

A STUDY ON ENVIRONMENTAL AND RESOURCE ETHICS IN THE RIGVEDA AND THEIR RELEVANCE TO SDGs

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines environmental and resource ethics in the Rigveda — the oldest layer of Vedic literature — and evaluates how those ethical ideas map onto the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Close reading of representative hymns (notably the Nadistuti/Nadi-sukta and hymns to Apas, Prithvi, Agni and the Soma ritual context) reveals recurring values: reverence for water, earth and vegetation; an ethics of restraint and gratitude toward resources; recognition of interdependence (expressed via the principle of Rta (ऋत), or cosmic order); and ritual practices that encode limits on resource use. Secondary scholarship interprets these hymns as proto-ecological knowledge embedded in social and ritual practice. Drawing on textual examples and modern scholarship, the analysis links Rigvedic attitudes to SDGs such as Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6), Life on Land (SDG 15), Climate Action (SDG 13) and Responsible Consumption and Production (SDG 12), arguing that Rigvedic ethics can enrich contemporary sustainability discourse by supplying cultural narratives that encourage stewardship, intergenerational responsibility, and locally grounded resource governance. The paper ends with policy implications for integrating indigenous and classical wisdom into modern sustainability education and practice.

Keywords: Ecological Interdependence; Environmental Ethics; Indigenous Knowledge Systems; Resource Ethics; Responsible Consumption; Rigveda; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); Sustainability and Cultural Traditions; Rta (Cosmic Order); Water Stewardship.

Introduction

Environmental ethics in classical texts has attracted renewed attention as scholars and policymakers seek culturally resonant ways to advance sustainability. The Rigveda — composed of hymns praising deities who personify natural phenomena — offers a window into early Indian attitudes toward water, land, forests, animals and human duties toward these constituents of the biosphere. Rather than treating the Rigveda as purely religious or mythic, this paper treats selected hymns as expressions of moral and practical orientations toward the environment that can be read alongside contemporary sustainability goals. The study combines primary textual references with modern scholarship to (1) identify core environmental and resource ethical themes in the Rigveda; (2) show how these themes resonate with specific SDGs; and (3) propose how Rigvedic wisdom can be operationalised in contemporary sustainability education and policy.

The accelerating ecological crisis of the twenty-first century has compelled scholars, policymakers, and civil society to revisit ethical traditions that shape human relationships with nature. Climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, land degradation, and unsustainable consumption patterns indicate that technological

innovation alone cannot resolve environmental decline. At its core, the sustainability challenge is ethical: it concerns how human beings perceive nature, how they assign value to non-human life, and how they regulate the use of shared resources. In this context, ancient philosophical and literary traditions are increasingly examined not as relics of the past but as repositories of ecological insight capable of enriching contemporary sustainability discourse.

Among the world's earliest literary compositions, the Rigveda occupies a foundational position in the intellectual history of the Indian subcontinent. Composed over several centuries during the second millennium BCE, the Rigveda is a collection of hymns that reflect the cosmology, social organisation, and material life of early Vedic communities. While primarily devotional in form, the text contains rich descriptions of rivers, forests, seasons, atmospheric phenomena, agricultural practices, and pastoral life. These descriptions are not merely poetic embellishments; they reveal a worldview in which natural forces are acknowledged as powerful, life-sustaining, and morally significant. The repeated invocation of earth, water, fire, wind, and sky suggests an integrated vision of existence in which humans are participants in, rather than masters of, the natural order.

Environmental and resource ethics in the Rigveda are embedded within its cosmological framework, particularly through the concept of *Rta* (ऋत) — the principle of cosmic order that governs both natural processes and moral conduct. *Rta* (ऋत) signifies harmony, balance, and regularity: the rising of the sun, the flow of rivers, the cycle of seasons, and the observance of truth are all manifestations of this order. Human prosperity, according to this vision, depends upon alignment with these rhythms. Such an orientation implies that excessive exploitation or disruption of natural systems would constitute a violation not only of ecological balance but also of moral duty. Thus, the Rigvedic worldview implicitly advances an ethic of restraint, reciprocity, and reverence.

The hymns to rivers (notably the Nadistuti Sukta), the praise of waters (*Apas*), the invocations to Earth (*Prithvi*), and the centrality of fire (*Agni*) illustrate how elemental forces were regarded as sustaining agencies worthy of gratitude and respect. Rivers are celebrated as nourishing mothers; the earth is addressed as a stabilising foundation; fire is treated as a mediator between realms, requiring careful tending and disciplined use. This personalisation of natural elements does not merely reflect mythological imagination; it also functions as a moral strategy that discourages reckless exploitation. When nature is perceived as sacred, resource use becomes regulated by ethical considerations rather than driven solely by material gain.

In contemporary global governance, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a comprehensive framework for balancing economic development, social inclusion, and environmental protection. Adopted in 2015, the seventeen SDGs aim to address interconnected challenges such as poverty, hunger, clean water access, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation, and responsible consumption. While the SDGs are articulated in modern policy language, their underlying aspiration — to ensure harmony between human advancement and ecological integrity — resonates with the moral vision embedded in many traditional knowledge systems. Examining the Rigveda through the lens of sustainability allows for a dialogue between ancient ethical insights and contemporary global commitments.

This study seeks to explore the environmental and resource ethics articulated in the Rigveda and to analyse their relevance to selected SDGs. The objective is neither to romanticise antiquity nor to claim that Vedic society achieved ecological perfection. Instead, the aim is to identify enduring ethical principles — such as reverence for water, respect for seasonal cycles, moderation in consumption, and recognition of interdependence — that may contribute constructively to present-day sustainability thinking. By situating Rigvedic ideas within the broader framework of environmental ethics, this paper highlights the importance of cultural narratives in shaping sustainable behaviour.

Furthermore, in countries like India, where classical texts continue to influence cultural identity and educational discourse, drawing connections between ancient wisdom and modern sustainability agendas can enhance public engagement. When environmental protection is framed not merely as a regulatory requirement but as a continuation of inherited ethical traditions, it acquires deeper legitimacy and emotional resonance. Integrating such perspectives into sustainability education, community governance, and policy discussions may strengthen collective commitment to the SDGs.

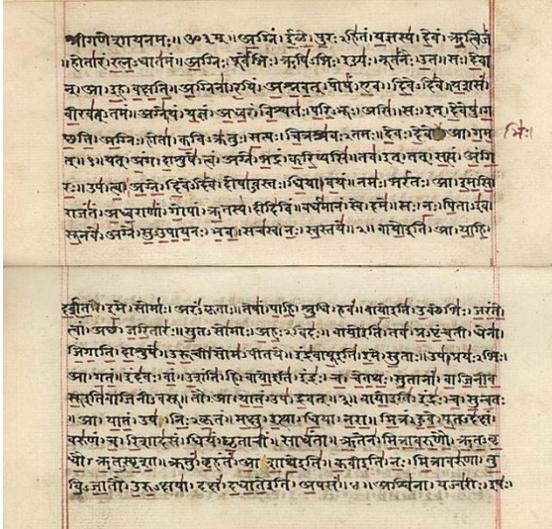
In sum, the Rigveda offers more than theological speculation; it presents a moral imagination in which human life is interwoven with elemental forces and ecological processes. By examining these dimensions carefully and critically, this paper contributes to an interdisciplinary conversation that bridges textual studies, environmental philosophy, and sustainable development. The sections that follow analyse specific hymns and themes, interpret their ethical implications, and evaluate how these insights can inform contemporary efforts toward ecological balance and sustainable resource management.

Methodology and sources

This is a textual-analytical study: representative Rigvedic hymns are examined (English translations and critical editions), and interpretations from modern research on Vedic ecology, environmental history, and sustainability are brought in. Key secondary sources include studies on Vedic environmental thought and peer-reviewed and scholarly analyses that connect Indian knowledge systems with sustainable development frameworks. (Selected sources are cited in the references and in-text where they support central claims.)

Literature review: Vedic texts and ecological readings

Recent scholarship has treated Vedic texts as repositories of proto-ecological knowledge: authors highlight hymns that address rivers, forests, seasons and agricultural practice and argue that Vedic ritual and cosmology often encode sustainable resource practices. Several contemporary papers synthesise these perspectives and propose that Indian knowledge systems — including Rigvedic hymns — offer ethics of moderation, reverence and household-level stewardship compatible with modern sustainability aims. These works also caution against simplistic idealisation: textual reverence does not automatically translate to historical practices, and interpreting ritual texts as direct "environmental manuals" requires nuance. Still, the consensus among many scholars is that the Rigveda contains ethical resources worth retrieving for modern sustainability conversations.



Source: Rigveda.

The image shows an ancient Sanskrit manuscript of the Rigveda. The red markings and script style indicate careful preservation and scholarly engagement. This image symbolises the textual authority and antiquity of Vedic knowledge.

From the perspective of environmental and resource ethics, the manuscript represents the source of ideas such as reverence for natural forces, cosmic balance (Rta), and regulated resource use. The preservation of the manuscript itself also reflects intergenerational responsibility — a principle closely aligned with sustainable development. Just as the text has been conserved across centuries, environmental resources must also be preserved for future generations, which directly connects to the SDG framework’s emphasis on sustainability.

Core environmental and resource-ethical themes in the Rigveda

1. Reverence and sacralization of natural elements

The Rigveda repeatedly names and praises natural forces — rivers (Apas), earth (Prithvi), sky (Dyaus), fire (Agni), wind (Vayu), dawn (Ushas) — not only as deities but as life-giving entities whose well-being is integral to human welfare. This sacralization establishes moral restraint: harming the river or forest becomes a religiously charged act, while honouring them is meritorious. Scholars interpret this as an ethic that protects ecosystems by embedding respect in ritual and language.

2. Water ethics: the Nadistuti (Nadi-sukta) and rivers as communal commons

Hymn 10.75 (Nadistuti/Nadi-sukta) famously praises rivers and lists major waterways of the Vedic world. The hymn celebrates the rivers’ abundance and requests their continued flow to sustain people and cattle. This hymn functions as both a geographic record and a moral affirmation that water is central to communal

life and deserving of reverence — a proto-norm for water stewardship. If water is praised as life-sustaining and sacred, exploitation or pollution would be conceptually dissonant with that ethic.

3. Ṛta (cosmic order) and interdependence

One of the Rigveda's foundational concepts is Ṛta — the cosmic order that regulates nature, ritual and social life. Ṛta encodes an understanding of interdependence: human well-being depends on respecting natural rhythms (seasons, rains, flows). Rituals that maintain Ṛta can be read as ritualised attempts to align human activity with ecological limits. Thus, Ṛta underpins an ethic of balance rather than domination.

4. Limits, moderation and ritualised restraint

Many hymns imply limits on consumption and emphasise offerings and gratitude over extraction. Ritual injunctions often prescribed specific uses of fire, water and soma in controlled ways; these ritual constraints, while religiously framed, also function as social rules that could slow resource depletion by embedding caution into daily practice. Scholars note that ritual prescriptions can serve regulatory functions in pre-modern societies.

5. Recognition of seasonal cycles and agricultural knowledge

The Rigveda comprises hymns that coordinate rituals with seasons (ṛtus) and agricultural cycles; explicit recognition of monsoon patterns, sowing and harvesting implies an empirical awareness of climate-linked resource management. Aligning agricultural practice with seasonal knowledge is, in modern terms, climate-sensitive farming — an element of sustainable land use.

Nadistuti / Nadi-sukta (RV 10.75) — rivers as moral actors

Hymn 10.75 enumerates and extols rivers, calling them generous, life-giving, and central to human prosperity. Its repeated appeals for rivers' flow and fertility express a communal plea to protect the hydrological commons. Translators and scholars treat the hymn as both devotional and practical: praising rivers strengthens social norms that restrain wasteful use while honouring their ecological role.

Hymns to Apas and Prithvi — water and earth as sacred caregivers

Hymns invoking Apas (waters) and Prithvi (earth) celebrate their nurturing qualities and ask for their mercy and protection. These prayers frame these elements as persons deserving respect, which ethnographically correlates with taboos and practices around water sources and sacred groves. The textual voice is one of reciprocity — humans give offerings and in return ask for sustenance — a formulation congruent with reciprocal stewardship.

Hymns invoking Agni and fire management

Agni is central to Vedic ritual; fire mediates between humans and gods, and careful control of sacrificial fire is repeatedly emphasised. This focus implies technical knowledge of fire management and a moral

imperative to handle energy sources responsibly — a conceptual precursor to later norms about controlled use of energy and respect for hazards.

Mapping Rigvedic ethics to the SDGs

The SDGs provide a global framework; below is a reasoned mapping from Rigvedic themes to selected SDGs, showing how ancient ethics can inform modern targets.

SDG 6 — Clean Water and Sanitation

Rigvedic reverence for rivers and waters (Nadistuti; hymns to Apas) emphasises water's sacredness and centrality, encouraging protection and equitable sharing. The hymn's pleading language supports norms for maintaining water quality and ensuring access — cultural levers that can buttress modern water governance and community conservation projects.

SDG 15 — Life on Land (forests, biodiversity)

Sacred groves, deified trees, and hymns addressing plants and animals foster taboos that historically protected habitats. When ecosystems are sacralised, destructive exploitation becomes morally problematic; thus, the cultural heritage of reverence can support forest conservation and biodiversity protection initiatives.

SDG 13 — Climate Action (resilience, seasonal awareness)

The Rigveda's awareness of seasonal cycles and Rta's (ऋत) emphasis on balance speak to climate sensitivity and resilience. Ritual calendars synchronised with monsoon and seasonal variations exemplify a form of adaptive knowledge — local ecological intelligence that can complement scientific climate adaptation.

SDG 12 — Responsible Consumption and Production

Ritual limits, moderation and offers as forms of gratitude encourage reduced consumption and mindful use of resources. Embedding those norms in cultural practice is a social strategy to reduce waste and promote circular use at community scales.

SDG 2 — Zero Hunger and sustainable agriculture

Rigvedic agricultural hymns and seasonal rites reflect empirical agrarian knowledge and practices respecting soil and seasonal cycles. These offer culturally rooted models for sustainable cropping calendars and agroecology.

Translating ancient ethics into modern policy and practice

1. Cultural narratives as leverage for behaviour change

Rigvedic hymns are not policy texts, but they are powerful cultural narratives. Integrating these narratives into community education (e.g., school curricula, public awareness campaigns) can make SDG messages

locally resonant. For example, framing river conservation in the language of gratitude and ritual care may increase local uptake of water protection measures.

2. Ritual institutions and commons governance

Ritual norms historically functioned like institutions: they regulated access, prescribed taboos, and maintained commons (waterholes, grazing lands, sacred groves). Contemporary decentralised resource governance can learn from such local institutions, combining customary norms with modern legal safeguards to manage commons effectively.

3. Indigenous knowledge and participatory science

Rigvedic seasonal knowledge and observational practices can complement scientific monitoring. Participatory programs that merge local indicators (e.g., phenological cues tied to hymnal calendars) with meteorological data can build robust climate adaptation strategies.

4. Cautions — historicizing the Rigveda

It is important not to romanticise the past. The presence of hymns praising nature does not guarantee equitable or sustainable historical practices across all regions and periods. Thus, policy designers should use Rigvedic ethics as a source of inspiration and cultural capital, but validate practices empirically and adapt them to current ecological realities.

Policy recommendations

1. Integrate targeted Rigvedic themes (e.g., reverence for water, *Rta* (ऋत) as balance) into local sustainability education and public messaging to increase cultural resonance with SDG initiatives.
2. Support community stewardship schemes that recognise and reinvigorate customary norms (sacred groves, river festivals) while ensuring inclusivity and scientific oversight.
3. Use participatory research to document local ecological knowledge tied to seasonal ritual calendars and incorporate it into climate adaptation planning.
4. Promote interdisciplinary research (textual scholars, ecologists, anthropologists) to develop context-specific sustainability interventions grounded in both tradition and science.

Conclusion

The Rigveda contains stanza-level reflections and ritual frameworks that encode respect for water, earth, vegetation, and the cyclic order of nature. While composed millennia ago, its ethical matrix — sacralization of natural elements, emphasis on cosmic balance (*Rta*) (ऋत), ritualised restraint, and empirical seasonal knowledge — resonates with several SDGs, especially those focused on water, life on land, climate, and responsible consumption. Rather than treating the Rigveda as a direct manual, contemporary sustainability efforts can responsibly mine its moral vocabulary and institutional analogues to create culturally credible

pathways toward the SDGs. The synergy of ancient ethical narratives and modern scientific tools offers promising routes for sustainability that are both locally meaningful and globally relevant.

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