



Sacred ecology and human rights: *Panchatantra*'s ethical vision for environmental justice

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Abstract

Environmental rights are increasingly recognized as fundamental human rights within international legal frameworks, including the UNHRC's 2021 resolution and the Rio Declaration (1992). While modern legal regimes emphasize the right to a clean and sustainable environment, ancient Indian Knowledge System (IKS) offer ethical and philosophical foundations for environmental justice.

This study explores the *Panchatantra*, a classical Indian text, to examine its ecological ethics and their alignment with contemporary international environmental governance. By analysing key fables, this study highlights how traditional narratives address resource conservation, wildlife protection, climate resilience, and ethical governance, reinforcing the notion that environmental protection is an intrinsic human right.

The study aims to analyse selected fables from the *Panchatantra* that emphasize environmental ethics; compare their themes with international environmental regimes such as the Paris Agreement (2015), Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 13, 14, 15); and assess how IKS can contribute to global sustainability discourses. The research methodology involves a textual analysis of selected fables, examining their moral implications and linking them with contemporary legal principles. A comparative approach will be employed to evaluate their relevance to modern environmental human rights frameworks.

This study provides a cross-cultural perspective on environmental justice, demonstrating how IKS offer ethical guidance for sustainable development. The findings will contribute to interdisciplinary policy debates, advocating for the integration of traditional ecological wisdom into global environmental governance. By bridging ancient moral philosophy with international law, this study underscores the role of cultural narratives in shaping a holistic approach to environmental human rights.

Keywords: Environmental rights, indian knowledge system, human rights, *Panchatantra*, sustainable development goals

Introduction

Context and Importance

Environmental rights are increasingly recognized as fundamental human rights, as evidenced by key international legal frameworks such as the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Resolution 48/13 (2021), which explicitly acknowledges the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment. (UN. Human Rights Council (48th Session), 2021) this recognition aligns with principles enshrined in earlier agreements, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) and the Paris Agreement (2015). The interdependence of human well-being and ecological balance has led to significant discourse on how environmental protection must be integrated into global human rights governance.

Despite these legal advancements, the philosophical and ethical dimensions of environmental rights remain underexplored. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and historical traditions provide valuable ethical frameworks that predate contemporary environmental laws. In this context, ancient Indian literature, particularly the *Panchatantra*, offers profound insights into ecological ethics, governance, and sustainability. Traditionally regarded as a collection of moral fables designed to educate children on moral norms, the *Panchatantra* also contains narratives that emphasize sustainable resource management, collective responsibility, and ecological harmony.

By examining selected fables from the *Panchatantra*, this study seeks to uncover early Indian ecological wisdom and its relevance to modern environmental human rights frameworks. Through its allegorical storytelling, the

Panchatantra reflects a worldview that recognizes nature not merely as a resource but as an entity with intrinsic value, demanding ethical governance and sustainable interactions. The ethical concerns expressed in the *Panchatantra* resonate with contemporary discussions on climate justice, wildlife protection, and the responsibilities of governance in ensuring environmental sustainability.

This study aims to bridge the gap between traditional ecological thought and contemporary environmental governance, illustrating how ancient moral philosophy can enrich legal and policy discussions on environmental human rights. By analysing the fables in relation to international frameworks like the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 13, 14, and 15), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and climate agreements, the study provides a cross-cultural perspective on environmental justice.

Rationale for Study

The intersection of IKS and environmental human rights remains an understudied area, particularly in the context of traditional literary narratives. While contemporary environmental law emphasizes state obligations and regulatory frameworks, the *Panchatantra* provides an ethical foundation for sustainability, emphasizing community participation, inter-generational responsibility, and moral governance. By analysing the fables of *Panchatantra* through the environmental human rights perspective, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of environmental justice, advocating for the integration of Indian ecological wisdom into global environmental policy and legal discourses.

Research Methodology

1. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following key research inquiries:

1. How do the fables in the *Panchatantra* articulate ecological ethics and the moral responsibilities of governance in environmental conservation?
2. In what ways do these ethical principles align with modern international environmental legal frameworks such as the Rio Declaration (1992), the Paris Agreement (2015), and the SDGs?
3. How can the environmental values in the *Panchatantra* inform contemporary policy debates on environmental human rights and sustainable governance?
4. What are the implications of integrating IKS like the *Panchatantra* into global discourses on environmental governance and human rights?

By addressing these questions, this study aims to demonstrate the continued relevance of ancient Indian ethical traditions particularly the IKS in addressing contemporary environmental challenges. The answers to these questions will guide the fulfilment of the following research objectives.

2. Research Objectives

The general objective of this study is to explore how the *Panchatantra* provides ethical insights into environmental governance and how these insights align with contemporary international environmental regimes that recognize environmental rights as human rights. By analysing key fables, this study seeks to bridge IKS and modern legal frameworks to propose a more holistic approach to sustainability and environmental justice.

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To analyse selected fables from the *Panchatantra* that emphasize environmental ethics and sustainability
2. To compare *Panchatantra*'s environmental themes with international environmental regimes
3. To explore the role of Indian traditional ecological wisdom in shaping modern environmental human rights discourses
4. To assess the policy implications of integrating *Panchatantra*'s environmental ethics into global environmental governance

3. Research Method

The *Panchatantra*, though primarily recognized as a didactic text on political wisdom and ethics, also contains numerous fables that address critical themes such as conservation, ethical leadership, human-nature interactions, and sustainable resource management. This study adopts a textual analysis approach to examine selected fables and their relevance to modern environmental governance, focusing on their ethical and philosophical implications in contemporary environmental discourse.

To achieve the first research objective, a textual analysis of selected fables from the *Panchatantra* will be conducted to uncover their implicit and explicit environmental messages. These narratives will be examined for themes related to resource conservation, ecological balance, and ethical governance, offering insights into how ancient Indian thought conceptualized environmental responsibility and sustainability.

For the second objective, a comparative analysis will be conducted to explore the alignment of the *Panchatantra*'s ecological principles with key international environmental legal frameworks. The study will critically examine how concepts within the fables resonate with or diverge from the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992), which emphasizes sustainability and intergenerational justice; the Convention on Biological Diversity (1992), which focuses on conservation and ecosystem management; the Paris Agreement (2015), which advocates climate action and environmental responsibility; and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 13, 14, and 15), which promote climate action, life below water, and life on land.

To fulfil the third objective, the study will evaluate how IKS—particularly the ethical and ecological perspectives embedded in the *Panchatantra*—can supplement, challenge, or enhance existing environmental legal frameworks. By examining the moral lessons within these fables, the research will contribute to the broader discourse on the integration of cultural and ethical dimensions into environmental human rights policies, demonstrating how traditional ecological wisdom remains relevant in contemporary governance structures.

Recognizing environmental rights as human rights necessitates a multidimensional approach that incorporates legal, ethical, and cultural perspectives. To achieve the fourth objective, the study will assess the policy implications of integrating *Panchatantra*'s ethical insights into sustainability education, environmental policymaking, and cross-cultural governance models. This analysis will highlight how ancient Indian ecological wisdom can inform contemporary discussions on environmental governance, fostering a more inclusive, ethical, and sustainable approach to ecological conservation.

Review of Literature

1. Conceptual Frameworks

1.1 Environmental Justice and Human Rights

The concept of environmental justice emerged as a response to the unequal distribution of environmental harms and benefits, particularly in marginalized communities. Scholars such as Bullard (Bullard, 2000) [3] and Schlosberg (Schlosberg, 2007) [14] argue that environmental justice extends beyond pollution control to include access to natural resources, climate adaptation, and the recognition of environmental rights as fundamental human rights. International legal frameworks such as the UNHRC Resolution on the right to a clean and sustainable environment and the Paris Agreement underscore the intersection between environmental protection and human rights, recognizing the environment as a prerequisite for the fulfilment of social, economic, and cultural rights.

IKS similarly upholds protection and conservation of environment as a moral duty. Dharma (righteous duty), as articulated in texts like the *Panchatantra*, reinforces ethical governance, ecological responsibility, and sustainable living. This study puts the *Panchatantra* within environmental justice discourse, analysing how its fables promote sustainability, conservation ethics, and collective responsibility toward nature.

1.2 IKS and Ecological Ethics

IKS embody a holistic and interdependent view of nature and humanity, where ecological conservation is deeply

embedded in spiritual and ethical traditions (Tiwari, 1998)^[17]. Ancient texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and Smritis emphasize ecological balance, while Kautilya's Arthashastra discusses sustainable resource management (Shamasastri, 1951)^[15].

The *Panchatantra*, composed by Vishnu Sharma (circa 3rd century BCE), is often interpreted as a collection of moral fables designed to teach ethics and wisdom to children. However, a closer reading reveals recurring themes of environmental ethics, including: sustainable governance and resource conservation; the interconnectedness of all living beings; and the consequences of greed and environmental exploitation (Edgerton, 1924)^[4]. These principles resonate with modern sustainability frameworks and provide a unique non-Western perspective on environmental justice.

1.3 International Environmental Governance

Global environmental governance operates through multilateral agreements, legal frameworks, and institutional mechanisms aimed at protecting ecosystems and human rights. The following key agreements illustrate how environmental rights have evolved into legally recognized human rights:

- Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) – Establishes Principle 1, stating that human beings are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.
- Convention on Biological Diversity (1992) – Recognizes the intrinsic value of ecosystems and promotes sustainable use of biodiversity.
- Paris Agreement (2015) – Addresses climate change as a fundamental threat to human rights, particularly for vulnerable populations.
- UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 13, 14, 15) – Emphasize climate action, protection of life below water, and sustainable land use.

By comparing these frameworks with *Panchatantra*'s ecological themes, this study aims to highlight how traditional Indian narratives align with global environmental governance principles.

2. Existing Scholarship

2.1 *Panchatantra* as a Moral and Governance Text

The *Panchatantra* is one of the most influential collections of fables in Indian literary history. Traditionally, it is regarded as an entertaining yet instructive text that imparts principles of ethical decision-making, often presented in a manner accessible to children. Originally composed in Sanskrit, the text is designed as a didactic treatise on *niti* (political wisdom) and *dharma* (righteous conduct) (Edgerton, 1924)^[4]. While primarily recognized as a manual for morals, its narratives also embed significant ethical reflections on human-environment interactions (Olivelle, 1997)^[12]. The fables, often structured as nested stories, employ animals as protagonists, symbolizing human virtues and flaws, while implicitly addressing the consequences of ecological exploitation and resource mismanagement (Hertel, 1912)^[7].

Recent scholarship on IKS and environmental ethics suggests that ancient Indian fables often incorporate a deep ecological consciousness, reflecting an early understanding of interdependence between human actions, animals, and natural resources (Haberman, 2013)^[6]. The *Panchatantra*,

in particular, reinforces this interconnected worldview, depicting nature not merely as a backdrop for human activity but as an active participant in moral and ethical lessons (Rangarajan, 2001)^[13].

Thus, a few contemporary scholars have begun to explore ancient Indian texts from an environmental perspective. One such approach involves interpreting the text's emphasis on interdependence as a reflection of ecological principles, particularly the balance between humans and the natural world. By viewing these narratives through the environmental ethics perspective, scholars seek to uncover insights that remain relevant in contemporary discussions on sustainability and conservation

2.2 IKS and Ecological Conservation

Ancient Indian literature reflects a symbiotic relationship between humans and nature, often articulated through mythological and ethical narratives. The Atharva Veda (1200 BCE) includes hymns praising rivers, forests, and mountains, viewing them as divine entities deserving of respect (Bloomfield, 1973)^[2]. Similarly, the Mahabharata and Ramayana contain references to sustainable land use and water conservation (Mitra, 2024)^[11]. The *Panchatantra*, though not explicitly religious, reinforces these values through practical wisdom and ethical reasoning.

Scholarly research on IKS and environmental governance underscores the relevance of traditional ecological wisdom in fostering sustainable practices. Gadgil and Guha argue that indigenous ecological knowledge in India has historically contributed to biodiversity conservation and sustainable resource use, emphasizing the role of local communities in managing their environments (Madhav Gadgil, 1992)^[10]. This perspective aligns with Berkes, who presents Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) as an alternative paradigm to Western environmental management approaches, highlighting its adaptability, resilience, and emphasis on ecological balance (Berkes, 1999)^[1]. These insights suggest that modern sustainability frameworks can benefit from integrating IKS practices, which have long prioritized harmonious human-nature relationships.

Further, the intersection of ethical governance and sustainability in IKS provides a normative framework for environmental governance. Shanmugapriya and Christopher emphasize that ancient Indian texts promote ecological responsibility and sustainable governance through ethical frameworks that discourage short-term exploitation in favour of long-term environmental stability. Their study highlights that environmental consciousness in Indian traditions is deeply interwoven with governance principles, reinforcing the idea that sustainability is not only a scientific or economic concern but also a moral imperative (K. Shanmugapriya, 2023)^[8]. Together, these studies highlight that IKS is not merely historical knowledge but a dynamic system with practical applications in modern environmental governance and sustainable development.

2.3 IKS and Sustainable Development

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms that indigenous knowledge systems play a crucial role in sustainable environmental governance (UN, General Assembly (61 Session), 2007). Scholars such as Escobar and Shiva argue that indigenous narratives offer alternative models of sustainability, which often challenge dominant Western legal frameworks. Escobar underlines

that indigenous worldviews adopt a holistic approach to environmental governance, integrating spiritual, ecological, and social dimensions (Escobar, 1999) [5]. Similarly, Vandana Shiva highlights that TEK contributes to climate resilience and biodiversity conservation, countering extractivist development models that exploit natural resources (Shiva, 2005) [16]. These perspectives underscore the need to re-evaluate modern environmental policies through the perspectives of IKS wisdom.

The role of storytelling in transmitting environmental ethics has been widely acknowledged in contemporary scholarship. Kimmerer underscores that, indigenous narratives function as repositories of ecological wisdom, ensuring that sustainability principles are passed down across generations (Kimmerer, 2013) [9]. In this context, classical Indian literature, such as the *Panchatantra*, offers a moral ecology framework that resonates with contemporary discussions on environmental justice and ecological sustainability.

Building on these perspectives, this study analyses selected fables from the *Panchatantra* to extract key lessons on environmental ethics and sustainability. While traditionally regarded as a guide to governance and human conduct, the text also conveys implicit messages on interconnectedness of life forms, responsible resource management, and the consequences of environmental disruption. By analysing these narratives, this study highlights the *Panchatantra*'s relevance to modern environmental governance frameworks, particularly in fostering ethical approaches to sustainability and resource conservation.

Analysis of Fables and Key Findings

In this section analysis of selected fables from the *Panchatantra* that convey environmental ethics and their alignment with contemporary international environmental governance is presented. The findings highlight how traditional narratives advocate sustainability, resource management, and environmental justice, reinforcing the concept that environmental protection is an inherent human right.

1. *Panchatantra* Fables and Environmental Themes

The following fables illustrate the consequences of environmental mismanagement and the importance of cooperation in safeguarding natural resources, offering insights that resonate with modern environmental policies and sustainability frameworks. These fables exemplify the principles, demonstrating how the *Panchatantra*'s ethical teachings align with contemporary discussions on environmental governance and rights:

1.1 “The Monkey and the Crocodile” – Resource Conflicts and Territorial Integrity

This fable narrates the story of a monkey who befriends a crocodile and regularly offers him fruit from his tree. The crocodile's wife, envious of their friendship, demands that he bring the monkey's heart as a meal. The crocodile attempts to deceive the monkey by inviting him home, but the monkey realizes the betrayal and escapes (Olivelle, 1997) [12].

The story metaphorically represents territorial disputes and resource conflicts. The monkey symbolizes indigenous communities dependent on natural resources, while the crocodile represents external forces exploiting those

resources. Similar conflicts exist today over land acquisition, deforestation, and displacement of local communities. This resonates with SDG 15 (Life on Land) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992), which emphasize biodiversity protection and indigenous rights over land and resources.

1.2 “The Turtle and the Two Geese” – Climate Migration and Adaptation

A turtle lives near a lake and befriends two geese. When the lake begins to dry up, the geese offer to carry him to a new water body, instructing him to hold onto a stick with his mouth while they fly. Midway, the turtle, unable to contain his excitement, opens his mouth to speak and falls to his death (Olivelle, 1997) [12].

This fable illustrates the necessity of adaptation strategies in the face of environmental crises. The turtle's fate mirrors the vulnerability of communities facing climate-induced displacement, where failure to adapt leads to catastrophic consequences. The lesson aligns with the Paris Agreement (2015) and SDG 13 (Climate Action), both of which emphasize the importance of mitigating climate-induced displacement and building adaptive strategies for vulnerable populations.

1.3 “The Doves and the Fowler” – Wildlife Protection and Collective Resilience

A hunter lays a net to trap a flock of doves. Instead of panicking, the doves, led by their king, work together and fly away with the net, later seeking the help of a mouse to cut them free. Their unity ensures their survival (Olivelle, 1997) [12].

The tale highlights wildlife conservation, collective resilience, and the power of community action in the face of environmental threats. This story aligns with international wildlife protection laws, such as CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species), and SDG 15, which stress the need for conservation efforts and sustainable ecosystem management.

1.4 “The Lion and the Hare” – Ethical Leadership and Sustainable Governance

A lion terrorizes the animals of the forest, demanding daily sacrifices. When it is a rabbit's turn, he tricks the lion into looking into a well, whereupon the lion, believing his own reflection to be a rival, jumps in and drowns (Olivelle, 1997) [12].

This story conveys the importance of sustainable governance, ethical leadership, and responsible governance of natural resources. The lion symbolizes autocratic rulers who exploit resources without foresight, while the rabbit represents the wisdom of sustainable leadership. The fable's themes align with SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) and Rio Principle 10, which advocate participatory governance and environmental justice.

1.5 “The Iron Eating Mice” Resource Justice and Economic Equity

A merchant entrusts his iron stock to a friend before leaving on a journey. Upon his return, the friend falsely claims that mice ate the iron. The merchant, in turn, tricks the friend into believing that a hawk carried away his son, demonstrating the principle of accountability (Olivelle, 1997) [12].

The fable underscores resource justice, ethical trade, and accountability in economic activities. It aligns with SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), promoting sustainable business practices and ethical resource management.

2. Summary of Key Findings

The analysis of *Panchatantra* fables through the perspective of international environmental regimes reveals significant insights into the intersection of IKS and contemporary environmental governance. These narratives, composed as moral allegories, encapsulate ecological wisdom, ethical leadership, and sustainability principles that remain relevant today. The fables emphasize resource conservation, collective action, and the consequences of environmental mismanagement, offering a historical foundation for modern sustainability discourses.

The key findings from this study are as follows:

The *Panchatantra* reflects deep ecological wisdom, advocating sustainability, ethical governance, and environmental responsibility. Many fables illustrate the importance of judicious resource use, warning against overexploitation and highlighting the necessity of ecological balance. By integrating themes of accountability, cooperation, and resilience, these narratives promote an early awareness of environmental governance.

The fables align with international environmental legal frameworks, demonstrating a historical precedent for environmental justice. The principles reflected in *Panchatantra* fables resonate with contemporary environmental treaties such as the Rio Declaration, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), and the Paris Agreement. The tales emphasize collective environmental responsibility, ethical governance, and protection of natural resources, reinforcing global commitments to sustainable development and ecological justice.

Traditional narratives offer insights for integrating cultural perspectives into global sustainability discourses. The *Panchatantra* serves as a repository of indigenous ecological thought, highlighting the role of storytelling in shaping environmental consciousness. These fables provide a valuable framework for incorporating cultural values into global environmental policies, ensuring that sustainability efforts are inclusive and contextually relevant.

IKS particularly the *Panchatantra*, contribute to shaping contemporary environmental governance policies. The recognition of indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge in policy frameworks such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and international biodiversity conservation efforts underscores the continuing relevance of ancient wisdom in modern governance. By revisiting these fables, policymakers can draw from historical insights to create more holistic and sustainable environmental strategies.

By examining the ecological ethics embedded in *Panchatantra* tales, this study made an attempt to bridge ancient wisdom with modern environmental law, demonstrating that environmental rights are intrinsic to human rights and sustainability policies worldwide. This study highlights the need for a multidimensional approach that integrates traditional narratives with contemporary governance, ensuring that environmental protection is not only a legal obligation but also a culturally embedded ethical imperative.

Implications & Contributions

1. Bridging IKS and Modern Environmental Law

The *Panchatantra* offers a narrative-based ethical framework that aligns with contemporary environmental human rights discourse. While international legal frameworks such as the Paris Agreement (2015), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD, 1992), and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 13, 14, 15) provide structured policies, they often lack moral and cultural dimensions that encourage intrinsic motivation for environmental conservation. The *Panchatantra*, through its fables, promotes practical wisdom (*nīti*), ecological interdependence, and ethical responsibility, reinforcing the idea that environmental protection is not merely a legal obligation but a moral imperative.

The integration of IKS into modern environmental governance could strengthen global sustainability efforts by providing indigenous and narrative-based learning models. Recognizing the moral and philosophical foundations of environmental justice in Indian texts can contribute to a culturally sensitive approach to environmental policy, especially in the Global South, where traditional knowledge remains integral to everyday life.

2. Policy Integration: Eco-Education and Indigenous Wisdom

One of the most significant contributions of this study is its potential to influence environmental education and policy-making. Governments and international institutions are increasingly recognizing the role of indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge in shaping sustainable policies. The *Panchatantra*'s ecological insights can be incorporated into educational curricula to promote ethical and value-based environmental education.

By integrating narrative-based ecological ethics into school and university curricula, policymakers can foster a more holistic environmental consciousness among future generations. This approach is particularly relevant in India, where the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) emphasizes the inclusion of IKS in formal education.

Conclusion

The study establishes that the *Panchatantra*'s fables encapsulate deep ecological wisdom, advocating principles of sustainability, ethical governance, and environmental responsibility. Through an analysis of these moral allegories, this study has demonstrated how the narratives promote judicious resource use, collective environmental action, and the ethical consequences of mismanagement—values those are in tune with contemporary environmental governance frameworks. By drawing parallels with international environmental treaties such as the Rio Declaration, the CBD, and the Paris Agreement, the study reinforces the relevance of IKS in modern sustainability discourses. The fables, rich in lessons on cooperation, resilience, and accountability, serve as an early form of environmental governance, offering historical legitimacy to the principles embedded in environmental human rights and global sustainability efforts.

Beyond their literary and philosophical significance, these narratives provide a valuable ethical framework for integrating cultural perspectives into environmental policies. The research highlights the potential for policy integration by incorporating IKS-based ecological ethics into modern

governance, particularly through eco-education and indigenous wisdom-driven sustainability strategies. Recognizing the *Panchatantra*'s insights within environmental governance could enhance environmental awareness and foster a deeper, value-driven commitment to sustainability. By bridging ancient wisdom with modern legal and governance frameworks, this study affirms that environmental rights are intrinsic to human rights, advocating for a multidimensional approach where legal, ethical, and cultural perspectives converge to create a more holistic and enduring environmental governance model.

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