

Environmental Ethics as Moral Commons Governance: Reinterpreting the Indian Knowledge System for Contemporary Ecological Politics

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Received: 8 March 2026 / Accepted: 17 March 2026 / Published: 31 March 2026
Journal homepage: <https://anubodhan.org>

Abstract

Contemporary environmental governance frameworks, mostly based on regulatory compliance and market-based tools, have found it difficult to address the ethical roots of ecological degradation. Although technological and legal measures remain important, their long-term success is limited without shared moral commitments guiding collective ecological restraint. As a response, scholars have increasingly engaged with indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems as alternative ethical resources for sustainability. This paper argues that environmental ethics within the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) can be reinterpreted as a form of moral commons governance—a type of ecological regulation rooted in ethical duty, collective responsibility, and cosmological order rather than solely in formal institutional enforcement. Through interpretive analysis of classical Indian philosophical texts and a comparative review of indigenous ecological practices—such as sacred groves, traditional water management, and the Bishnoi community—the study shows how ethical norms have historically functioned as governance tools shaping human–nature relationships. Instead of idealising IKS, the paper critically explores its limitations, including social hierarchy, institutional fragility, and translation challenges within diverse democratic settings. The findings indicate that while IKS-based ethics cannot be directly copied, their core principles—restraint, duty, and intergenerational responsibility—can effectively enhance modern environmental governance when combined with democratic institutions and scientific understanding.

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Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Environmental Ethics, Moral Commons Governance, Political Ecology, Sustainability Governance, Indigenous Knowledge

1. Introduction

Environmental degradation in the modern era has increasingly exposed the limitations of governance models that treat ecological crises mainly as issues of regulation, pricing, or technological efficiency. Although such approaches have achieved measurable results in specific contexts, they often fail to foster the ethical commitments necessary for long-term ecological restraint. The lack of moral accountability and collective responsibility has therefore become a significant weakness within leading sustainability frameworks (Dryzek, 2013).

This limitation has sparked renewed scholarly interest in indigenous and non-Western knowledge systems, not only as sources of ecological information but also as normative frameworks that influence environmental behaviour beyond formal institutions (Berkes, 2012). These systems incorporate ethical reasoning, cultural responsibilities, and collective identity into daily practices of resource use and conservation.

Within this broader intellectual shift, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) presents a particularly instructive example. Rooted in philosophical traditions that emphasise moral order, restraint, and interconnectedness, IKS views human–environment relations as ethically governed rather than solely economically optimised. Classical Indian thought does not regard nature as an external object to be managed but places it within a moral universe structured by duty, balance, and responsibility.

Existing scholarship on IKS has largely emphasised its cultural significance or its value as a civilisational critique of modern industrial society (Dwivedi, 1990; Sharma, 2017). While such studies highlight the ethical richness of Indian traditions, they rarely explore how these ethical principles function as mechanisms of governance capable of regulating collective behaviour. This paper addresses that analytical gap by conceptualising environmental ethics within IKS as a form of moral commons governance—an arrangement in which ethical norms, social sanctions, and cosmological beliefs operate as regulatory forces.

The paper further contends that although moral commons governance provides valuable insights for contemporary sustainability debates, it is neither universally applicable nor free from structural constraints. A critical reinterpretation is therefore necessary to evaluate its relevance within modern democratic, pluralistic, and market-integrated societies.

2. Contribution to the Literature

This paper makes three contributions to interdisciplinary debates on environmental ethics and governance. First, it introduces the concept of moral commons governance to explain how ethical norms and shared moral worldviews can function as regulatory mechanisms beyond formal institutional arrangements. Second, it repositions the Indian Knowledge System within contemporary political ecology and governance scholarship, moving beyond cultural description towards analytical engagement. Third, by explicitly examining the social and institutional limits of IKS-based practices, the paper promotes a balanced framework that avoids normative romanticisation while maintaining ethical relevance. These contributions extend existing commons and sustainability literature by highlighting the role of moral regulation in supporting ecological systems.

3. Theoretical Framework: Moral Commons Governance

Commons governance scholarship has traditionally emphasised institutional design, rule enforcement, and collective-choice arrangements as key factors in maintaining shared resources (Ostrom, 1990). While these insights remain fundamental, they often underestimate the role of ethical norms and moral worldviews in shaping collective ecological behaviour over long periods.

Moral commons governance describes a form of environmental regulation where shared ethical commitments, cosmological beliefs, and social obligations serve as the main governance tools. Instead of relying on coercive authority or economic incentives, such systems function through internalised restraint, social accountability, and moral sanctions. In this context, environmental protection is maintained more by collective adherence to ethical norms than by external enforcement.

The Indian Knowledge System offers a historically grounded example of moral commons governance. Ethical concepts such as *ṛta* and *dharma* serve as normative principles that align individual behaviour with ecological balance. Indigenous practices translated these ideas into localised governance arrangements, illustrating how moral regulation can influence environmental outcomes. However, moral commons governance is inherently context-dependent and vulnerable to social inequality, political marginalisation, and economic disruption—limitations that warrant critical scrutiny.

4. Research Design and Analytical Strategy:

This study employs an interpretive qualitative research approach that combines philosophical analysis with institutional interpretation. Classical Indian texts, including the Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad Gita, and selected epic writings, were chosen for their lasting engagement with ethical reasoning, cosmological order, and social duty. These texts are not viewed as fixed doctrines, but as

normative resources that have historically influenced ecological reasoning and social conduct.

Indigenous ecological practices—such as sacred groves, traditional water management systems, and the Bishnoi community—are examined as historically contingent governance arrangements rather than fixed traditions. The analysis focuses on how ethical norms were transformed into collective regulation, while also recognising contextual exclusions and structural constraints. This comparative and critical approach allows for an evaluation of both normative ideals and governance outcomes.

5. Ethical Ordering of Nature in Classical Indian Thought

Environmental ethics in classical Indian philosophy are rooted in wider metaphysical ideas that focus on interconnectedness and moral balance. Instead of separating humans from nature, these traditions see ecological systems as essential parts of social and ethical living.

Early Vedic thought presents ecological balance as a moral principle that governs both natural processes and human behaviour. Natural elements are often personified and revered, embodying a relationship based on ethical restraint rather than instrumental dominance (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Griffith, 1896/2014). This moral perspective sets boundaries on resource use by connecting ecological damage to ethical violations.

The Atharva Veda, especially in its depiction of Earth as a nurturing and responsive being, expresses a relational ethic that highlights reciprocity between humans and the natural environment. Environmental damage is seen not merely as physical harm but as a breach of moral and social order (Dwivedi, 1990).

Upanishadic philosophy deepens this ethical outlook by rejecting dualistic distinctions between humans and nature. The claim that all existence is permeated by a shared ultimate reality strengthens ethical restraint and responsible resource use (Sharma, 2017). The Bhagavad Gita extends this reasoning through the principle of action without attachment, discouraging accumulation driven by desire or greed (Gandhi, 1960).

Epic narratives further connect environmental ethics with political responsibility by depicting ecological protection as a duty of government. Leaders are shown as morally responsible for the health of forests, rivers, and wildlife, implying early ideas of environmental accountability within political authority (Alley, 2002).

6. Indigenous Practices as Moral Commons Institutions

6.1 Sacred Groves

Sacred groves are localised ecological areas where environmental protection was rooted in religious belief and social duty. These forest patches were preserved not through external enforcement but via shared moral standards that regarded ecological harm as an ethical offence. Their longevity relied on collective acceptance of moral penalties rather than formal policing (Gadgil & Vartak, 1976).

While sacred groves played a vital role in conserving biodiversity, their governance structures were not always inclusive. Access and decision-making were frequently influenced by existing social hierarchies, highlighting both the strengths and limitations of morally grounded environmental regulation.

6.2 Traditional Water Management Systems

Traditional water-harvesting structures—such as tanks, stepwells, and rainwater channels—reflect localised ecological knowledge integrated with ethical stewardship. These systems emphasised collective maintenance, equitable distribution, and long-term sustainability, often reinforced through social obligation and religious merit (Agarwal & Narain, 1997). Their decline illustrates the erosion of both ecological knowledge and moral governance under centralised infrastructure development.

6.3 The Bishnoi Community

The Bishnoi community exemplifies an ethically motivated approach to ecological protection, where caring for the environment is seen as a moral duty rather than a regulatory requirement. Conservation efforts arise from internalised ethical commitment, demonstrating how moral conviction can sustain ecological restraint without coercive enforcement (Guha, 2000). However, such models rely on strong internal cohesion and shared belief systems that are difficult to reproduce in pluralistic contexts.

7. Limits and Contradictions of IKS-based Ethics

Despite their normative richness, IKS-based environmental ethics are not free from structural limitations. Moral commons governance assumes shared ethical frameworks and social cohesion—conditions that are increasingly fragmented in contemporary societies. Many traditional practices were embedded within hierarchical social orders, raising concerns about exclusion based on caste, gender, and access to resources. Sacred groves, for instance, while ecologically effective, were not always democratically governed. Similarly, traditional water systems often reflected unequal power relations within villages.

Furthermore, market integration, state intervention, and economic pressures have weakened the moral authority that supported such systems. Attempts to revive IKS without addressing these structural conditions risk becoming merely symbolic rather than leading to genuine governance reform.

8. Implications for Contemporary Environmental Governance

The modern significance of IKS lies not in its outright revival but in critical rethinking. Ethical principles such as restraint, duty, and intergenerational responsibility can complement existing governance structures by enhancing moral accountability and public trust. Effective integration requires institutional translation, democratic safeguards, and attention to social inequalities. When combined with scientific expertise and participatory governance, morally guided approaches can strengthen the resilience of sustainability efforts.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that environmental ethics within the Indian Knowledge System can be understood as a historically rooted form of moral commons governance. By regulating ecological behaviour through ethical obligation and collective responsibility, these systems provided an alternative to coercive or market-based environmental control. However, their modern relevance relies on critical reinterpretation rather than uncritical revival. Incorporating ethical insights from IKS into contemporary governance frameworks can foster more legitimate and sustainable responses to ecological crises when aligned with democratic and scientific principles.

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