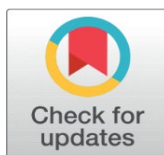


# THE ECOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DHARMA: INVESTIGATING THE MEANING OF BEING HINDU

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## ABSTRACT

This article builds upon previous studies that have argued ecological consciousness as being central to the ancient Vedic (and modern Hindu) way-of-life. Differentiation between the terms 'religion', 'culture' and 'dharma' have been formalized. Hindu dharma has been defined in terms of its main objective: attaining moksha (liberation), and then investigated in terms of the rituals and practices that represent the belief-system of its followers. The ecological foundations of the ashrama and varnashrama (caste) systems have been investigated. Education-based policy recommendations for the protection of Hindu dharma have been presented in the conclusion.

**Keywords:** Environment, Culture, Religion, Caste, Education

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From a temporal and anthropological perspective, the relatively young culture of the modern Euro-American West has been labelled by some authors as a 'pack-type' culture, in contrast to ancient and peaceful cultures like India and Japan (Guha, 1992, p. 58). 'Pack-type' cultures are characterized by specific attributes—the welfare of the worker classes in the civilizational hierarchy is typically neglected; the pursuit of material, measurable and tangible gains represents the central mechanism of motivation; the non-equitable sharing of benefits between social classes is highly prevalent; a "predatory rather than altruistic social organization" is sustained; and perhaps most importantly, a need for aggressive action (warfare), catalyzed by prevailing circumstantial causes, is the only major cause of collective action (J. C. Kumarappa in Ibid.). This means that the mindset and culture of the Euro-American civilizations may not undergo change until and unless the stimulant of impending war does not arise to influence their collective consciousness. This also means that for their 'pack-type' culture, the concept of ethics and the belief in the power and benefits of comporting oneself ethically may not be as developed as parallel, more ancient cultures on the planet. In such a situation, it is imperative to investigate ancient cultures on the planet which hold the potential to educate the rest of the world.

The ancient Aryan culture, alternately the Vedic civilization, has been referred to as the foundation of all the world's various civilizations (Agarwal, 2013, p. xi). Archaeologists have identified that the original Aryans were the inhabitants of the Saraswati basin in ancient India (Sharma, 1999, p. 35). The scientific basis of the Aryan invasion theory has been refuted and nullified on many grounds (Danino, 2003, p. 21), and may even represent the calculative efforts of other civilizations who wish to suppress the evidence of the historical primacy of the ancient Indian civilization for meeting their political objectives. The question arises, how can the ancient Indian Aryan culture respond to the 'pack-type' culture of the Euro-American West, which is spreading throughout the world at an unprecedented rate and acclimatizing the various populations towards giving precedence to material wealth over and above the ethical considerations that arise with its accumulation? For instance, Vedic knowledge has been cited as the body of literature which deals with the curtailment of the "material appetites" of human beings (Dwivedi, 1997). In stark contrast, the modern culture of the Western society has been equated to the concept of a 'consumer culture' (Slater, 2015, p. 1). Ideals of frugality and self-reliance (Swadeshi) are central to Indian culture, but the rise of the consumerist culture of the Euro-American West has steadily challenged and degraded the ancient strongholds of Indian belief systems and worldviews in ever-increasing complex ways (Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012, p.12). Means and methods to counter the disintegration of the Indian way-of-life need to be investigated on an urgent basis. At the same time, it is necessary to investigate formally the meaning and construct of Indian culture.

## 2. RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

Literature related to ancient Indian concepts of environmental consciousness, ethics, and ecological awareness was explored with the objective of identifying and re-discovering the roots of our civilizational values. A descriptive and qualitative methodology of writing was adopted to maintain the flow of reasoning. The arguments accumulated in the process were summarized in the form of policy objectives. The research paper will be useful for students and policy-makers investigating the confluence of Indian Knowledge Systems, ethics, environmental science, and education.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some authors have argued that the religion known today as 'Hinduism' did not exist in posterity in the form of a formal system of the social spectrum answering to the modern construct of how a 'religion' is today defined, but more as a way of life and 'spiritual culture', invisible, non-apparent and intangible to the follower—impossible to be objectively characterized as a specific doctrine or ritualistic belief system by those who belonged to it (Prime, 1996, p. ix). The major subject-matter of 'Hinduism' traditionally dealt with the question of ethics, which are divided into two halves: the principles and methods of achieving moksha (enlightenment), and the concept of one's duty towards the outer world (dharma) (Baird, 1998, p. 582). These two pursuits, or purusharthas, summarize the salient objective of living an ethical human life by seeking to answer two ontological questions:

- 1) Why am I here? (moksha)
- 2) How do I go about attaining it? (dharma)

The meaning of the word dharma is similar to the connotations of the word *rta*, which represents the underlying principles of causality that govern all actions—some authors write that *rta* refers to a "divine custom", signifying an underlying principle of primordial truth governing everything (Verma & Dwivedi, 2020, p. 4). The word dharma, in contrast to the utter objectivity and immutability of *rta*, which is predominantly derived on observations regarding patterns in the environment, can be interpreted in a variety of context-specific ways (Ravikanth, 2021, p. 54). Within Hindu culture, the word dharma represents a "formal code of conduct" (Dwivedi, 1993, p. 4). The problem arises when one seeks to translate the word 'dharma' into English—there is no clear or direct equivalent in the language. Some equate the word 'dharma' to religion, some call it duty, some refer to it normatively as righteousness, and some may argue it is similar to the meaning of the word 'law'. Modern literature on the concept of religion is divided—there exists no single definition of religion upon which researchers agree (Rakodi, 2012, p. 640), and the words 'religion', 'faith' or 'belief' when used in literature to describe diverse attributes of cultures other than Christianity fail to capture the spectrum of parallel view-points (Fitzgerald, 2000 in Ibid.). This implies the slim but momentous possibility that the usage of the word 'religion' to denote the set of beliefs and practices that constitute 'Hinduism' could be incorrect, simply because the word 'religion' is a concept in a different language, different culture, different society. Researchers in anthropology understand the same from a different perspective—the terms 'culture', 'language' and 'society' are sometimes used comparably (or

interchangeably) with 'religion' (Narayanan, 2013, pp. 132); which means that the Euro-American Christian culture, currently dominating the literature of research into the social studies on religion and associated concepts, may approach the word 'religion' from a completely different set of semantics than what its equivalent 'dharma' may mean for Hindus. Perhaps a better word to refer to the Hindu civilizational ethic would be 'culture' instead of 'religion'. Irrespective of the possibility that the word 'religion' has no real meaning for the 'way-of-life' represented by Hinduism, religion has been considered as a "defining force" within culture (Selinger, 2004, pp. 523), even though 'religion' is a tough idea to define or understand (Narayanan, 2013, pp. 131), and "... it is probably impossible to analyze religion and culture separately" (Rakodi, 2012, p. 642). But these are merely words descriptive of the qualitative aspects of different traditions—a culture's aspirational values are judged more on the basis of the actions promoted at individual and collective bases rather than the philosophical discourse.

#### 4. ACTIONS SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS: THE ASHRAMA SYSTEM

The ancient Sanskrit texts are unique from the socio-cultural and religious literature found in other civilizations. The Indian texts offer a model of reasoning, a paradigm of self-reinforcing logic per se, which does not directly talk about ethics but instead formulates a system of natural reasoning in the student, such that the way that one comes to think after engrossing oneself in their study naturally yields the development of ethics, through the emergence of ontological observations about the nature of the self or one's surroundings (Frazier, 2021, p. 1). However, in addition to this specific inarticulate property of ancient Sanskrit texts, wherein they elicit the growth and development of an inductive mechanism of reasoning leading to the creation of a supreme ethic in the reader, the culture of ancient India further offers an action-based solution-in-principle to the problem of developing ethics in existing and future generations: the ashrama system. The four ashramas (Brahmcharya, Grihastha, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa) presented in ancient Indian texts represent the four stages of human development throughout the life-cycle: the first, Brahmcharya, to be followed from birth until one reaches 25 years of age; the second, Grihastha, representing married life, to be followed between the ages 25 and 50; the third, Vanaprastha, literally 'departure to the vana' (forest), to be followed between the ages 50 and 75, and the fourth and final stage Sannyasa, to be followed after the age of 75 and beyond (Kumar, 2021, p. 46). The subliminal principle promulgated by this system is singularly simple: The planet is finite. Resources are limited. One must make way for the next generation to take over the reins of the household and limit oneself to the enquiry of completing the foremost objective: liberation. The ashrama system represents the conclusion of what it means to be a 'Hindu'—the complete and calculated surrender of the material world in the pursuit of moksha (detachment from the mundane), while maintaining the continuity of one's ethics towards the society and the environment with utmost sincerity.

Consider the analogy of the leaves of a tree falling to the surrounding ground after growing old and replenishing the selfsame tree through the process of nutrient cycling. The ashrama system represents the ecological equivalent of this process for the tree of the Indian civilization—each individual born into our midst is a leaf on the tree of cultured growth; each one of us contributes to the growth and sustenance of the shared culture while we live. For economists, this contribution may represent the payment of taxes or the monetary flow of goods and services—for social scientists, this contribution may represent the invaluable and undefined contribution to social and civic structure. The gradient of movement away from the material and outer world towards the spiritual and inner, signified by the stages of growth as one progresses through the ashramas, can be considered an admission of the ecological certainty that each leaf on our civilizational tree must make way for new leaves to flourish, while time to ponder over greater meanings of life other than material responsibilities is gravely limited. Perhaps the maturity of the Indian collective psyche can be gauged from the observation that the ashrama system promotes the understanding of the inevitable: each leaf will have to leave the tree behind—including all relations, material wealth, and other everyday constructs of self-identity—to merge with the larger ecosystem. The process of cremation in Indian culture, too, represents the merger of the metaphysical with the bio-physical: once reduced to ashes, the human body contributes to the nutrient recycling of Earth, now as an integral part of the biogeochemical cycles which span the entire Earth. The analysis of the ash of cremated human bodies reveals minerals such as Sodium, Magnesium, Iron, Potassium, Calcium, and Zinc in abundance (Schultz, Warren & Krigbaum, 2015, p. 99). When emitted into rivers, these naturally contribute to the formation of nutrient-rich soil wherever they resurface.

## 5. THE ECOLOGICAL ROOTS OF THE VARNASHRAMA (CASTE) SYSTEM

The simple villager-like lifestyles of the descendants of ancient India were decimated first by the invaders from other cultures, specifically the British colonizers who introduced and imposed industrialization, leading to a gradual reliance on the West (Robinson & Cush, 1997, p. 25). The village-dominated lifestyle of living was majorly independent of the political and economic concerns of whatever approximations of 'urban' regions existed in those times. Indians were simply not concerned with the Western concepts of 'inequality' and 'equity' because the culture already had checks and balances to ensure inter- and intra-generational equity. The problem in understanding the underlying principles of Hindu culture arose when questioners of the logic behind these precepts arose internally from amidst the population—who, in the abstract urge for 'need satisfaction', decided to forgo the ancient rules and regulations. The caste system was originally indirectly the result of the need for the efficient allocation of resources, and derived its rationalization from limiting considerations presented by the environment. The origins of the caste system have been traced to concepts of sustainable development—the problem addressed by the ancient Indians through the creation of various social classes was precisely how to manage resource partitioning on the basis of pre-existing occupations, so that the primary users, or the societal class responsible for the existence of the core of the culture and civilization, were not challenged by the other castes (Dwivedi, 1993, p. 23). This pre-determined 'ecological space' for various sections of the Indian society collapsed when the rapid growth of the economy during British Raj led to competition between the castes, most of whom were captivated with the objective of seeking jobs and 'developing'—but before the caste system disintegrated, the social structure generated by its rules was responsible for the preservation of India's natural resources from mindless and uneducated usage for centuries (Dwivedi, 1993, p. 24).

Within the caste system, the arrangement of importance and veneration was not based on didactic power structures but rather on the basis of a deep understanding and mutual respect of the power of knowledge. It would not be too far to propose that the real economy of ancient India revolved around the axiom: 'knowledge is power'. The Brahmins, who were placed at the top of the caste hierarchy, were the carriers of this knowledge—not only in their minds and on paper, but in actions. Very specifically, in contrast the Western concept of wealth, in ancient India, the poorer you were the more exalted you were—the Brahmins were the poorest, and the saints were even poorer (Prime, 1996, p. 75). So, the Brahmins were honored above all the other castes simply because they were more oriented towards mastering the currency of knowledge instead of amassing material wealth. The gradual migration of the collective mindset of Indians away from valuing the currency of knowledge of the permanent and immutable truth (Brahm) towards the pursuit of currencies which could purchase material comforts represented the first step in the gradual dilution of the strength and integrity of Indian culture.

A simple example to assert the importance of caste-based allocation of resources can be presented. The consumption of meat is increasing worldwide with rising populations and affluence, and can pose serious consequences for the health of human beings and climate change now and in the future (Godfray et al., 2018). The Brahmins of ancient and modern India have remained pre-dominantly vegetarian in their choice of seeking sources of nutrients from the environment—in addition to the natural and philosophical pursuit of ahimsa (non-violence), this environment-friendly method of subsistence has not only been professed by them through teachings but also through action. The alarm bells begin to ring when the lower castes, who may not be knowledgeable enough to realize the true cost of following a 'developed' lifestyle on other co-inhabitants of the ecosystem, begin to mindlessly expand their materialistic ambitions for the sake of a comfortable quality of existence and associate 'affluence' with the consumption of meat. The ancient caste system could have been designed to limit the ability of less knowledgeable sections of the society to wield undue influence over the flow of materials in the ecosystem—however, with the advent of 'modernity', it is possible that the palate of the lower castes expanded to equate 'development' with the exercise of their free will to abuse the natural bounty of the planet without concern for either the environment or for current and future generations, including their own. Thus, the value of education and a knowledge-based civilization cannot be stressed enough for the security of environmental abundance in the future of India and the world.

## 6. ECOLOGICAL CONSCIOUSNESS: A FOUNDATIONAL PILLAR OF HINDUISM

A deep sense of respect, concern and unlimitable love for each and every living being emanates upon the realization that we are but an extended family—a concept which is explained in Indian culture as 'vasudhaiva kutumbakam'—the



world is a family—from which a de facto sense of “stewardship” for the welfare of all life-forms arises (Dwivedi, 1997, p. 34). In contrast to other traditional Western cultures where anthropocentric views prevail (i.e. the belief that only human beings have intrinsic value in comparison to the instrumental value of the rest of the ecosystem’s inhabitants), in Hinduism, the Almighty is considered as the one and only sovereign over all animate beings—the “viceroys” of humans or the “relative worth” of other species cannot be formally determined by means of any comparison, since the Lord over all beings loves each entity equally.

From the environmental and religious point of view, Lord Vishnu incarnates in the form of all the species (Prime, 1996, p. 36). And not only life-forms—the Lord of the Hindus is the Creator of things animate and inanimate, which includes all elements, forces, and generally each and every thing that surrounds us (in the environment) (Ravikanth, 2021, p. 48). Analogous is the Panch Mahabhuta concept, where the five primal elements (earth, water, fire, air, space) compose reality as we know it (Dwivedi, 1997, p. 27). These are captured in the popular mantra chanted by a fair majority of Hindus Om Namah Shivay, with Na representing the element Earth, Ma representing Water, Shi representing Fire, Va representing Air, and Ya representing Space.

In the Upanishads, the central perspective views everything as a sacred continuous whole, of which all parts are integral to the larger entity known as Brahm (Sreevidya, 2017, p. 407). The Vedas represent the most ancient example of organized nature-worship on Earth (Tiwari, 2010, p. 157). The Atharva Veda has been cited as the first known text of any socio-cultural tradition which praises nature and promotes respect for constituents of the environment (Dwivedi, 1997, p. 29). Ecological conscience is intrinsic to the Vedas (Bhandari, 2021, p. 72), and the presence of sustainability concepts in Vedic texts has been noted by several researchers (Rai & Rai, 2024, p. 90; Renugadevi, 2012, p. 1). Some authors argue, to state that there was only ecological awareness in the ancient seers who were the observers (lit. knowers) of Brahm is a reductionist and minimizing statement—ecology is limited only to the physical environment—the ancient seers developed a much more comprehensive conceptualization of the cosmos than one simply limited to the environment (Dwivedi, Tiwari & Tripathi, 1984, p. 379). In summary, the Hindu worldview can be summarized that we look upon the Earth as the Universal Mother (Singh, 1986, p. 10), and this Mother is not a mechanistic operator of causality knowable only from materialistic environmental laws, but is something like miracle (Desai, 2009, p. 640). Thus, reverence for nature is an intrinsic property of ancient Indian culture (Kala & Sharma, 2010, p. 85).

However, these are theoretical aspects of Hindu religion/culture derived from textual sources. What distinguishes the Hindu way-of-life from others are the set of rituals and practices that comprise the specific mechanism of worship of various aspects of reality represented by Brahm or Om Namah Shivay. And these everyday practices form the true substratum of what Hinduism is. While the personification/deification of the natural elements is central to the Vedic religion (Vijayalakshmi, 1993, p. 2), there are specific gods and goddesses associated with the environment that Hindus worship. The Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta (10:26), the Vamana Purana (32.1-4) and the Varaha Purana contain references to the sacredness of the Peepal tree—and Hindus worship the tree with dedication, for instance, by offering water to it every day. Lord Vishnu is believed to reside in the peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) (Dwivedi, 1997, p. 34). The Skandapurana (Ch. 250) contains references to the sacredness of the Bilva (*Aegle marmelos*) tree, and the grace of Goddess Parvati is said to reside in the tree and its leaves/fruit. The leaves of the Bilva tree are used to worship Lord Shiva, the deity of the mantra Om Namah Shivay. Some texts refer that Lord Shiva himself resides in Bilva tree, (for instance the Bilva Upanishad). The followers of the Shakta (worshippers of the Almighty in the form of the Mother Goddess Parvati) and Shaiva (worshippers of the Almighty in the form of the Father God Shiva) traditions worship the lingam (icon, lit. sign) of Lord Shiva with Bilva leaves, and the tree is therefore an integral part of Hinduism’s ritualistic basis. Goddess Lakshmi, the deity of wealth and the wife of Lord Vishnu, resides in Tulasi (*Ocimum tenuiflorum*) (Dwivedi, 1997, p. 34); Goddess Sheetala, the deity of healing resides in Neem (*Azadirachta indica*) (Ibid.); Lord Brahma, the deity of creation resides in Vata (*Ficus indica*) (Ibid.). It is pertinent to note that unlike the Abrahamic religions (Islam, Christianity and Jewism), Hindus do not worship the Creator. Instead, the principle of sustenance (represented by Lord Vishnu) and the principle of destruction (represented by Lord Shiva) are worshipped. The banana, mango, amla, and khejri trees are also considered sacred (Kala & Sharma, 2010, p. 86). A number of religious festivals also exist, which revolve around the worship of various trees (ashokasthmi, durvasthmi, madanotsava) (Vijayalakshmi, 1993, p. 3). In addition, formal codes of conduct such as the Manusmriti ordain not stealing water (XI.164), and contain references to the sacredness of the cow (Manusmriti XI 60-65). Respect for cows as an integral part of Hindu culture—respect which is sourced ranging from economic utility based on milk (and milk products) used for human consumption, to purposes of worship (for

instance oblations on the lingam), to the affiliation with Lord Shri Krishna, the primordial cowherd (Robinson & Cush, 1997, p. 35).

In addition to the cow, a spectrum of other animal species is considered sacred in Hinduism. Lord Shri Ganesha, the deity worshipped before starting any auspicious work, has an elephant's head. Hindus attach religious significance to elephants because of this, in addition to the mouse, upon whom Lord Shri Ganesha rides. The ancient Hindu Sanskrit texts narrate how Lord Brahma emanated from the navel of Lord Vishnu wreathed in a lotus flower (*Nelumbo nucifera*), which is already the national flower of India. In the traditional images easily available in the Indian subcontinent, the majority of Vaishnava gods and goddesses hold a lotus in one hand. Lord Vishnu is typically shown in cultural images sleeping on the coiled body of a gigantic snake, called Lord Shesh Naag. According to this iconography, the entire cosmos is stationed on the top of the head of Lord Shesh Naag. Another reference to the sacredness of snakes in Hinduism is the serpent-god Lord Vasuki, who is the chief adornment of Lord Shiva. A lion or a tiger is usually the vehicle of the wife of Lord Shiva, the Goddess Parvati. The Goddess Ganges and the Goddess Narmada are both shown seated atop crocodiles or ghariyals (*Gavialis gangeticus*), while the Goddess Saraswati, the deity of knowledge, music, and literacy, has a white swan as her vehicle.

Two of the most widely-worshipped gods in Hindu religion, Lord Shri Rama and Lord Shri Krishna, are in essence the incarnations of Lord Vishnu—but He does not appear only in the form of a human being. The ancient Hindu Sanskrit texts narrate Lord Vishnu first appeared in the form of a primeval fish on planet Earth—that was the first incarnation, known as Lord Matsya. The second incarnation of Lord Vishnu took place in the form of a tortoise. The third incarnation of Lord Vishnu was the famous boar-headed individual known as Lord Varaha—the One who lifted planet Earth out of the primordial waters upon His tusks. Lord Vishnu otherwise rides upon the Garuda Devata, who is a creature with the body of a human and the torso of a kite or an eagle, also known as the Lord of Birds. The fourth incarnation of Lord Vishnu was the lion-headed Lord Shri Nrsingh, the deity Who fiercely protects His followers. Furthermore, the histories related to the incarnations of Lord Shri Rama and Lord Shri Krishna are replete with examples of the relevance and significance of the natural world. Lord Shri Hanuman, called a vanar in Hinduism, has a face and humanoid body similar to a monkey. For much of the duration of Lord Shri Rama's fight against the demon-king Ravana, he was assisted by an army of apes, monkeys, bears, and other inhabitants of the jungle. For instance, Jambavan was the name of the king of bears who fought alongside Lord Shri Rama. In the next incarnation of Lord Vishnu, Jambavan's daughter Jambavati was married to Lord Shri Krishna. Lord Shri Krishna further represents the eternal cowherd—milking cows, stealing butter, and interacting with cowherds are noted to be some of his major pastimes in the Shri Bhagavat Mahapurana.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Hindus must learn to distinguish between the rampant materialistic culture of the Euro-American West and their own dharma. What is Hindu dharma? The protection of the ideal of moksha, and completing this objective with supreme attention to ethics in every thought and action. Hindus must also accept the possibility that the word 'religion' is insufficient to capture the simple yet profound manner in which the society, economy and ecosystem of the civilization are integrated at a fundamental level. The Hindu dharma is more than a religion—it is a way-of-life, a perspective, an abstract heuristic proclamation of movement away from the material world and towards the divine. The ashrama system bears witness to the venerated ideal of resigning oneself to the pursuit of the highest form of education—it represents a comprehensive yet unstated gradient of development throughout life, mastering first the material world and then the spiritual one. The ashrama system further represents the ecological principle of regeneration in its most sublime form. The varnashrama system, when it existed in full force before man-made corruption, too was derived from ecological considerations. Thus, the interplay between the inhabitants of this ancient land and her ecology has remained a chief determinant of the destiny of Indians in constancy. The ancient Vedic seers lived primarily in forests, and the major portion of their meditations occurred while surrounded by the flora and fauna of that pre-historic pristinity (Prime, 1996, p. 9). According to the ashrama system, half of our lives are meant to be lived in forests, meditating upon truths higher than the interests of the human body. Perhaps this observation summarizes the importance ancient Indian culture attaches to the environment.

An 'internal development' of human beings based on a dharma derived from ecological principles is required (Khoshoo, 1999, p. 1153). This paper argues Hinduism is that dharma. A very curious hypothesis was propounded by (Kineman & Anand, 2014, p. 34). They suggested and investigated the possibility that the ideas of the world's original holistic philosophy on the unity between nature and existence, (represented by the culture and civilization of the Vedas

and Upanishads), as they spread through the ancient world, became diluted as they reached the emerging Euro-American civilization, with the result that the modern Abrahamic religions and the modern world developed a primarily dualistic perspective, differentiating nature and God, in stark contrast to the continuity worshipped by modern Hindus in the form of Brahm. Furthermore, the word 'Hindu' is a geographical term, but the word Sanatan refers to an eternal principle which cannot be bounded by caste, creed, geographical or temporal origin. Thus, it is possible that while there may exist a number of religions on the planet, there is a singular dharma called Sanatan. Since the modern-day name of the Sanatan dharma is the Hindu dharma, Indians as individuals (and as a whole) must seek to profess their dharma (not religion) to the world. For which, they must first also practice it. The various sections within results and discussion in this paper clearly reveal specific attributes of ancient Indian culture, such as the ashrama system, or respect for natural flora and fauna, which can be applied in daily life. However, educating both the existing and future followers of this dharma about its actual objectives and doctrines is extremely important. With the growth and spread of the internet, the ancient Sanskrit texts have become open to interpretation.

For instance, the concept of Brahmcharya and the associated semantics of the word witnessed a gradual drift with the passage of time. Originally, instead of following celibacy as the sole objective, as is suggested by its name, the ashrama of Brahmcharya had referred to the reading of the Vedas for gaining knowledge about Brahm (Gitapress, 2003, p. 28), (Who is the monotheistic conceptualization of the almighty discussed in great detail in ancient Indian texts). This is not to say that celibacy as a social construct was not promoted, or that it was not strictly adhered in ancient India until the age of 25 (or even lifelong). The students of ancient Gurukuls (i.e. indigenous schooling system before the arrival of foreign invaders) maintained their dedication to celibacy with great caution, and this habit of managing basic human instincts with attention and precision resulted in the gradual association of the term Brahmcharya as representing the sole pursuit of celibacy (Ibid.).

The importance of Brahmcharya in the modern world cannot be summarized in a short article of this nature. However, two lateral directions are essential for the defense of Indian culture:

- 1) The power of education, especially religious education which deals with the concept of a non-materialistic and intangible reality (Brahm).
- 2) The power of celibacy as a social construct to promote the cultivation of character, such that individuals do not fall prey to distractions from their studies.

## 8. EDUCATING THE LOWER CASTES ABOUT THE MAIN OBJECTIVE OF HINDU DHARMA

The pyramidal structure of the caste system portrays the Brahmins (educators), Kshatriyas (politicians, managers, defense personnel, etc.) and Vaishyas (economists, businessmen etc.) at a plateau which is comparatively superior to the lower caste Shudras (labor class). However, this hierarchy is maintained only as long as each respective class of society follows their dharma to the letter—the educators, for instance, must impart knowledge which awakens both emotional awareness and intelligence. The politicians must realize the ethics associated with their high office, and the economy must provision to manage the welfare the labor class. Without a strong foundation, the pyramidal structure of society represented by the ancient Indian caste system could collapse. At the same time, it is important to accept the possibility that without the right kind of knowledge, the upliftment of the lower castes to 'developed' states of existence could in effect cause the civil structure of India to witness internal conflict. Policy imperatives related to teaching them about the highest ideal and objective of Hindu dharma, viz. to seek moksha, and denying material satisfaction, are urgently necessary. The collinearity of the ashrama system with the caste system has been noted by (Parashar, 2024, p. 98)—the caste of the individuals who have attained self-awareness enough to renounce all material possessions and enter the Sannyasa ashrama is not considered important. At that plateau of knowledge, each one in India is venerated equally, but perhaps not before.

## 9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Some authors have already noted that the government needs to take a pro-active role in promoting the preservation of the environment and society through the propagation of ancient Indian cultural teachings, including the teaching of the Shrimad Bhagavad Geeta (Pramanik & Sarkar, 2018). The recommendations of this paper add to the same stream of reasoning, with a particular focus on environmental education. As evidenced in the discussion, the precepts of the Hindu

dharma already have a foundational basis of reverence for various plants and animals associated with a number of gods and goddesses. If education regarding these entities is made compulsory at different levels of school and college curriculum, it will irretrievably consolidate both ecological consciousness and protect Hindu dharma. Making the Ramcharitmanas and the Shri Bhagwat Mahapurana compulsory can especially contribute to this process. Teaching the former will help develop sensitivity to the fact that when the Lord Almighty Himself takes human form, even He requires assistance from the animal kingdom, and teaching the latter will sensitize the population towards the protection of cows, for both health and economic considerations (e.g. source of vegetarian protein through milk, and the milk economy), and at the same time solidify cultural respect for cows, as Hindus traditionally believe that all the gods and goddesses reside within.

The undergraduate syllabus of Environmental Science at Delhi University, for instance, contains a section titled 'Human Communities and the Environment' (Unit 7). The sub-section on 'Environmental philosophy' can be expanded to include teachings of the various Indian gods and goddesses, with a specific focus on the integral relevance of flora and fauna for ancient Indian culture. As argued in this paper, this does not compromise on the principle of secularism in any way, since Hindu 'religion' and the Sanatan dharma each represent potentially different concepts. In conclusion, Brahm is composed of two distinct aspects, one called jada (non-conscious) and other chetan (conscious) (Ravikanth, 2021, p. 48). The tool of environmental education should be used to promote awareness of the conscious aspect of reality, and the many ways in which the gods and goddesses of India are linked to flora and fauna can act to sensitize future students towards the reverence that Indian culture imparts to each and every one constituent of the environment.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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