁶³ Padhy, Sachidananda. "Pancha Yajnya (Five Sacrifices): The scientific philosophy of human ecological responsibility since the Vedic Age: A review." *Journal of Biodiversity* 4, no. 1 (2013): 25-44.

⁶⁴ Jain, P.. *Dharma and ecology of Hindu communities: sustenance and sustainability*. Routledge, 2016

⁶⁵ Gerald J. Larson, "Conceptual Resources in South Asia for 'Environmental Ethics,'" in *Nature in Asian Traditions of Thought: Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Roger T. Ames (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1989), 267-277

⁶⁶ The Hindu diaspora is worldwide and live in a variety of different settings.



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Another factor to take into consideration is the cognitive dissonance that occurs between textual authority and practice. There is plenty of evidence that religious practises affect the environment in detrimental ways. The incongruity ideal and practice can be clearly perceived from the polluted “sacred” rivers and lands⁶⁷. There are mountains of non-degradable materials piling up at ritual sites both in India and abroad because the use of the original naturally biodegradable materials is not ‘modern’⁶⁸ or not available. There are a few reasons for this disparity. Firstly, scriptural texts and/or *dharmashastras* are not necessarily read by everyone or disseminated to the masses so there may not be a clear understanding of the environmental ethos or ethic at a grass-root level. Attitudes of convenience over care and profit over piety have become the norm in the consciousness of the masses.

This issue has been recognised by the The Hindu Environmental Task Force (HETF)⁶⁹, who in partnership with the Lancaster Environment Action & Protection (LEAP) has pioneered the use of an Environmental Assessment & Management (EAM) toolkit for Hindu temples and *samaj* buildings and have rolled out the first key step in training⁷⁰.

Secondly, scholars have highlighted and are often guilty of the widespread misinterpretation of certain beliefs. For example, there is what Christopher Chapple calls a ‘subtle dilemma within Hinduism’ — whilst the ascetic traditions seek renunciation, the householder traditions advocate harmony and interconnection between humans and the natural and social realms.⁷¹

Lance Nelson highlights the ascetic worldview and asserts that the Indic renouncer traditions, in seeking the ultimate goal of *mokṣa* (liberation), ultimately ‘achieves its brand of “non-duality” not inclusively but exclusively, at great cost: the world of nature is finally cast out of the Absolute, out of existence’⁷². He goes on to say that rather than having an environmental concern it is this worldview, that have led Indians to disregard the environment and ecological issues.

Scholars⁷³ have challenged this idea saying that Sankarācharya’s statement ‘*Brahma satyaṃ jagat mithyā*’ (brahman alone is real, and the world is unreal), has been misinterpreted and misunderstood as being world-negating and nature devaluing. Claims such as this are based on an exclusively intellectual and colonial⁷⁴ understanding of philosophical ideas that do not take into account the plurality of the lived realities of religious practices and the pre-requisites required for *mokṣa* and the positive value and attitudes that many philosophical schools attribute to nature⁷⁵.

Another disparity observed is that devotion for natural entities-rivers, earth, air etc does not necessarily prevent environmental degradation. Perhaps no other issue describes the convergence of Indic religions and ecology more

⁶⁷ Haberman, 2006; Eck, 2012; Malinar [1]

⁶⁸ Nagarajan, V., *Feeding a Thousand Souls: Women, Ritual, and Ecology in India- An Exploration of the Kolam*. Oxford University Press, 2018, pg.209

⁶⁹ The environmental wing of the Hindu Forum of Britain.

⁷⁰ Training on the EAM toolkit was organised by the Hindu Forum of Britain and delivered on 4th September to 38 Hindu temple & organisational representatives by LEAP Directors Dr Richa Soni and Dr Shorma Pal. Prior to rollout of the toolkit, consultations were held with Environmental representatives from Brahmakumaris and ISKON, two large Hindu temple organisations, who reviewed the toolkit.

⁷¹ Jain, 2009, pg.99

⁷² Nelson, 1998, pg.79

⁷³ Jain, 2009; Haberman, 2006

⁷⁴ Haberman, 2006, pg. 23

⁷⁵ Kinsley, D.R., 1995. Ecology and religion: ecological spirituality in *Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Vol. 8). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.



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saliently than ‘the simultaneous sacredness and pollution of Indian rivers Ganga and Yamuna.’⁷⁶ Research on the sacrality of the Ganga found that devotees often ignore government clean-up protocols because of their conceptions of the rivers ability to purify whatever enters her. It is due to the allotted sacredness that makes the pilgrim priests do not admit the possibility of the rivers polluted state⁷⁷. The widespread belief that because the rivers (and other elements) are conceived as Goddesses and deified as sacred, they cannot be polluted and are able to purify not only the person who takes a bath in her waters but also all objects and other pollutants. Recent initiatives by Hindu leaders to bridge the gap between belief and practices have taken place⁷⁸.

Thirdly, festivals and pilgrim sites across all religions often cause an increase of environmental damage when non-biodegradable materials containing heavy metals or plastic are used or masses people gather at a particular site⁷⁹ and cause added pressure on and pollution to the land, air, and waters. However, Madhu Khanna asserts that the ritual brings biotic, ethical, social, and cosmic relationships together, preserving herbal lore and biotic diversity in a ‘silent language of geopiety’⁸⁰:

nature is sanctified in the embrace of ritual, and ritual offers a traditional strategy for celebrating fertility and the creativity of nature . . . which are intimately bound to seasonal rhythms and crop cycles.”⁸¹

These rituals used to have a much greater significance and their practices were of gratitude, celebration and to remind humans of their interconnection with nature and its cycles. Today, the significance of traditional practices is lost, and their celebration is a blind following and entertainment rather than a keen understanding.

Lastly, the gravity of the environmental crisis may not be grasped by the majority of people. The connections between the environmental destruction and pollution that is occurring, and our everyday actions of over-consumption, wastage and unconscious living are not being made. And if it is, the pervading sense of what can one person do seem to cloud any effective action. The “‘One straw won’t hurt’”, said seven billion people’ attitude needs to urgently change.

The fact that environmental ethics can be linked to Hindu traditions does not automatically mean that adherents will internalise those ethics. From the above analysis, we may well question the effectiveness of appealing to religion or faith traditions for environmental ethos and action. However, the urgency of the environmental crisis demands a transformation in our current attitudes and behaviours and faith organisations are very often effective, powerful platforms to disseminate positive values and behaviours. In the midst of this crisis, the Hindu faith has a very clear social responsibility to uphold and sustain the living world. Although it is unnerving to observe that despite the wonderful values and ethos found in the Hindu scriptures, non-compliance with the implications of these values and ideas does not

⁷⁶ Jain, 2009, pg. 99

⁷⁷ Alley, K.D., Idioms of Degeneracy: Assessing Garigā's Purity and Pollution. *Purifying the earthly body of god: Religion and ecology in Hindu India*, 1998, pg.297.

⁷⁸ Save Ganga movement: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Save_Ganga_Movement

⁷⁹ Wexler, Jay. *When God Isn't Green: A World-Wide Journey to Places Where Religious Practice and Environmentalism Collide*. Beacon Press, 2016. Jay Wexler travelled to different parts of the world to explore instances where religious practices and environmentalism collide. His book illustrates the complexity of the problems in order to learn how to align religious practice and environmental care.

⁸⁰ Khanna, M., “The Ritual Capsule of Durga Puja: An Ecological Perspective.” In Chapple and Tucker (above), pg. 491.

⁸¹ Ibid., pg. 475.



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in any way negate them. “They ought to be recovered and reclaimed. The religions of the world are great symphonies of hope. And hope gets things done.”⁸²



⁸² Maguire, D. C., *Sacred Energies: When the World's Religions Sit Down to Talk about the Future of Human Life and the Plight of this Planet*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. 2000, pg. 128



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The Hindu Response and Contribution in the UK

There are various examples of Hindu organisations working on environmental initiatives, on both a local and global scale. In the UK, the Bhumi Project was initiated in 2009 by the Oxford Centre for Hindu Studies to represent the Hindu voice on worldwide environmental concerns. The nine-year project set out to understand and bring to the fore the “unique contributions Hindu teachings can make” in addressing the environmental crisis through networking, action, and education⁸³ Its global initiatives include the Green Temples Guide⁸⁴ which was an effort to make Hindu pilgrimage sites and worshipping practices around the world more environmentally sustainable, representing the Hindu voice at the UN environment and faith amongst others.

Hindu Organisations have also been acting. The Brahma Kumaris, ISKON, Chinmaya Mission, are just some of the organisations that have started environmental initiatives to bring awareness of the climate crisis and take tangible climate action. For example, the Brahma Kumaris offer online green talks, conduct ‘Green Champions’ retreats where planning for future eco projects takes place and share meditations to initiate connection with the elements and the environment⁸⁵. Chinmaya Mission UK has hosted yearly workshops on Yoga and Sustainability drawing inspiration from the *Bhagavadgīta* as well as the *Yogasutras of Patanjali*. They have also implemented many eco-friendly features in the planning of their building reconstruction plans in Hendon.

Hindu Climate Action (HCA) is another project of the OCHS⁸⁶ whose aim is to encourage and promote a greener lifestyle amongst South Asians and to increase ethnic representation in eco-activism. The HCA was established in 2020 and has more than 500 members and has run over 30 events in the past year⁸⁷ illustrating the interest and commitment of Hindu volunteers.

The Hindu community has and is contributing to both vision and action. The urgency of the situation demands a greater focus and greater effort to transform our perceptions and behaviours towards the Earth if future generations are to survive. This is the main impetus for the formation of Hindu Environment Task Force, whose role is to inspire change within the Hindu community.

⁸³ <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/hindu-9yp.pdf> pg. 3

⁸⁴ <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/Green%20Hindu%20Temples%20Guide.pdf>

⁸⁵ <https://eco.brahmakumaris.org/rising-to-the-climate-emergency-brahma-kumaris-uk-2021-cop26/>

⁸⁶ https://www.hinduclimateaction.org/?page_id=60

⁸⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-bristol-57803897>



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Action

“Action without vision creates division. Vision without action is imagination. Vision with action leads to transformation”

~ Swami Tejomayananda

Hindu scriptures provide a metaphysical and ethical framework of the intangible interconnection between humans and the environment which propagates an inherent environmental ethic. Amid the current environmental crisis, Hindus have a dharmic responsibility to understand and act on their own teachings regarding the care of the earth and its inhabitants. However, knowing is not doing, doing is doing. The next section lists a number of suggestions of how the Hindu community can take further steps to increase positive climate action, in accordance with traditional ideas externally within our faith communities, work and school and internally through our personal *sadhana*'s (spiritual practices).

Individual action:

1. Introspection. Asking what is the purpose of life and what it means to be a person in this world? Having a clear vision and understanding of the world and our place in it allows us to focus on the important things and not distracted by profiteers vying for our time, energy, and wealth.
2. Educate yourself and others about the issues. Make the connections of where things really come from and the process it goes through. Also, learning about the spiritual implications of the environmental crisis and what responsible action can you take. The first step is to understand the issues and connect the causal values and attitudes to the environmental crisis and its catastrophic effects being felt worldwide. And talk about it. Conversations that bring awareness can make a difference by sparking of ideas and inspiring each other to act.
3. The next step is to take selfless action for the welfare of the world. Offering seva to a spiritual-environmental cause is a wonderful way to spend time and energy. It allows us to contribute to the wider issues whilst growing internally. Service or seva offered up to a greater good, implemented with commitment and devotion becomes Karma yoga.
4. Spend quality time in nature and meditating on the elements⁸⁸. This could be going on nature walks, finding your local forest, park, or garden, and remembering to clean up after yourself. This time will calm the mind and remind us of the interconnection between ourselves and nature. When we are cooped up inside city walls there is a tendency to forget the beauty, abundance and wonder of the cycles of the natural world.
5. Conscious consumption. Consuming consciously is not only thinking about if we really need the product before we purchase it but also ensuring that our purchases are sustainable and made and delivered

⁸⁸ Chapple, Christopher Key. *Living Landscapes: Meditations on the Five Elements in Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain Yogas*. SUNY Press, 2020.



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through ethical means. This added layer of consumer research and not purchasing products that are unsustainable is an impetus for businesses to change their mindset and put people and planet first whilst still making a profit. Choose to refuse to purchase items that are made with or packaged in single-use plastic, or poor quality “fast fashion” that do not last. Take a water bottle/keep cup etc to eliminate plastic bottle and drink cup waste. Consume energy consciously in terms of food, light/electronics, and switch things off when they are not in use. Share, recycle, upcycle as

6. Conscious production. This means questioning the things we are producing – are they useful, sustainable, recyclable, shareable in respect to the environment and wellbeing of the maximum number of people? If our thoughts, words, and deeds are not positively productive, how can we change them? Innovate and build sustainable, cyclical practices that can be effectively implemented at school/work. Invest in eco-friendly technology that will create a sustainable future.

7. Offset carbon footprint when traveling. This can be done through planting trees or subscribing to an offsetting scheme. Have tree planting parties, fundraisers, events or sponsor such initiatives to celebrate or commiserate special occasions. If it is possible, walk or cycle to nearby destinations.

8. Practice ahimsa by moving to a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle. There are many meats and/or fish plant-based substitutes. This is one of the most effective choices you can make to reduce your personal carbon footprint. If you are vegetarian, source dairy items from dharmic sources that do no harm to the cow and calf. If you have space at home, start a small vegetable patch or fruit garden or get involved with a community one.

Community and temple activities

1. Implement green practices and technology in places of worship. Temples, centres, and places of worship can be standard bearers for green building by using natural materials, planting trees on their grounds, and embracing renewable energy practices. For example, the use of solar power, installing water-efficient faucets, and using recycled grey water for plants. The BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Temple in London was built with an environmental ethos in mind⁸⁹ and has systematically optimised energy efficiency and low-carbon practices through using natural light, avoiding energy waste, gardening, and planting and advocating low-emission transportation amongst visitors⁹⁰ and.

2. Support temple greening initiatives. Get involved with making your local temple eco-friendly and sustainable. Start or support ongoing initiatives such as celebrating festivals and special occasions by planting trees, installing an organic compost for degradable temple waste such as flowers and fruit or starting an organic garden.

⁸⁹ <http://londonmandir.baps.org/the-haveli/environment-friendly-features/>

⁹⁰ <https://wedocs.unep.org/bitstream/handle/20.500.11822/33262/GGHW.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> pg. 20



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3. Introduce the importance of environmentally friendly practices and sustainable living in talks, workshops, and events. Temples and study centres can convey the environmental ethic embedded in Hinduism in regular talks, workshops and events based on prayers, stories, and scriptural texts. Some examples of this might be observing UNEP's World Environment Day on 5th June to encourage positive environmental action by presenting the significance and symbolism of the deities that represent the elements or conducting yoga workshops that tie in the yamas and niyams to sustainable and environmentally friendly living.

4. Using sustainable and bio-degradable products and services. Temples, centres, and houses of worship can lead by example by using sustainable and locally sourced products such as recyclable thalis/plates, cutlery and cups, recycled paper, organic cleaning products and locally grown foods. Temple shops can use paper bags and ensure their packaging is not made from single-use plastics or non-degradable materials⁹¹.

5. Greening festivals and celebrations. Some of the most celebrated festivals use very environmentally unfriendly materials. This is where we can make a change on a mass scale. For example, using natural organic powders during Holi celebrations, creating Ganesha idols out of natural clay, banning fireworks during Diwali, using plant-based milk as an offering during Shivaratri and reusing it to make prasad.

6. Start a faith community fruit and/or vegetable garden. Offering prayers to the devatas and the active participation in growing food ignites an awareness of the interconnection of humans and nature.

7. Support or start local Gaushalas where animals are well looked after. This gives the animals a good quality of life and using the excess milk from these animals is far more dharmic than that of those that are treated as live 'stock'.

8. Use digital marketing rather than physically printing flyers and posters. Recycle or reuse paper waste in creative and responsible ways. For example, creating art or sculptures from waste as a teaching or awareness activity⁹².

The Bhumi Projects Green Temple Initiative⁹³ and the UN Guidelines on Green Houses of Worship⁹⁴ literature includes many more sustainable practices. It is an effort to make Hindu pilgrimage sites and worshipping practices around the world more environmentally sustainable. This can be adapted for temples and ashrams and Indian knowledge centres here in the UK.

Final thought:

“Remember, we must ~~only~~take from Nature that which is a necessity. If human beings today forget this principle and begin to abuse their power over Nature, future generations of humanity will pay the price.”

⁹¹ <https://chennai.citizenmatters.in/composting-floral-waste-mylapore-besant-nagar-kapaleeswarar-temple-chennai-5337>

⁹² Klöckner, C. A., and Sommer, L. K.. "Visual art inspired by climate change—An analysis of audience reactions to 37 artworks presented during 21st UN climate summit in Paris." PloS one 16, no. 2, 2021

⁹³ Green Temples Guide: <http://www.arcworld.org/downloads/Green%20Hindu%20Temples%20Guide.pdf>

⁹⁴ UN Guidelines on Green Houses of Worship: <https://www.unep.org/resources/publication/guidelines-green-houses-worship>



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~ Mahabharata

We started this paper by saying that anthropogenic climate change is perhaps the most profound and complex challenge to have confronted the human race⁹⁵. Humans have caused this crisis and humans have the ability to remedy it. This remedy needs us to change our attitudes and behaviours. Change comes from taking a dharmic course of action and it is our “dharmic duty [to ensure that] we have a functioning, abundant, and bountiful planet”⁹⁶ for this generation and the generations to come. Hindu philosophy has within its tenets the preservation and care towards the Earth. Adherents must now introspect and live lives of balance, integrity, and honesty. It may appear difficult, but it is possible by constant practice and awareness of the choices we are making.

Only through individual perfection can world perfection be achieved

~ Swami Chinmayananda



⁹⁵ Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. *The Oxford handbook of religion and ecology*. OUP USA, 2006, pg.2

⁹⁶ Hindu Climate Declaration: <http://www.hinduclimatedeclaration2015.org/english>