Dharmic Ecology: Perspectives from the Swadhyaya Practitioners

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Abstract
This is an article about the lives of the Swadhyayis, Swadhyaya practitioners, in the Indian states of Gujarat and Maharashtra. The Swadhyaya movement arose in the mid-twentieth century in Gujarat as a new religious movement led by its founder, the late Pandurang Shastri Athavale. In my research, I discovered that there is no category of “environmentalism” in the “way of life” of Swadhyayis living in the villages. Following Weightman and Pandey (1978), I argue that the concept of dharma can be successfully applied as an overarching term for the sustainability of the ecology, environmental ethics, and the religious lives of Swadhyayis. Dharma synthesizes their way of life with environmental ethics based on its multidimensional interpretations.

Keywords
dharma, Hinduism, ecology, tree-temples, religion and environmental ethics, Athavale, Swadhyaya

Swadhyaya’s Dharmic Ecology

Having heard about the tree-temples of Swadhyaya, I called their office in Mumbai to visit one of such sites in the summer of 2006 during my trip to India. Soon, I found myself on my way to Valsad in Gujarat. I arrived at the home of a swadhyaya volunteer Maheshbhai who took me to the site of the local tree-temple with several other Swadhyayis. All of them

1) In this article, I have used pseudonyms except for the well-known personalities.
showed warmth and enthusiasm to welcome me and explain about the tree-temples and several other works and ideologies of the Swadhyaya movement. The tree-temple appeared like an oasis having suddenly sprung up out of nowhere. It was a dense garden of trees of mangoes and chikoo (sapodilla). Although I appreciated the view of lush green trees, I was particularly impressed that it was built on a land where people had previously lost all hopes of cultivation. Even the government had declared it as a barren land. As the caretakers of this garden began explaining about the way they perceive the trees and the vision of their guru Athavale, I began asking questions related to environmentalism. What I present below is based on my several such interviews with Swadhyaya followers who have participated in such work. I have also extracted relevant information from the vernacular literature of Swadhyaya that is based on the video-recorded discourses of Athavale.

Swadhyaya is one of the least known new religious movements. It arose in the mid-twentieth century in the Western states of India. Although this movement now has some presence in several Western countries such as the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, it has not received the attention of scholars of Hinduism except in a few introductory articles. Before I begin introducing the tree-temples of Swadhyaya, it is important to mention that their environmental significance is denied by the Swadhyayis. In fact, one of the Swadhyayis was taken aback when I told him about my topic of research. In his own words,

You might misrepresent Swadhyaya if you choose to research it from ecological perspective. Swadhyaya and its activities are only about our devotion to almighty; ecology is not our concern. Environmental problems are due to industrialization and the solution lies beyond Swadhyaya’s activities. Swadhyayis are not environmentalists!

2) Between 1994 and 1996, some observers and scholars had visited the Swadhyaya villages. Their observations were compiled in an edited volume by R. K. Srivastava (1998). This is a helpful introduction of the movement. In addition, I have provided some other scholarly articles in the bibliography, see Dharampal-Frick (2001), James (2005), Little (1995), Paranjape (2005), Rukmani (1999), Sharma (1999), and Unterberger et al. (1990). After completing this article, I also came to know that Ananta Giri has published a monograph on self-development and social transformation brought about by Swadhyaya, see Giri (2009).
Based on my observations of Swadhyaya’s several activities, I tend to agree with him. Athavale has repeatedly emphasized that the main goal of Swadhyaya is to transform the human society based on the Upanishadic concept of “Indwelling God”. According to him, since the Almighty resides in everybody, one should develop a sense of spiritual self-respect for oneself irrespective of materialistic prestige or possessions. In addition to one’s own dignity, the concept of “Indwelling God” also helps transcend the divisions of class, caste, and religion and Athavale exhorted his followers to develop the Swadhyaya community based on the idea of “brotherhood of humans under the fatherhood of God”. Activities of Swadhyaya are woven around this main principle, which in turn are also aimed at the Indian cultural renaissance.

Although environmentalism is neither the means nor the goal of Swadhyaya’s activities, natural resources such as the earth, the water, the trees, and the cattle are revered and nurtured by Swadhyayis based on this understanding. Environmentalism does come out as an important by-product of its multi-faceted activities and this was noted by a 1992 conference in Montreal where Swadhyaya was invited to present its ecological philosophy and work. I argue that a multivalent term like dharma can comprehend and describe this kaleidoscopic phenomenon and the way it relates to the ecology. Swadhyaya followers do not regard environmentalism as their main duty, their dharma. Alternatively, from the outside, one can regard their dharma, their cultural practices, as ecologically sustainable as I show below. I also want to note that my observations are based on their activities in the rural parts of India since the urban and the diaspora Swadhyayis do not have such ecological projects yet.

Vrksamandiras, literally tree-temples, are constructed as inspired by Athavale’s teachings that regard trees as gods. By several explanations from Indic texts, he developed a set of preaching that I would like to term “arboreal dharma,” dharmic ecology inspired by the qualities of trees. He

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3) Since the 1990s, this became the theme of celebration for Athavale’s birthday, which is celebrated as “Human Dignity Day” around the world by his followers.
4) This conference, “Living with the Earth: Cross-cultural Perspectives on Sustainable Development, Indigenous and Alternative Practices”, took place on April 30-May 3, 1992. It was organized by the Intercultural Institute of Montreal, Canada. A three-page report titled “Presentation by Didi (the current leader of the movement) on the Swadhyaya Movement” was written by Robert Vachon in the proceedings of the conference. An interview with Didi was subsequently broadcasted nationwide by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation on a one-hour radio program called Ideas.
gave slogans such as “Vṛkṣa main Vāsudeva,” (literally, Kṛṣṇa in trees) and “Paudhe main Prabhu” (literally, God in plants). To explain divine power in trees, he interpreted the capillary action of trees in this way, “There is a divine power in trees which makes it possible for water and fertilizer to rise from the roots below and reach the top portion against the gravitational force. It is not just the result of Keśākāraṇa (capillary action) but it is Keśavākāraṇa (Kṛṣṇa’s force).”

According to Athavale, ancient Indic sages had the spiritual vision to see divinity in the entire universe. Since it is difficult for common people to see this transcendental reality in their routine lives, sages specifically asked them to revere some representative plants. Athavale explained that the sages deliberately chose tulsi, which has no material benefits for humans. It provides neither shelter nor flowers nor fruits, and yet sages considered it sacred. Millions of Hindus establish this plant in their homes and worship it. Similarly, bilva is considered sacred for Śiva and even the common grass dūrvā is used in rituals such as Gaṇeśa-worshipping. He also explained the ritual of Vata-Sāvitrī performed by married women. They tie the sacred thread, janeu, to vata and pipal trees and worship them. Women ask for long lives for their husbands and families from these huge trees. According to Athavale, ancient sages introduced the sacred use of specific plants and trees in all these rituals to develop reverence for them. Evidently, Athavale’s teachings are based on the Upaniṣadic philosophy to see divinity in every particle. His emphasis here is to inspire his followers to see divinity beyond their immediate socio-economic needs. According to him, it is easy to develop respect and reverence for one’s own family. The ultimate goal of dharma is to transcend this limited family and see the entire universe, including natural resources such as trees, as family.

This dharmic approach is different from shallow ecology’s utilitarian approach, i.e., to protect ecology for human needs. This is also different from deep ecology’s biocentric approach of privileging nature more than human society. The dharmic approach is to connect humans with ecology based on the divine relationship between the two, not by separating one from the other. The dharmic approach is also different from a religious approach because it is not based on one’s belief in the “truth” of the words of a historic person or a scripture.
Athavale explained several ethical qualities that humans can learn from the trees. Trees develop a fixed bonding with the land. Trees are forever connected with the land that supports them. They grow at one place and provide shelter to others. They are stable and withstand all natural phenomena such as thunderstorms, cold winters, and hot summers with courage and patience. Athavale compared the Hindu god Śiva, who drank poison so that other gods could get nectar, with the trees which intake carbon dioxide so that others can get oxygen. Athavale also preached that the trees provide fruits even to those who throw stones; they provide roots and herbs for medicines, leaves and flowers for sacred rituals, fruits for physical strength, timber for construction, and shelter for travelers. In this way, they sacrifice all their parts for others without any expectation of gratitude in return. They have no false pride for all the charity they do for others. They serve as the ideal role model for ethics and they are wonderful gifts from God. Here, Athavale describes inherent qualities and virtues of trees, i.e., the dharma of a tree. According to him, by observing and following the dharmic qualities of a tree, one can develop one’s moral and ethical qualities, the dharma of a human being. Here, we see several meanings of dharma interplaying with each other. The dharma, inherent quality, can inspire the dharma, virtue, and this can help develop the dharma for the environment, environmental ethics.

Athavale then goes on to cite several texts about the above-mentioned dharmic interplay of meanings. According to his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gītā (15.1), this world is the aśvattha tree whose leaves are the Vedas. Just as the leaves decorate a tree, Vedic knowledge decorates the world. Athavale also cited Shakespeare’s appreciation of nature from As You Like It, “Tongues in tree, books in running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything (sic) . . . Under the Greenwood tree, who loves to lie with me? . . . Turn his merry note, unto the sweet bird’s throat! Come hither, Come hither, Come hither, here shall he see, no enemy, but winter and rough weather.” He cited Kālidāsa’s Rāghuvamśa to show that

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5) Úrdhva-mūlam adhah-sākhaṃ aśvattham prāhuravyayam, chandāṃsi yasya pārṇāni yastam veda sa vedavit (Bhagavad Gītā 15.1). Literally, it is said that there is an imperishable banyan tree that has its roots upward, branches down, and whose leaves are the Vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas. (In this article, all translations from Sanskrit, Hindi, and Gujarati are mine.)
the devadār tree, regarded as a son by Śiva is nurtured by goddess Pārvatī. Also from the same text, when Kautsa, the disciple of Varatantu visits King Raghu, Raghu asks Kautsa about the well-being of the trees at the hermitage of his guru, “The trees of hermitage that you nurtured like your children, who provided comforting shadow to the travelers, are they safe from thunderstorms and other calamities?” According to Athavale, this conversation shows that the ancient Indians had a sense of kinship with trees and they asked for their well-being. Athavale mentioned other verses from Kālidāsa’s Abhijñānaśākuntalam. Once while Śakuntalā was watering the plants, her friend Anasuyā tells her that her father Kaṇva seems to have more affection for his trees than she does. Hence, he asked her to water the plants. Śakuntalā replies, “I feed the plants not just to obey my father but I love and feed them considering them my own brothers.” Later, when Śakuntalā leaves for her husband’s home, Kaṇva asks his trees to bid farewell to her,

One who did not even drink water before feeding you, one who loved to decorate but never took even a leaf from you, one who celebrated when your first flower blossomed, that Śakuntalā is today going to her husband’s home, please bid her farewell. (Abhijñānaśākuntalam act 4.9)

All the above references from different texts again exemplify the dharmic interrelationship of trees with the human society. In July 1979, Athavale gave a practical shape to his dharmic ecology, when he inaugurated the first tree-temple at village Kalavad in Rajkot district in Gujarat. It was named Yājñavalkya Upavan, an orchard named after the Vedic sage Yājñavalkya. There were 6000 trees planted here. So far, followers of Atha-

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6) Amum puraḥ paśyasi devdārum putrikrtau asatu vṛṣabhadhvajena. Yo hemakumbha stanaṁ sriṁśāṁ skandasya mātu payasāṁ rasajñah.

7) Ādhārbandhapramukhāh prayatnaih samvardbhitānāṁ sutanirviśēṣāṁ. Kacchina vāchwādirūpaplavavḥ śramacchidāmāṁramapādapānāṁ.

8) Na kevalam tāta niyoga eva. Asti me sodarasneho apyetes u.

9) T. S. Rukmani also cites Abhijñānaśākuntalam in her article in the Harvard Volume on Hinduism and Ecology (Chapple et al. 2000).

10) Coincidentally, these were the years when Chipko in UP, Appiko in Karnataka, and Anna Hazare’s efforts in Maharashtra were being hailed as successful socio-ecological movements based on people’s participation. Athavale included tree-plantation projects into his programs of spiritual activism after emergence of other socio-ecological movements and soon launched several other environmental prayogs related to water conservation, sanitation, and agriculture.
Vale have created about two dozen such tree-temples in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. Villagers nurture them throughout the year. They frequent tree-temples not as gardeners but as devotees. The orchard becomes their temple and nurturing the plants becomes their devotion. The fruits or other products collected of such orchards are treated as prasāda, divine gift. The income generated from selling such fruits is either distributed among needy families or saved for future such prayogs.

On May 28 2007, I met a senior Swadhyayi volunteer Nathbhai at his home in New Jersey. Nathbhai was one of the key-participants in the building of the first tree-temple at Rajkot, Gujarat in 1979. Replying to my questions, he did not want to label tree-temples as an ecological project. He denied any significant ecological impact of tree-temples against widespread environmental problems. For him, environmental problems are the direct consequence of industries and it has to be dealt at that level. Below I quote his responses in my translation. I first asked him about the reason for this seemingly innovative project by Dādājī. He outrightly rejected any ecological basis for these gardens and told me,

Dādājī did not plant these trees for paryāvaranā (literally, the environment) even though he had taught us the reverence for all creation including mother earth, rivers, trees, and animals based on Upaniṣadic concept Īśāvāsyam Idam Sarvam, (Entire universe is divine because of omnipresence of supreme divinity).

Having denied environmental motivation, he went on to describe the true motivation of constructing the tree-temples as he understood from Swadhyaya ideology. He also mentioned how the name was chosen for these tree-temples:

Dādājī taught us that the early humans chose water out of the five great elements, pancha mahābhūtas, fire, earth, wind, water, and space, to offer to God. Later, based on their discoveries from surroundings, humans started offering other things such as the flowers, fruits, sandalwood, and abīr (red powder). Since water and other natural offerings were created by God, humans wanted to offer what was created by humans to show their gratitude towards God. Flowers and fruit are sowed by humans but grown by God. Even further, what can we offer to God? What is our own that we can offer! Dādājī told us that our own creativity, skill, and efficiency could be a better offering than mere flowers or fruits. Since farming is the skill that farmers and gardeners have, Dādājī devised tree-temples for their offering. He simply
chose to build tree-temples to help farmers offer their efficiency and time for spiritual development based on *Bhagavad Gītā*’s message of selfless work, *Karma Yoga*. Initially tree-temple was named *Upavan*. Later on, to distinguish from other gardens, the name was changed to *Vṛksamandira*.

Obviously environmentalism does not appear to be the motive of Athavale or his followers. Swadhyayis strongly emphasize that such prayogs are only for expressing their devotion for the almighty in a novel way. Instead of usual rituals of offering done in temples, devotion can transform one’s perspective towards one’s daily work-schedule. This routine labor can be utilized for devotion which Athavale called *kṛtibhakti*, literally action-oriented devotion or devotional action. What is also noteworthy is that this devotion is not merely based on blind faith in the words of their founder guru. Rather their goal is to apply this devotional labor into their work of farming to develop their bonding with the trees and to learn moral qualities from the trees. Ironically, the more I asked him about the role of such gardens for environment, the more he denied it.

Ecological problems have to be solved at the global level, not at the local level. Trees are only a small part of ecology; it was not an issue with Dādājī. Only small number of gardens cannot really help the environment. Farmers commonly own much bigger fruit gardens for their business that might have a greater ecological impact. Farmers in general have no awareness for ecology. However, we regard even stones as divine, so trees can also be regarded as divine, especially those in which we do *Prāṇa Pratiṣṭhā*.

*Prāṇa Pratiṣṭhā* is a ritual ceremony to invoke and establish the divinity in the trees. According to this Swadhyayi, after many years of participating in the Swadhyaya sessions, people start understanding their relationship with God and then they are involved in Swadhyaya activities such as tree-temples that help them transform their lives. For Swadhyayis, their *kṛtibhakti* based on the interpretations offered by Dādājī is a major motivation to participate in these prayogs.

In my observations, the devotional labor of Swadhyayis appeared as a significant force that can be a role model for several other traditional communities. While governmental efforts also routinely organize tree-plantation projects, the survival rate of such plants remains questionable.11

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11) According to a survey done in the 1980s by Food and Agriculture of the United
On the other hand, the devotion of Swadhyayis towards the newly planted and deified plants ensures a near 100% survival rates in all their tree-temples. This is a striking contrast between two similar efforts. The former which is done at the political level with an ecological focus and the latter which is done at the community level with a devotional focus. The success of Swadhyaya’s efforts is apparent in the way they conduct such activities.

Here is another glimpse extracted from Nathbhai’s memoir that he narrated to me. This was in 1978 when the first such Swadhyaya tree-temple was to be built based on kṛti bhakti of Swadhyayis without any political, social or financial support from outside the Swadhyaya movement. The intensity of Nathbhai’s dedication was apparent even after thirty years when he was one of the key volunteers for this project.

In 1978, a wasteland of about 50 acres was bought and was divided into parts of about 23 and 27 acres. It was a rocky and barren land. Nearby farmers were not hopeful about the project but Dādājī insisted and even located a spot for the well and that indeed turned out to a great supply of water for the tree-temple. Thousands of Swadhyayis came on weekly basis from all over Saurashtra including districts of Rajkot, Jamnagar, Surendranagar, Bhavnagar, Junagargh, Vairaval, Amreli, and Kutch. Most of them also had their own personal farms so had to take some time away from their personal farming. It was not noticed by any media or political leaders. As usual, it was a silent work so there is no question of support or opposition from any section of society. Volunteers brought their own food, bedding, and worked completely selflessly with only incentive of devotion, selfless love, and selfless work for God. After working for about one year, on July 12, 1979, tree-temple was inaugurated with Bāla Tāru Prāṇa Pratiśṭhā Mahotsav on first piece of the land. Next year second portion of the land was inaugurated. Bāla Tāru, a small plant, was ritually invoked with God and then was regarded as deity. A few families from nearby villages and towns were sitting near each bāla tāru to perform pūjā for couple of hours. In the next months and years, that

Nations, only 66% of the plants planted by state governments survived. The figures are similar for several other countries where the survey was conducted. I also found two reports in Times of India in which serious concerns were expressed about the survival rates of plantation efforts in Bihar and Haryana (2002 and 2003). Also, see a government of India report which admits poor survival rate of forest plantation efforts: [http://envfor.nic.in/nfap/forest-plantation.html](http://envfor.nic.in/nfap/forest-plantation.html)

12 As also claimed by their current leader Didi at *World’s Religions after September 11: A Global Congress* in Montreal, Quebec, September 11-15, 2006. I watched her video-recorded speech from this conference with a Swadhyayi.
group took care of their assigned bāla taru, so they became pujārī (worshipping devotee) for that bāla taru. Just as a priest maintains and cleans a temple, people did the same for these small plants.

I met another Swadhyayi, Rajeshbhai, on June 5th, 2007, who narrated a similar incident to me about the Buddha Vṛkṣamandira built in Junaghar district:

This piece of land was certified by an agriculture officer as a barren land unsuitable for farming. Earlier when the local administration wanted to donate the land to poor people, they rejected the offer, noting its uselessness. Swadhyayis have turned this land into a green oasis in the form of Buddha Vṛkṣamandira spread over 42 acres. It has 1200 fruit trees, 200 herb trees, and 150 trees of 30 diverse species. To water these plants, a 700-meter canal was also built. The entire orchard also has an underground water drop system about 18 inches under the land, supplying one-liter water to every plant. This leads to 70% reduction in the wastage of water and 800 plants can be watered simultaneously. This Vṛkṣamandira also has a prārthanā mandir, a prayer temple, where approximately 15 pujārīs pray and discuss every evening. A charity trust was established and the land was registered in its name. Tree-temple’s products are sold in its name and the money thus generated, called Mahālaksīmī, divine money, is distributed to the needy families as prasāda, divine gift. People are constantly vigilant never to let these temples be used for any selfish use whatsoever. Swadhyaya thoughts are important to maintain the sanctity of the temples.

Below I quote a report from the Times of India about Patañjali Vṛkṣamandira in Vadodara district (February 27, 2002):

It is a temple with a difference. Huge, spread over 30 acres of land and without deities or idols. Bells do not toll and mantras are not chanted. Yet some 60 pujārīs busy themselves in unique prayers every day. About 1,500 trees in Vṛkṣamandira campus are looked upon as deities and are cared for with great diligence by ‘devotees’. Seventeen years after sage Pandurang Athavale founded the Vṛkṣamandira, life for thousands of people in 16 villages surrounding the mandir campus and those living in 12 talukas of Vadodara, has changed. Vṛkṣamandira boasts of the following species of trees: 640 mango, 126 chiku, 125 drumsticks, 118 lemons, 110 awla, 84 coconuts, 70 berries, 25 papaya and 100 other common trees besides several species of medicinal herbs and vegetables. About 700 people from Chhani, Dhumal, Vemali, Sankarda, Virod, Dashrath, Koyalì, Ranoli, Ankodia, Sokhda, Ajod, Bajwa,
Pilol, Asoj, Padamla, and Siswa villages besides others from the city perform as ‘pujāris’ in turns at Vṛksamandira.

Shah, Sheth, andVisaria (1998) record a similar Vṛksamandira known as Śaunaka Vṛksamandira in Rojhad. Its total area is 11.64 hectare. There are 11,000 eucalyptus trees and 1617 fruit trees. Chemical fertilizers or chemical pesticides are not used here. Worm compost is prepared, and a mixture of kerosene and extracts from cactus thorns is used as pesticide; there is a tube well; drip irrigation through a network of PVC pipes has been provided on 14 acres of the Vṛksamandira. This Vṛksamandira is different from the others—here pujāris from not merely the surrounding villages but from the whole district come to offer pūjā. Approximately 3690 Swadhyayis (2443 males and 1247 females) are currently registered as pujāris at the Vṛksamandira. Of them, only 280 pujāris are from the local talukas, the rest come from all over the district; about 300 pujāris cover a distance of more than 100 kilometers from their residence to the Vṛksamandira. There are four broad categories of pujāris: (a) Vānaprastha couples and individuals (senior citizens) who reside for a period of three months, (b) Vānaprastha couples who reside for a period of one month, (c) pujāris who live for a fortnight, and (d) those who spend only a day at the Vṛksamandira. The pujāris of the first and second categories are experienced agriculturalists; they are familiar with the routine work of the farm; they guide and help others who may be unfamiliar with the farm work; they act as a link between the daily pujāris. One couple from the first category, two couples and two individuals from the second and third categories, and ten individuals from the fourth, work as pujāris at the Vṛksamandira.

The daily pujāris bring packed meals with them while those who stay for a fortnight or longer cook their meals at the Vṛksamandira. All pujāris use their own resources for their transport, food, and other requirements. The daily pujāris come to the Vṛksamandira in the evening and leave the next evening. At night, the pujāris engage in devotional activities and discuss Swadhyaya ideas. The produce of the Vṛksamandira is marketed in the area itself. The pujāris themselves buy the produce at a fixed price; some visitors also buy from the Vṛksamandira. The income during the last three years has ranged from a little over one-lakh rupees to about two and a half lakhs. The procedure for handling cash has been streamlined—as soon as the cash crosses the figure of Rupees 1000, it is deposited in the
when the bank balance crosses Rupees 10,000, it is sent to the central office. On the recommendation of the local workers, any proposal for expenditure from the account of the Vṛṣamandira is forwarded to the central office; the amount is then received and spent for the purpose.

Above descriptions about different Vṛṣamandiras demonstrate the success of Swadhyaya in convincing the villagers to transcend their reverence from Hindu gods and goddesses to revere plants and trees. Swadhyayis also do not claim that these sites are their efforts to save biodiversity. It is questionable whether the farmers have any such awareness and yet these new “sacred groves” built by Swadhyayis are a small but promising trend to capitalize on the popular devotional attitudes in the service of greater ecological good.

In July 1993, Athavale’s followers participated in another prayog called Mādhava Vṛṇḍa (Kṛṣṇa orchard). Swadhyayis everywhere planted tree saplings and jointly nurtured their plants for 100 days with daily chanting of Śrīsūktam and Nārāyanopaniṣad verses from Hindu texts. On October 19, 1993, it was announced that 7 million saplings had survived (Hinduism Today, July 1995). The tenth anniversary of this devotional undertaking was celebrated in the year 2002 as Mādhava Vṛṇḍa Daśābdī (Kṛṣṇa Orchard Decade). These celebrations were held at various places and 3.5 million new plants were planted in the same manner all over India and abroad. The intent for this prayog was to strengthen the feeling that trees and plants are also family members. According to Swadhyayis, by periodically chanting Sanskrit verses near plants by the entire family, not only love for plants is manifested but the family-members also develop harmony and love among themselves. In some years, the celebration is in the form of Vṛdbiṣu Utsava when the focus is not planting new trees but taking care of the older ones. According to an estimate by a senior Swadhyayi, there are at least ten million trees planted so far as part of this prayog. In this way, Swadhyaya’s dharmic ecology has helped give rise to several grass-root projects to connect local people with ecology. In 1987, Athavale was awarded the “Indira Priyadarshini Award” by the National Wasteland Development Board for tree-temples created under the banner of Vaijnāth Bhāvdarśana Trust. Giving an example of transformation occurring from such prayogs, a Swadhyayi told me that after the Gujarat riots in 2002, in Dhunadra village in Kheda district, they planted trees in Muslim graveyards and Muslims planted in Hindu cremation areas. Simi-
larly, another Swadhyayi recalled that Swadhyayi engineers had built sanitation facilities in thousands of tribal villages in Maharashtra.

Overall, we can conclude that the dharmic ecological work done by Athavale and his followers can be compared with ecological work done by environmental NGOs. However, for the Swadhyayis, their work is simply a reflection of their kṛtibhakti, activity inspired by their devotion to the divinity inherent in themselves and in nature around them. For Athavale's followers, trees and plants merely symbolize the divine force that works as a connecting force between the human society, puruṣa and nature, prakṛti. As Swadhyayis told me: “To be is to be related”. By developing reverential relationships with the trees, cows, and other ecological resources, Swadhyayis strive to develop their dharmic teachings into practice.

Athavale often cited the definition of dharma in the Mahābhārata as one that sustains both the personal order and the cosmic order.¹³ Swadhyayis, like many other Hindu communities, use dharma interchangeably to describe their ethos as it relates to their religion and natural order. For them, the distinction between the religious ethos and the ecological order is negligible since they describe them with the common term dharma or dhāram. Several scholars have noted this trend in Indians. Ann Gold’s observations from her fieldwork in Rajasthan are especially helpful. She describes the villagers who relate their moral actions with the ecological outcomes (2002). Frederick Smith describes similar trends in the ethnosociology of Marriott and Inden (2006: 586). Smith also cites Arjun Appadurai, “South Asians do not separate the moral from natural order, act from actor, person from collectivity, and everyday life from the realm of the transcendent.” Smith concludes, “The distinction between mind and body, humanity and nature, essence, idea, quality, and deity, would be (largely) one of degree rather than of kind.”

Dharma as “virtue ethics” has served as a role model for Indians for several millennia (Matilal 2002). From my research with the Swadhyayis, I found that their inspirations were the Hindu epic heroes and their guru whom they see as role-models practicing dharma to attain mokṣa. In several of the discourses of Athavale, I found him exhorting his followers to follow the ideal of Arjuna, the warrior of the Mahābhārata who preferred

¹³) Dhāraṇād dharma ity āhur dharmena vidhṛtāḥ prajāḥ, Yat syād dhāraṇasamyuktam sa dharma iti niścayaḥ (MBh 12.110.11).
the path of the *pravṛtti* (action) instead of *nivṛtti* (renunciation). Athavale repeatedly stressed that only actions done with a devotional motive can be considered dharmic actions leading to mokṣa. He correlated the motive of the action with the potential for mokṣa. Based on my case study of Swadhyayis, an ethical framework, based on dharma and karma that is also integrated with mokṣa, can serve as an important step to develop comprehensive Hindu environmental ethics.

Several authors such as T. S. Rukmani, George James, Vasudha Narayanan, and O. P. Dwivedi have noted theoretical and textual references from Indian texts to show ecological reverence (Chapple and Tucker 2000). These textual references have also been part of the worldview or cosmology of Hindus from the last several millennia as I noted in the lives of the Swadhyayis. They follow the texts by revering the natural resources such as the trees and the earth. Their relationship with nature not only includes revering it, but it inspires them to restore, protect, and conserve it. However, considerations of Hindu dharma must extend from mental textual constructs to daily experiences by the body in its immediate cosmic environment where the world is imagined as a transparent unity. As the stream of sensory experience is constantly flowing, dharma only has the appearance of permanence. While the dharma texts show that dharma boundaries are fixed and absolute, the flow of bodily experience, upon which such boundary conditions are superimposed, is constantly changing. The ambiguity that results is often better reflected in the myths of the epics and purāṇas than in the dharma texts themselves. Thus, Hindu dharma manifestations at the level of bodily perception (house walls, field boundaries, rivers, etc.) are important for the study of Indian culture.

I have found such patterns in my case study. By participating in different activities related to ecology, the practitioners of traditional communities such as the Swadhyayis not only undergo somatic experiences but also these experiences help them to “relive” the lives of Vedic sages and other mythical figures such as Arjuna. This is the embodied imagination or the “ecological mind” where perceptions, self-perception, and symbolic ideas resonate together. This is the level at which dharma means something to them before it has acquired its extremely diverse lexical meanings and social functions. It connects the practitioners with the experiences of their gurus and their natural surroundings.
Conclusion

Marriott has suggested that dharma can be an *ethnosociological* category to study and analyze the Indic world that frequently transgresses the world of religion, environmental ethics, and human social order, as is evident from my case studies of Swadhyayis. Swadhyayis, like other Hindus, use dharma to mean both their religious practices and their social duties. Thus, I suggest that the concept of dharma can function as a bridge between the ecological notions and environmental ethics of local Hindu communities and the ecological message related to the planet earth. The word dharma can be effectively used to translate the ecological awareness to reach out to the local communities of Hindus based on its meanings related to duties, ecological order, sustenance, virtues, righteousness, and religion.

References

Videos


Books and Articles in Hindi


Books and Articles in English


