



ISSN: 3049-2017
 IJMH 2025; 2(2): 32-35
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 www.themultijournal.com

Received: 21-04-2025
 Accepted: 26-04-2025
 Publish : 29-04-2025

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Sustainable Development Goals: A Vedic Knowledge System Perspective

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Abstract

While sustainable development might seem like a modern concept, its roots actually go back to the ancient wisdom found in the Vedas. These ancient texts represent a fascinating picture of harmony between people and the natural world. They teach us to manage resources thoughtfully and responsibly, to lead ethical lives, and to care for our environment. Fundamental principles like *Rta*, the natural cosmic order, and *Ahimsā*, or non-violence, reflect a deep respect for all forms of life. The Vedas also remind us of the value of simplicity, suggesting that “less is more.” They view elements like earth, water, air, and fire as sacred and worthy of protection. This essay explores how these age-old lessons continue to resonate with today’s sustainability efforts, offering timeless guidance for building a more balanced and sustainable future.

Keywords: Vedic Knowledge System, SDGs, *Rta*, *Ahimsā*, Environmental Conservation, Water Conservation, Renewable Energy.

Introduction

The *Vedas* are considered as the sources of all true knowledge. The origin of the word ‘*Veda*’ comes from the root ‘*vid*’, which meaning knowledge. About the Vedas the sage *Manu* said ‘*sarvaevedat prasidhyati*’ (the Vedas are the origin of all spiritual and physical knowledge) and ‘*Vedoakhilo dharmulam*’¹(the Veda is the main source of all *Dharma*). For anyone seeking an accurate understanding of *Dharma*, the Vedas remain the ultimate authority.²

So it is possible to consider the Vedas as being to do with knowledge, for its purpose of guiding and developing individual in their moral, spiritual, economical, political and all physical aspects. These Vedic knowledge system abound with timeless wisdom, illuminating every facet of life to guide people toward excellence and virtue. They serve not only to nourish the spirit but also to quench humanity’s quest for truth and to ensure a successful journey through life.

One of the biggest challenges we face today is achieving sustainable development—finding a way to balance social well-being, protecting the environment, and growing the economy. While sustainability might feel like a modern idea, its core principles have actually been around for centuries. In fact, they’re deeply rooted in ancient wisdom, especially in the Vedas, some of the oldest sacred texts known to humanity.

Many practical concerns we face today—like relying on renewable energy, conserving water resources, protecting forests, and choosing to consume mindfully—are already addressed in these ancient texts. This shows just how closely the wisdom of the past aligns with modern sustainability efforts and how ancient philosophy can still guide current solutions.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

In 2015, the United Nations introduced the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a global blueprint for tackling some of the biggest social, economic, and environmental challenges we face today. These 17 goals aim to create a fairer, more inclusive, and sustainable world by 2030. They focus on everything from ending poverty and hunger, improving health and education, and achieving gender equality, to ensuring access to clean water and energy, fostering economic growth and innovation, reducing inequality, building sustainable cities, encouraging responsible consumption, fighting climate change, protecting life on land and in the oceans, and promoting peace and global partnerships.

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This is where ancient wisdom, especially from Vedic philosophy, offers timeless guidance. The Vedas emphasize the importance of living with integrity, protecting our resources, and coexisting peacefully with nature, principles that lie at the heart of the SDGs. By revisiting these teachings, we can deepen our understanding of sustainable living and explore new paths toward a resilient and thriving future.

Vedic Perspective on Sustainable Development

The Vedas offer a holistic view of life, emphasizing the deep connection between humans and nature. They encourage a way of living that fosters ecological balance, promotes careful use of resources, and supports the well-being of everyone over the long term. At the heart of this philosophy are ideas like *Rta* (the cosmic order) which controls the harmony between human activities and the environment, *Ahimsā paramo dharmaḥ* (non-violence is the ultimate duties of all human beings), *Vasudhaiva-kutumbakam*³ (the world is a family), *Mātā bhūmih putro aham pṛthivyāḥ* (Earth is my mother and I am her son), *samgacchadhvam*⁴ (we walk together) etc.

Cosmic Order *Rta* and Environment

According to the Vedic context, the cosmic order of the universe is called *Rta*. *Rta* presents matter direction and integration while minimizing chaos to the cosmos. It also establishes harmony and symmetry in the environment. Therefore the concept of *Rta* also includes an aesthetic element; it represents splendor and beauty. Because of this the Vedic *Devatā* upholding cosmic order *Rta* are all lawful, kind and delightful.

Rta upholds the order of the universe and is the cause of all movement and existence. No one can deny it which is described in *Taittiriya Brāhmaṇa* “ऋतं नात्येति किञ्चन ॥”⁵ The power is controlling and sustaining by cosmic order. Everything in the cosmos is controlled and working by the *Rta*. According to *Rgveda* it also keeps the sun in the sky-

ऋतेनादित्यास्तिष्ठन्ति ॥⁶

According to the Veda, *Varuṇa* is depicted as the Lord of cosmic order *Rta*. He is a great king, ruler of universe and law maker. Basically, he is revered as the lord of *Āpaḥ* (water) but his main role to controls and maintains the world in an order.

Now a day this cosmic order is disturbed by things like unethical activities of human, use of excessive natural resources, environment pollution etc. As a result, there is an imbalance, suffering and chaos in both nature and society.

पूर्वापरं चरतो माययैतौ शिशु क्रीळन्तौ परि यातो अध्वरम् ।
विश्वान्यन्यो भुवनाभिचष्ट ऋतूरन्यो विदधज्जायते पुनः ॥⁷

This Vedic mantra explore that the nature operates in a cycle, and any disturbance in this balance results in disorder.

The Vedic concept of *Rta* teaches us to maintain ecological balance, to protect *pañcamahābhūta* like earth, water, fire, air and space and also to live harmoniously and sensibly with nature.

2. *Ahimsā* and Ethical Treatment of Nature

Absence of *Himsā* is called *Ahimsā*. In vedic text it is three types i. *Mānasika* (*ahimsā* in thought), ii. *Vācika*

(*ahimsā* in speech), iii. *Kāyika* (*ahimsā* in deed). It means avoiding from harm in thought, speech and deed. This concept includes non-violence against all living beings and non living beings. According to the Upanishad all human beings should follow these five rules in their lives. These are *Tapah* (meditation), *Dānam* (giving to others), *Ārjavam* (non- hypocrisy), *Ahimsā* (not harming others) and *Satyavacanam* (telling the truth).

Among these *Ahimsā* or non-violence, it's not just about how we treat other people. This concept encourages us to extend concern and respect to all creatures even the nature itself. The Vedic knowledge system teaches that nature isn't different from us; everything is interconnected, like the world is a family. This concept originates in the *Mahā-upaniṣad*:

अयं बन्धुरयं नेति गणना लघुचेतसाम् ।

उदारचरितानां तु वसुधैवकुटुम्बकम् ॥⁸

This mantra provides valuable insights into these universal thoughts of togetherness, encouraging a sense of oneness and benevolence among all living beings. This following Vedic mantra emphasizes peace and non-violence towards all creatures, reinforcing the need for ethical treatment of animals and nature.

दृते दृह मा मित्रस्य मा चक्षुषा सर्वाणि भूतानि समीक्षन्ताम् ।

मित्रस्याहश्चक्षुषा सर्वाणि भूतानि समीक्षे ।

मित्रस्य चक्षुषा समीक्षामहे ॥⁹

The Vedic thought of reducing environmental pollution resonates strongly with today's efforts in water conservation, soil conservation, energy conservation and sustainable farming. Following mantra from the *Yajurveda* invokes peace for the earth, sky, water, plants, *Vanaspataya* etc. and highlight the importance of living in harmoniously with environment : -

द्यौः शान्तिरन्तरिक्षं शान्तिः पृथिवी शान्तिरापः शान्तिरोषधयः शान्तिः ।
वनस्पतयः शान्तिर्विश्वे देवाः शान्तिर्ब्रह्म शान्तिः सर्वं शान्तिः शान्तिरेव
शान्तिः सा मा शान्तिरिधि ॥¹⁰

Similarly, Lord Sri Krishna's thoughts on embracing simplicity and preserving the environment, which promotes minimal impact on the earth, are explained in the *Bhāgavatamahāpurāṇa*.¹¹

3. Minimalism and Responsible Consumption

The Vedas teach us to avoid excessive consumption of natural resources and addiction to material things, instead promoting a life focused on inner contentment and simplicity. Vedic seers remind us of the importance of natural resources and their proper use. This responsibility is not only to fulfill our own needs but also to protect and preserve them for future generations.

The *Iśa Upanishad* states: “*tena tyaktena bhūñjithā, mā grdhaḥ kasya svid-dhanam*”¹² (Enjoy the resources of nature with detachment and do not covet others' wealth).

This principle aligns with modern sustainability efforts such as zero-waste lifestyles, resource conservation, and mindful consumerism.

4. Water Conservation and Purity

The Vedas represents the holiness of Water elements. It play critical role in supporting life and preserving environmental balance. In human environment water is available in five forms like Rain water (*Divyā*), Natural

spring (*Sravanti*), Wells and canals (*Khanitrimā*), Lakes (*Svayamjā*) and Rivers (*Samudrathāh*). i.e.

या आपो दिव्या उत वा स्रवन्ति खनित्रिमा उत वा याः स्वयंजाः ।
समुद्रार्था याः शुचयः पावकास्ता आपो देवीरिह मामवन्तु ॥¹³

There are some other classifications such as drinking water, medicinal water, stable water etc.¹⁴

According to the *Yajurveda*, don't harm trees and plants. In the same way, another mantra states that water should be kept pure, enriched with nutrients, and that medications should be kept safe by being irrigated with water.

माऽपो हिंसीः, मा-ओषधीहिंसीः ।¹⁵

अपः पिन्व, ओषधीर्जिन्व ।¹⁶

According to Vedic mantra, *Yañja* is the way to reduce the purity of rivers' and other sources of water. *Yañja*'s fragrant air helps to eliminates water pollution.

अपो देवीः...सिन्धुभ्यः कर्व हविः ।¹⁷

Rain water has been described as the most excellent and nectar. By this water all diseases are cured and one gets long life.¹⁸ In different branches of Vedas water has been described as the root of human life. It works as a medicine for all creatures.¹⁹ According to *R̥gveda* water and plants are very beneficial for all individuals.

निष्यिध्वरीः ओषधीरापः ।²⁰

आपश्च मे वीरुधश्च मे ।²¹

वातो गन्धर्वः, तस्यापो अप्सरस ऊर्जो नाम ।²²

सं मा सृजामि अद्भिरोषधीभिः ।²³

सुमित्रिया न आप ओषधयः सन्तु ।²⁴

Water has been described as the best medicine and it relieves all types of pain. It is also cure for heart diseases. According to the *Atharvaveda*

आपो विश्वस्य भेषजीः, तास्त्वा मुञ्चन्तु क्षेत्रियात् ।²⁵

आपः.....भिषजां सुभिषक्तमाः ।²⁶

आपो....हृद्योतभेषजम् ।²⁷

And also in *R̥gveda* -

आपश्च विश्वभेषजीः ।²⁸

अप्स्वन्तरमृतम् अप्सु भेषजम् ।²⁹

आपः पृणीत भेषजम् ।³⁰

The scriptures frequently highlight the significance of keeping water sources abundant, clean, and easily obtainable. It describes water as a purifier and a source of life, urging people to protect it.

Vedic Knowledge System helps to water management including rainwater harvesting and to control water pollution.

5. Forest Conservation and Biodiversity Protection

In Vedic tradition, forests are cherished as essential to life, lovingly called "*Vanapati*", which means not just a group of trees, but sacred guardians that provide us with oxygen, healing plants, and sustenance. Trees are seen as divine beings, caring for every living creature and giving far more than they take. Because of this deep reverence,

the act of planting and preserving trees is more than just a good deed in the Vedas it is both a spiritual practice and a moral obligation. Cutting down trees mindlessly, or destroying forests, isn't just discouraged, but viewed as a violation of our duty to the Earth and all its inhabitants. The wisdom here is simple: caring for forests and nature is woven into the fabric of living a good, meaningful life.

नव नन्दान्द्विजः कश्चित्प्रपन्नानुद्धरिष्यति ।

तेषां अभावे जगतीं मौर्या भोक्ष्यन्ति वै कलौ ॥³¹

This praises forests and urges their protection, recognizing their role in maintaining ecological balance.

The Veda conveys immense reverence for nature through ancient groves- special forest region preserved for their spiritual and ecological significance. Like modern national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, these groves provide a safe haven for both flora and animals, sustaining the environment for future generations to inherit.

6. Renewable Energy and the Worship of Natural Forces

The Vedas emphasize the reverence and responsible use of natural energy sources like the sun, wind, and water, viewing them as sacred and essential for life. Sun worship, particularly of *Sūrya*, symbolizes immortality, purity, and renewal, highlighting an early appreciation for solar energy's sustainable qualities. Wind and water are also honored for their vital roles in sustaining life and maintaining ecological balance. Through these teachings and rituals, the Vedas promote gratitude, stewardship, and harmonious living with nature—principles that align closely with modern renewable energy and environmental sustainability efforts.

Solar energy is particularly respected among them since it represents immortality, purity, and rebirth. An early understanding of solar power as an essential, sustainable, and clean energy source is shown in Vedic hymns' worship for the sun (*Sūrya*). According to *R̥gveda*

उद्वयं तमसस्परी ज्योतिष्पश्यन्त उत्तरम् ।

देवं देवत्रा सूर्यमगन्म ज्योतिरुत्तमम् ॥³²

This mantra glorifies the Sun (*Sūrya*) as the primary source of life and energy. According to *Yajurveda*, *Agni* is the king of all energy:-

अयमिह प्रथमो धायि धातृभिर्होता यजिष्ठः ॥³³

त्वामग्ने मनीषिणः सम्राजम्.. ।³⁴

The following Vedic mantra describes the sources of energy-

There are many forms of fire. We get it in different ways. The *R̥gveda* says that there is only one fire and there are many different ways to extinguish it.

एक एवाग्निर्बहुधा समिद्धः ।³⁵

Fire is obtained from water, stone, plants and various types of medicines.

त्वमग्ने .. अद्भ्यः, अश्मनः, वनेभ्यः, ओषधीभ्यः ।³⁶

According to the *Atharvaveda* the fire resides in the water element.

या अग्निं दधिरे .. आपः ।³⁷

The *R̥gveda* states that the fire is obtained from the sun, sea and flowing water like river and waterfall.

त्रीणि .. समुद्र एकं दिवि एकम् अप्सु ।³⁸

यो अग्निः श्रितो विश्वेषु सिन्धुषु ।³⁹

According to the *R̥gveda* huge amount of electricity is extract from whirl pools which appear in rivers.

अपां नपादा ह्यस्थात् विद्युतं वसानः ।⁴⁰

There is fire in medicines and plants. They produce fire through friction.

त्वम् ओषधीभ्यः जायसे शुचिः ।⁴¹

The confluence of rivers, sun, sea and air are sources of energy.

ये नदीनां संख्ववन्ति उत्सासः सदमक्षिताः ।⁴²

त्रयः कृण्वन्ति भुवनेषु रेतः ।

सूर्यस्य, समुद्रस्य, वातस्येव प्रजवः...।⁴³

The use of fire (*Agni*) for controlled energy generation also highlights early ideas of sustainable energy consumption. Modern renewable energy technologies, such as solar and wind power, reflect the Vedic emphasis on using natural forces responsibly.

Relevance to Modern Sustainability Goals

There are many similarities preserve the environment, using natural resources ethically, promoting renewable energy, and maintaining social and moral responsibilities. This common vision demonstrates the timeless value of traditional wisdom in addressing modern problems.

- **Clean Water and Sanitation (SDG 6):** Water conservation principles in the *R̥gveda* align with efforts to manage global water resources.
- **Affordable and Clean Energy (SDG 7) :** Vedic hymns are promotes the use of natural energies like sun, fire and water.
- **Sustainable Consumption and Production (SDG 12):** The Vedas teach living in harmony with nature through moderation, ethical use of resources, and minimizing waste, embodying the essence of responsible consumption and production.
- **Climate Action (SDG 13):** Vedic teachings on *R̥ta* and ecological balance promote harmony with nature.
- **Life on Land (SDG 15):** The protection of forests and biodiversity, as emphasized in the *Atharvaveda*, mirrors modern conservation strategies.

Conclusion

Based on the idea of harmony between humans and nature, the Vedic texts provide a timeless and significantly silent framework for sustainable living. Nowadays, concepts such *Ahimsā* (non-violence), *R̥ta* (cosmic order), conscious consumption, and environmental stewardship are extremely relevant. Many of the ideas ingrained in contemporary sustainability aspirations are reflected in these ancient thoughts. We can shift toward a more ethical, long-lasting, and balanced approach to growth by incorporating Vedic wisdom into current laws and practices. The Vedas serve as an indication that conserving natural resources and leading an ethical life are not revolutionary concepts; rather, they are tried-and-true

strategies for ensuring the wellbeing of our world and our descendants.

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