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Assessing Spiritual Ecology as a Path to Holistic Environmental Conservation in ISKCON Mayapur, India

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Abstract

An attempt has been made in this study to explore the role of spiritual ecology as a paradigm shift in the field of environmental conservation by focusing on the daily lives of devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur, India. This research highlights how devotees' different spiritual practices integrate spirituality with ecological practices. Using NVivo Word frequency analysis, the study highlights key themes such as 'environmental' (4.66%), 'people' (3.90%), and 'spiritual' (3.80%) which foster a deep connection between daily rituals observed by the devotess and conservational efforts. The findings of this study demonstrate that spiritual ecology encourages sustainability by bridging the gap between scientific methods and ethical-spiritual values. Instances such as the Green Temple Initiative and Govardhan Eco Village illustrate the practical application of biodiversity conservation through the spiritual-ecological concept. The study results reveal that the application of the concept of spiritual ecology for the purpose of environmental conservation is a comprehensive and inclusive approach for a sustainable environmental future.

Introduction

With the deterioration of environmental quality globally, contemporary methods for preserving nature that rely heavily on scientific and economic aspects have fallen short in addressing these complex and diverse issues (Kates et al., 2001). Although scientific research and technological advancements provide knowledge for minimizing the crisis, they often fail to address its cultural and spiritual dimensions of the crisis (Kates et al., 2001). Different economic strategies, such as market-based approaches and environmental regulations also have limited success in environmental conservation efforts, as they tend to put short-term profits ahead of long-term stability and overlook the inherent worth of nature (Costanza et al., 2014). Recently, people have begun to realize the need for a paradigm shift in environmental conservation methods that integrate the ecological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions together (Trucker and Grim, 2017). This shift is encapsulated in the emerging field of spiritual ecology seeking to explore the intersection of spirituality, religion, and environmental stewardship (Vaughan-Lee, 2016). The concept of Spiritual Ecology highlights the fact that environmental challenges go beyond technological or policy solutions and delve into profound spiritual and ethical dimensions (Jenkins and Chapple, 2011). It focuses on both comprehensive value of nature and interconnectedness of all living creatures which highlights religious as well as spiritual traditions to inspire a more holistic and sustainable relationship with the environment (Sponsel, 2012). In a global context, spiritual ecology has rapidly gained popularity rapidly as a response to address the limitations of traditional environmental conservation methods, which often fail to account for the cultural, ethical and spiritual dimensions of these environmental crises (Berry, 2006). In spiritual ecology, various belief systems, ranging from earth-centered practices to global religions have become common grounds for advocating environmental stewardship. It offers a shared interest in boosting relationship between humanity and the natural world.

Spiritual Ecology in Global Context

Spiritual Ecology is the intersection of spirituality, religion, and environment. This highlights the deep bond between humans and nature. It states that an ecological crisis is not only the result of environmental degradation, but also involves the moral and spiritual dimensions of an individual (Grim and Tucker 2009). This perspective on nature comes from various religious and spiritual traditions that include indigenous cosmology, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, which focus on environmental stewardship, reverence of nature, and the interconnectedness of all living creatures (Sponsel, 2012). Examples can be cited from indigenous traditions where Earth is believed to be a living entity and deserves respect and care, which is a core of the concept of environmental discourse (Berkes, 2017). This paradigm shift in environmental consciousness can be crucial as it helps to address different environmental crises such as deforestation, climatic change, and loss of biodiversity, and focuses on the ecological consciousness and ethical responsibility of every human being. According to Kaza (2005), spiritual ecology underscores the role of different rituals, storytelling and sacred practices of different communities that foster a sense of belonging and connection with nature, which helps to work together for better environmental sustainability. In this era of globalization and technological advancement, the concept of spiritual ecology not only offers a holistic framework that reconciles human progress with ecological integrity but also sustainable the human-nature relationships. The integration of different spiritual beliefs and practices into environmental advocacy can create a new pathway towards a more harmonious and environmentally sustainable society.

Indian Mythology and Spiritual Ecology

Since ancient times, Indians have worshipped almost every living and non-living entity as a form of God. The main theme of spiritual ecology is to connect nature with the spiritual beliefs of an individual, which has been well depicted in Indian mythology. In Indian mythology, every living and non-living entity of nature is considered a divine and every part of the earth or nature is interconnected with the divine. Indian mythology, which is a combination of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and other indigenous traditions, portrays the Earth as a living entity, and represents the concept of *Prakriti* (nature) as the expression of cosmic order (Rta) and the form of goddess Shakti (Chapple, 1998). Examples can be cited from Vedic hymns, including Atharva Veda's *Prithibi Sukta*, where the Earth was embodied as a mother goddess and highlights the moral and ethical responsibility of mankind to protect nature (Nelson, 1998). A similar respect for nature was embossed in the Puranic texts. Similarly, in Bhagavata Purana and Vishnu Puran, the Earth has been venerated as *Bhudevi*, the goddess of nourishment of life, and is honoured through sustainable practices (Haberman, 2013). The principles of *ahimsa* (non-violence), followed by Jain and Buddhism, reinforce the sacredness of all living forms and advocate a harmonious coexistence with nature (Chapple, 2006). In Indian mythology, the rivers of India such as Ganga, Yamuna, Saraswati and many more have been glorified as sacred rivers and considered a symbol of purity, fertility, and spiritual liberation (Alley, 2002). The Chipko Movement, an eco-socialist action in the 1970s in the Garhwal region of Uttarakand, India, exemplifies the mythological reversal of trees and demonstrates how the concept of spiritual ecology can lead to real-world activism. The villagers of the Grahwal region embraced the trees to protect them from being cut down, as they adulated the forest as *Vriksha Devatas*

or tree deities that reflected their reverence towards the Indian mythological aspect of respecting nature (Guha, 2000). Furthermore, the concept of *Pancha Bhuta* (Five Elements of nature) of Indian Philosophy, which includes air, water, earth, fire, and ether also conveys the message of interconnectedness of all creatures in Earth and highlights a sustainable way of living for ecological balance (Kumar, 2010). The Great Indian Epic, such as The *Ramayana*, The *Mahabharata* also rich in ecological wisdom. The depiction of aranyas (forests) as a space of spiritual development and the importance of living in harmony with nature have been elaborately described in these epics (Sutton, 2000). In this contemporary period of environmental crisis, the integration of Indian mythology and spiritual ecology can create a revolutionary framework that can address this environmental degradation and inspire society to return to its spiritual principles to adopt environmentally sustainable ways of living.

Objectives

The theory of spiritual ecology drawn from indigenous knowledge can offer a transformative framework for reestablishing the relationship between humans and nature, and can provide a universal platform for all global religions to consider the earth as a sacred entity that can promote global environmental care (Gottlieb, 2006). In previous studies, theoretical discussions on spiritual ecology have been well-documented, but the practical application of this concept through empirical studies still remains untouched. Many unorganised groups based on their spiritual beliefs have engaged in different environmental activities, but the motivation, methodologies, and socio-economic and socio-cultural dynamics behind this conservation effort remain scarce (Veldman et al., 2015). To address this research, gap, the present study aims to explore how the devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur, apply principles of spiritual ecology in their daily lives and in conservational practices.

Methodology

The present study includes a qualitative research design to investigate the perspectives of the environmental conservation of devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur, India, through the lens of spirituality. Unstructured and semi structured questionnaires were used to capture the lived experiences, beliefs, and spiritual practices of the participants, with a focus on understanding how the concept of spiritual ecology influenced their environmental stewardship. Using the purposive sampling technique (Patton, 2014), 40 participants were selected (nine female aged 45 to 60 years, thirty-one males aged 45 to 65 years) who are actively engaged in different environmental initiatives of ISKCON and can offer rich, in-depth insights into the integration of spirituality and ecological practices.

Selection of Participants and Collection of Data

As mentioned earlier, participants were chosen using a purposive sampling method to ensure that each individual has a deep understanding of both environmental conservation and spiritual ecology. The

participants consented to take part in the interview procedure after getting the assurance that their identities would not be revealed.

The participants were selected based on their involvement in various sustainable practices and dedication to the spiritual principles of *Bhakti yoga*.

Among the 40 participants, 14 are selected from 'Mayapur Environmental Protection Team', 7 from 'Govardhan Team', 8 from 'Eco Centre Team of Mayapur' and 5 from 'Community development team'. The remaining 6 are selected from the teachers of Vedic Schools.

Data were collected by applying semi-structured interview method, which provide researcher the opportunity to explore participants' perspectives towards environmental conservation through spiritual ecological practices. As both the interviewer and the participants were native Bengali speakers, the entire interview process was conducted and recorded in Bengali, the mother tongue of both the interviewer and participants. Duration of each interview was between 60 to 90 minutes and also audio-recorded with the consent of the participants.

Data analysis Using NVivo- Software

The transcribed interviews were entered into Microsoft Excel 2020 and exported to the NVivo environment for word frequency analysis. Word Frequency analysis was carried out in the current work as it helps to identify the most prominent themes and concepts in participants' responses. This qualitative research tool helps to quantify and visualize the recurrence of specific terms which has helped the researcher understand a clear indication of the participant's priorities, values and perspectives (Saldana, 2021).

The quantitative dimension of the participants' statements provided rigorous and transparent insights into the topic (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). In the present study, word frequency analysis assists in highlighting the spiritual and ecological principles that are most salient to ISKCON devotes, offering a precious insight into how these principles shape their environmental practices. Contributing to a broader discourse on spiritual ecology, this study provides a sustainable understanding of the intricate relationship between spirituality and environmental conservation by combining word frequency analysis with the principles of thematic analysis (Grim and Tucker, 2009).

Results

The results of the qualitative interviews by word frequency analysis conducted using NVivo software, explore significant insights into the perspectives of the devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur about their environmental conservation through spiritual ecological practices. The analysis highlights the frequency of words, representing the number of times that they appear with a weighted percentage of the words,

reflecting the key themes and priorities of the participants (Markowitz et al., 2021). The analysis of word frequency is presented in Table No. 1.

Table No1: Word Frequency Analysis

WORD	LENGTH	COUNT	WEIGHTED PERCENTAGE (%)
ENVIRONMENTAL	13	43	4.66
PEOPLE	6	36	3.90
SPIRITUAL	9	35	3.80
SPIRITUALITY	12	29	3.15
EARTH	5	23	2.49
CONSERVATION	12	20	2.17
INDIVIDUALS	11	18	1.95
HELPS	5	16	1.74
DEVELOP	7	15	1.63
PLANET	6	15	1.63
PRACTICES	9	15	1.63
PRAYER	6	15	1.63
RESPONSIBILITY	14	15	1.63
RITUALS	7	15	1.63
SENSE	5	15	1.63
TOWARD	6	15	1.63
ALIGNS	6	13	1.41
BALANCE	7	13	1.41
EMPHASIZES	10	13	1.41
PRINCIPLES	10	13	1.41

Source: Analysed by authors.

1. Environmental (4.66%)

The term ‘environmental’ with a count of 43 and a weighted percentage of 4.66 emerges as the most frequently used word by the participants during interviews indicating a deep concern of the participants about the environmental issues. This reflects a strong association between participants’ environmental

conservation and their concern for ecological sustainability. It underscores the centrality of the environmental stewardship of the devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur and their daily spiritual and practical lives.

2. People (3.90%):

With a count of 36, 'people' stands as the second most frequent word, suggesting the view of the participants about the collective responsibility of the environmental conservation. It highlights the philosophy of '*Vasu dhaiva Kutumbhakam*' (the world is one family), which emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals and their shared responsibility to protect the Earth.

3. Spiritual (3.80%) and Spirituality (3.15%):

The respondents also highlighted the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' in their interviews which indicated the integration of diverse spiritual practices into environmental conservation efforts. The reflection of these words manifests the devotees' beliefs that environmental awareness and conservation are not merely physical or practical pursuits but also deeply spiritual endeavours. The repeated use of these words suggests the spiritual duties or activities that devotees associate with protecting the environment.

4. Earth (2.49%) and Planet (1.63%):

The repeatedly mentioned terms like 'Earth' and 'Planet' indicate a strong sense of reverence for the natural world. The use of these terms by the respondents represents their view of the earth as a sacred entity that needs care and protection. This aligns with the spiritual ecological framework and environmental conservation, emphasizing the intricate relationship between the Earth and the moral responsibility of people to act as a steward of the planet.

5. Conservation (2.17%):

'Conservation' is another keyword used by the participants that reflects their active engagement in different conservation efforts. Environmental conservation practices, such as organic farming, waste management, and renewable energy projects, performed by the devotees of Mayapur highlight the principles of spiritual ecology.

6. Individuals (1.95%) and Responsibility (1.63%):

The use of the terms like 'Individuals' and 'Responsibility' highlight the devotees' strong sense of personal accountability in environmental stewardship. This suggests that devotees hold the responsibility, as an individual and as a member of a broader community, to protect the Earth.

7. Help (1.74%), Develop (1.63%), and Practices (1.63%)

The terms like ‘Help’, ‘Develop’, and ‘Practices’ highlight the practical aspects of each participants’ engagement in different environmental conservation efforts. The word ‘help’ implies the views of the devotees to their meaningful contribution towards environmental stewardship, whereas ‘develop’ and ‘practices’ emphasize their commitment to the ongoing process for saving the earth.

8. Prayer (1.63%) and Rituals (1.63%):

These frequently mentioned terms highlight the spiritual dimensions of devotees’ environmental efforts. Prayer and maintaining different ritual activities emphasize that their conservational efforts are deeply connected with a sense of divine.

9. Sense (1.63%) and Toward (1.63%)

The words like ‘sense’, ‘towards’ indicate a vigorous sense of purpose and direction in the devotees’ activities regarding conservation efforts. These terms reflect the commitment of participants’ towards creating and nourishing a sustainable environment.

10. Aligns (1.41%), Balance (1.41%), Emphasizes (1.41%), and Principles (1.41%):

All these terms mainly focus on the alignment of devotees’ conservational efforts with spiritual principles. ‘Aligns’ indicated the intricated relationship between devotees’ activities with their spiritual beliefs, while ‘balance’ highlights their goal on ecological equilibrium. ‘Emphasizes’ and ‘Principles’ underscore a strong importance on the ethical and spiritual attitudes towards conservational efforts.

Discussion

The present study attempts an in-depth exploration and highlights the intricate relationship between spirituality and environmental conservation by analysing the responses of selected ISKCON devotees from Mayapur. Their experiences reflected the emerging framework of spiritual ecology. The qualitative data obtained through interviews, analysed by NVivo word frequency analysis, clearly indicates that the devotees perceive environmental ideas not merely as a physical or scientific task, but as a sacred responsibility deeply rooted in their Bhakti Yoga practices and Vedic teachings.

Frequent occurrence of the terms like ‘spiritual’, ‘prayer’, ‘rituals and ‘responsibility’ in participants’ narratives strongly determines their aesthetic views. This also indicates their inner transformation from an anthropocentric world view to an aesthetic, environmental perspective. This shift in human perception is the central concept of ‘Spiritual Ecology’, where, nature has been considered natural, earth as earth with the addition that we are part of it. (Scatolini, 2022). As a part of nature, spiritual aspects of human behaviour, such as prayer and rituals, encourage devotees to be more environmentally responsible, giving rise to a new dimension of the global environmental movement focused on ecological sustainability. In other words, spiritual ecology is not a new religion but rather an approach to environmental conservation through a spiritual lens (Gumo et al., 2012). By developing more accurate measures of human impacts on environmental conservation, collaborating with ISKCON devotees, implementing government policies

and enhancing educational and spiritual awareness, the philosophy of spiritual ecology can become a crucial element for environmental sustainability (Orr, 2002).

Furthermore, focus on words like ‘individuals’ and ‘people’ by the respondents deeply emphasises on individual’s accountability and collective responsibility towards the environment. This reflects a bottom-up approach to environmentalism, in which both individual and collective involvement are required to protect and conserve the environment through spiritual concepts. This bottom-up approach integrates individual and collective mechanisms addressing ecological issues. This encourages a harmonious lifestyle through environmental interaction rather than the conventional economic growth model approach (Lestar and Böhm, 2020). Indian ethical traditions which are deep rooted in the everyday activities of ISKCON devotees’, conceptualize humans as integral parts of nature and recognise the interconnectedness between people and nature through sacred bonds of spiritual practices. Devotees adopt a holistic approach towards the environment by valuing ecological responsibilities and interconnectedness. This approach in the form of practicing Bhakti Yoga or Vedic teachings emphasizes that every person has a role in maintaining the earth’s balance, echoing the ideology of spiritual ecology (Pradheksa et al., 2023).

As ISKCON devotees abide by the rules of prayers and rituals in their daily lives, they have set a new dimension of spiritual ecology for environmental conservation complementing common scientific measures. This dimension is not only philosophical but also practically implemented, and is rarely found. This concept, which can be referred to as spiritual oneness, highlights its motive through individual or collective spiritual beliefs that have a tangible commitment towards sustainable well-being (Garfield et al., 2014). In 2022, the ISKCON Environment Initiative (IEI) declared Green Temple initiatives, setting three tier benchmarks for sustainable temple operations. Following these guidelines, ISKCON Mayapur and its devotees have made significant contributions to environmental protection by protecting cows, planting trees and plants regularly, encouraging the use of bio-degradable products such as paper cups and plates, motivating people for spiritual meditation, introducing pure distilled water, and banning the use of plastics and mobile phones on campus. They also enriched their libraries with books related to the environment and its protection (Sharma and Dixit, 2010). These actions show how individual devotee, through their lifestyle and temple-centred activities, contributes to broader environmental goals.

Apart from these in-situ environmental conservations efforts, a model called *Govardhan Eco Village (GEV)* was established by ISKCON near Mumbai. This model demonstrates how spiritual ecological principles can be institutionalized to generate measurable ecological and social benefits (Fici, 2015) The concept of spiritual ecology is also reflected in the establishment of eco-villages in Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh, where the Govardhan Hill is considered a sacred place for Krishna worship, reflecting ecological harmony with spiritual concept (Haberman, 2020). Projects like sacred grove conservation, Yamuna River clean-up drives and green pilgrimage routes illustrate the collective mobilization of people motivated by spiritual values, not just environmental legislation. This reinforces the observation from the current study that devotees derive their ecological responsibilities from religious teachings rather than from external mandates or scientific rationales. Both models reflect that individual devotees or their

communities are guided by Bhakti Yoga and view environmentalism as their sacred duty instead of a scientific mechanical obligation. They realised spiritual ecology as a function of personal transformation and communal action (Chavan and Sharma, 2024).

However, the inclusion of prayers and rituals in ecological routines of devotees represents a major divergence from scientific environmentalism and the cultivation of deep ethical habits and emotions towards ecological balance. This kind of divergence promotes environmental awareness through different spiritual beliefs and practices throughout the world. Evidence from different traditions across the world, such as the Sundanese tradition of Ruwatan Leuweung Babakti Mandala Manglayang in Indonesia, symbolizes the intricate relationship between humans and nature highlighting the significant connection between culture and environmental conservation (Prasetyo, 2023). These rituals not only act as religious activities, but also foster environmental consciousness through preserving local heritage.

Additionally, in Myanmar, an initiative was taken to revitalize indigenous knowledge through ecotourism practices in the Khaw NuM'cung National Park, which promotes the potentiality of cultural practices in environmental stewardship (Bawi, 2025). This kind of initiatives not only encourages economic and cultural empowerment but also guides sustainable resource management through the preservation of biodiversity. In Africa, the integration of spiritual practices with ecological management highlights traditional beliefs that play a crucial role in conserving the environment (Sarfo-Mensah and Oduro, 2007).

Examples can also be citated from India, where sacred groves are worshiped by people with different religious beliefs, which illustrates another instance of how different spiritual practices can algin conservational efforts (Amirthalingam, 2016).

These acts serve as spiritual technologies that give rise to ethical habits and emotional bonds overlooked by policy makers for environmental conservation (Sponsel, 2012). The rituals practiced by the devotees of ISKCON, Mayapur, promote ecological sustainability by engaging with nature and, encouraging daily environmental consciousness at the grassroots level.

From the above discussion, it is clear that the spiritual ecological concept is not only an abstract idea, but also an actionable framework for environmental protection. It can be carried out through tree plantation drives, plastic free campaigns, and ecological farming rooted in daily devotional life. The philosophy not only establishes a cultural and ethical foundation, but also builds a model for sustainable development.

Conclusion

The present study deeply explores the significant role of ISKCON devotees in an emerging paradigm shift in environmental conservation driven by the philosophy of Spiritual Ecology. It highlights how the devotees of ISKCON Mayapur perceive and implement ecological responsibility as a sacred duty. Thus, their spiritual practices are unlikely to engage in the process of environmental protection. The analysis of this article also reveals that, apart from scientific or policy-based environment conservation approaches,

devotees' commitments to environmental protection are embedded in spiritual and ethical principles of Bhakti Yoga and Vedic Teachings. Furthermore, the article also reveals that the spiritual lifestyle of these devotees naturally integrates ecological awareness and responsibility. Word Frequency analysis also substantiates this by showing devotees' frequent engagement with terms 'prayer', 'rituals and 'nature' which indicate a strong personal and collective environmental consciousness.

The ideology of Spiritual Ecology, followed by ISKCON Devotees, establishes that not only scientific measures of environmental conservation can protect the environment but also adopt spiritual measures in daily life, and integrating them into conventional scientific measures of environmental protection can make the process easier and more widely acceptable. Examples cited from the Green Temple initiative and Govardhan Eco Village models successfully establish spiritual ecological principles and have become more actionable and sustainable through community practices. This integrated approach bridges the gap between ecological concerns and spiritual values, offering an inclusive, culturally relevant and sustainable model for environmental management. This approach not only inspires the action of knowledge or policy but also materializes inner transformation by daily devotion among devotees worldwide.

Declarations

Author's Contribution:

All authors Mahadeb Das, Dr. Sonel Som and Prof. Piyal Basu Roy made substantial contributions to the conception or design of the work; or the acquisition, analysis and interpretation of data. Mahadeb Das and Dr. Sonel Som Drafted the work. Prof. Piyal Basu Roy revised it critically for important intellectual content. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Competing interest

The authors declare that there is no Competing interest regarding the publication of this article.

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Ethical Approval and Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and participation was entirely voluntary. It will be provided if required.

Clinical Trial Number

Not applicable.

Clinical Trial Registration

Not applicable.

Clinical Trial

No Clinical Trial has been conducted regarding this article.

Ethical Approval

The study involved human participants and was conducted in accordance with established ethical standards for social science research. The research was carried out in accordance with the ethical principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki. The study was approved by **Ethics Committee of Cooch Behar College.**

Consent to Participate

Consent to Participate declarations: Applicable and addressed as above.

Consent to publish

Consent to Publish declarations: Applicable

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures



Figure 1

No. 1 Word Cloud Representation

Source: Prepared by Authors