

EMBODIED NATURE WORSHIP: PRAKRITI POOJAN AS A CIVILIZATIONAL CONTINUUM BETWEEN TRIBAL TRADITIONS AND SANATAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

Across the Indian subcontinent, nature has been approached not merely as environment but as presence—sacred, animate, and morally significant. This qualitative study investigates *Prakriti Poojan* (nature worship) as a civilizational continuum linking tribal traditions and Sanatan thought. Rather than treating tribal cosmologies and classical Hindu philosophy as isolated or hierarchically arranged systems, the paper argues that both emerge from a shared ecological imagination rooted in reverence for elemental forces, sacred landscapes, and ethical restraint.

Using interpretative textual analysis and thematic comparison of philosophical literature and anthropological studies, the research examines convergences between the metaphysical concept of *Prakriti* and *Panch Mahabhutas* in Sanatan thought and tribal practices such as sacred grove protection, seasonal agricultural rituals, and clan-based landscape worship. A focused case illustration from tribal communities in South Gujarat further demonstrates how ecological governance is embedded in ritual norms and collective memory.

The study suggests that *Prakriti Poojan* operates as an embodied ecological ethic—transforming environmental responsibility from external regulation into civilizational value. In the context of contemporary ecological crises and India's developmental vision toward 2047, recognizing this continuity provides a culturally grounded framework for sustainability. By integrating insights from philosophy, anthropology, and environmental ethics, this paper repositions indigenous ecological traditions as foundational rather than peripheral to India's civilizational discourse.

Keywords: *Prakriti Poojan*, Tribal Traditions, Sanatan Thought, Sacred Ecology, *Panch Mahabhutas*, Environmental Ethics, Civilizational Continuity.

Introduction

Indian civilizational thought has long refused to separate the sacred from the natural. Rivers are addressed as mothers, mountains as embodiments of endurance, and forests as abodes of spiritual power. Diana Eck (2012) describes India as a “sacred geography,” where landscape itself becomes theology. Such a worldview is not confined to philosophical texts but is also visible in tribal lifeworlds across regions.

Modern scholarship often categorizes tribal traditions as “indigenous” and Sanatan philosophy as “classical” or “mainstream.” However, this binary overlooks deep continuities in cosmological imagination and ecological ethics. Tribal sacred groves, ancestral hill worship, and seasonal agrarian rituals reflect the same elemental reverence articulated in philosophical doctrines of *Prakriti* and *Panch Mahabhutas* (Flood, 1996).

This paper argues that *Prakriti Poojan* represents a civilizational continuum—an enduring ecological consciousness expressed through multiple cultural forms.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretative methodology grounded in hermeneutics and thematic comparison.

Research Design

The research is exploratory and conceptual, focusing on meaning rather than measurement. It examines philosophical texts alongside anthropological documentation.

Sources

Primary philosophical interpretations are drawn from discussions of Samkhya and Vedantic thought (Radhakrishnan, 1923; Flood, 1996). Anthropological perspectives on tribal cosmology and sacred ecology are drawn from works such as Elwin (1964) and Berkes (2012). Ecological studies of sacred groves are informed by Gadgil and Vartak (1976).

Analytical Framework

The central analytical category is “civilizational continuum,” which recognizes dialogic interaction rather than assimilation. Themes identified include:

- Elemental cosmology
- Sacred geography
- Ritual as ecological regulation
- Ethical responsibility toward nature

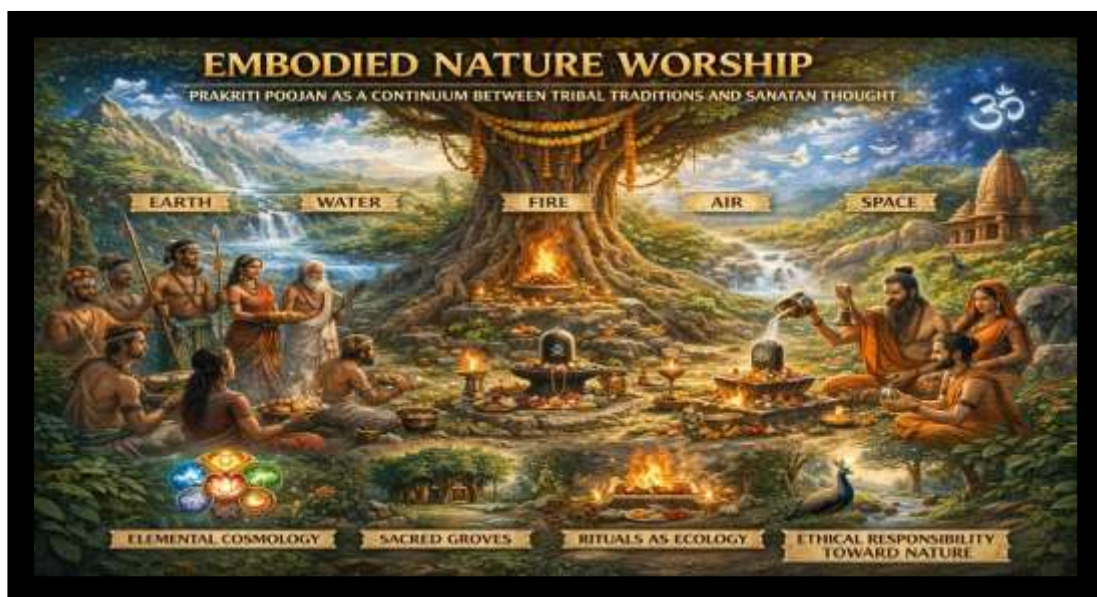
Prakriti in Sanatan Philosophical Thought

In classical Samkhya philosophy, *Prakriti* is described as the primordial matrix from which the manifest universe evolves (Radhakrishnan, 1923). It is constituted by three *gunas*—sattva, rajas, and tamas—whose dynamic interplay generates diversity.

The Bhagavad Gita conceptualizes *Prakriti* as the operative field of divine manifestation (Gita 9.10). Nature is neither inert nor morally neutral; it is a sacred force within which human beings participate. Gavin Flood (1996) notes that Hindu cosmology emphasizes interdependence between cosmic elements and individual embodiment.

The doctrine of *Panch Mahabhutas*—earth, water, fire, air, and space—further reinforces this unity. The human body and the cosmos share elemental composition, suggesting ecological interrelatedness.

Visual Representation of Prakriti Poojan as a Civilizational Continuum between Tribal Traditions and Sanatan Thought



Source: Researchers’ conceptual illustration

Tribal Cosmology and Sacred Landscape

Anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1964) observed that tribal communities experience forests and hills as animate presences rather than exploitable property. Sacred groves, protected through ritual sanctions, serve both spiritual and ecological purposes.

Gadgil and Vartak (1976) documented that sacred groves in India preserve biodiversity through customary prohibitions against tree felling. These ecological outcomes arise from belief systems rather than external enforcement.

Fikret Berkes (2012) describes such systems as “sacred ecology,” where environmental knowledge is embedded in ritual and oral tradition. The sacredness attributed to land ensures conservation across generations.

Panch Mahabhutas and Elemental Awareness

Although tribal traditions may not articulate formal philosophical doctrines, their rituals reflect elemental awareness. Agricultural festivals celebrate soil fertility and rainfall cycles. Fire rituals mark seasonal transitions. Sky and wind are often associated with ancestral spirits.

This experiential recognition parallels the elemental cosmology of Sanatan thought (Flood, 1996). Both traditions affirm that imbalance in natural elements disrupts human well-being.

Gujarat Case Illustration: Sacred Groves of South Gujarat

In South Gujarat, tribal communities such as the Rathwa and Bhil maintain sacred groves associated with village deities. Entry into these groves is regulated through ritual norms. Cutting trees is restricted except under ceremonial permission.

These groves function simultaneously as:

- Sites of worship
- Community gathering spaces
- Ecological reserves
- Symbols of ancestral continuity

The conservation outcome mirrors findings by Gadgil and Vartak (1976), who observed biodiversity preservation within sacred groves. Ecological protection here is not imposed but internalized through belief.

Ritual as Ecological Governance

Ritual practices regulate environmental interaction. Seasonal fasting, agricultural ceremonies, and water worship align human consumption with natural cycles (Haberman, 2006). Hunting taboos in tribal societies often coincide with breeding seasons, indirectly ensuring species survival (Berkes, 2012).

Thus, ritual operates as informal ecological governance.

Dharma and Moral Ecology

The concept of *dharma* extends to maintaining cosmic order (Radhakrishnan, 1923). Environmental imbalance is seen as ethical imbalance. Tribal councils similarly treat ecological violations as moral transgressions (Elwin, 1964).

Both traditions embed ecological responsibility within moral consciousness.

Continuity vs Assimilation

It is important to distinguish continuity from assimilation. Historian Romila Thapar (2002) notes that Indian civilization evolved through interaction among diverse communities. Continuity suggests dialogic exchange, not absorption.

Prakriti Poojan illustrates shared ecological assumptions expressed differently across contexts.

Contemporary Relevance and India@2047

Modern environmental crises challenge mechanistic development models. Sacred ecology offers culturally embedded sustainability frameworks (Berkes, 2012).

For India's 2047 vision, civilizational resources can inform policy:

- Community-led conservation
- Recognition of indigenous ecological knowledge
- Integration of ethical ecology in education
- Protection of sacred landscapes

Such models align development with cultural continuity.

Conclusion

Prakriti Poojan reveals a deep ecological thread within Indian civilization. Tribal traditions embody it through ritual ecology and sacred landscapes. Sanatan philosophy articulates it through metaphysics and dharmic ethics.

This civilizational continuum transforms environmental stewardship into cultural value. In times of ecological uncertainty, revisiting this shared heritage offers not nostalgia but guidance for sustainable futures.

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