CONCEPTUAL PAPER DOI: 10.21844/16202118204

Vol. XVIII, No. 2; September 2025 - February 2026 Print ISSN: 0975-024X; Online ISSN: 2456-1371

Indian Knowledge Systems and the Ethical Foundations of Urban Sustainability

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Abstract

We view urban development through quantitative parameters of growth such as boosting the economy, growth in infrastructure, housing, transport services, and land uses models resulting in efficient cities, which are functional to meet the demands of modern times. While achieving these results, the topic of ecological conservation or sustainability is overlooked. The view has dominated the western urban planning for ages and is also adopted into Indian urban policies in the post-colonial period. This paper critically examines this phenomenon and argues that these models, grounded in exploitative rationalities, have resulted in ecological degradation, spatial and resource inequality and a lack of moral responsibility among its people.

This paper then introduces the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) and explains how it can address the normative deficits present in current urban policies. Drawing on the primacy of Vedic and post Vedic concepts such as rta, dharma, and aparigraha, this paper builds a relational ecological urban model. By situating the IKS with dialogue with the current urban and ecological policies, we can propose a balanced urban development in India, that is ethically grounded and culturally situated.

Keywords: Urban sustainability, Ecological Urbanism, Indian Knowledge System (IKS), Urbanization in India, Environmental Ethics.

Introduction

Urban sustainability is one of the emerging problems faced due to the sudden shift of rural population into urban spaces in search of a better income, lifestyle and opportunities. The state has developed several extensive strategic programs that frame the urban programmes in terms of efficiency measures, creating infrastructure modernization and digital integration (Datta, 2015). A framework based on these parameters comes up with the problem of '*thin*' sustainability. Thin sustainability can be described as a minimalist, technology driven, and managerial conception of sustainability. This paper argues that western models of urbanization are the root cause of such thin sustainable models; primarily focusing on quantifiable ecological indicators, efficiency improvements and resource utilization without any consideration or engagement into the moral, cultural or social aspects of human-environmental relationship.

Due to engagement with thin models of sustainability, we can observe a philosophical shift in how we see spaces, nature and their relationship with humans. In such models the focus is usually on fast-paced growth, based on data-driven management, engineering, and digital control systems. However, it is important that we understand that when it comes to sustainability, it is more than just quantifiable data which is measured and assessed through indicators and adheres to

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How to Cite the article: Abhijat, S.R.; Routray, S.S. (2026). Indian Knowledge Systems and the Ethical Foundations of Urban Sustainability, Purushartha, 18(2), 54-63
Source of Support: Nil
Conflict of interest: None

numeric targets; what *cannot* be easily measured is often treated as secondary or irrelevant.

Indian ecological ethics views settlements, environment and the moral order as interdependent guided by principles such as ṛta, dharma, and yajña (Radhakrishnan, 1951; Chapple, 1993). Here, the moral responsibility towards nature is placed within the everyday moral conduct, patterns of habitation, and shared social practices (Gadgil & Guha, 1995; Srivastava et al., 2025).

David Schlosberg, in his works 'Defining Environmental Justice', gives arguments against mainstream sustainability for being excessively focused on and therefore prioritizing efficiency, adaptability, and resilience while ignoring the questions regarding the ethical aspects of justice, capabilities, or community development in sustainability practices (Schlosberg, 2007). This according to Schlosberg is done by not incorporating them as legitimate policy concerns. He critiques that such frameworks are underspecified in terms of keeping the topics of moral responsibility in sustainability unanswered or neglected. According to his theory, mainstream sustainability becomes how well systems function, not whether they are ethically justified. Expanding on his argument, we can say that such models of sustainability can also be called 'thin' because they avoid commitments to distributive justice. or participatory justice, environmental concerns. They tell us how to act efficiently, but not why we ought to act in that way. Due to this, cities become efficient but unjust, green but exclusionary.

When we look at sustainability through a philosophical lens, it is not merely an exercise that focuses on the quantitative aspect of utilization and production but also about coming up with ways that are holistic. Thin sustainability, much like Arne Naess's shallow ecology, treats environmental degradation as a set of discrete problems that require technical solutions or efficiency gains. Shallow Ecology seeks to protect nature only insofar as it serves humankind (anthropocentric). Focused on consumption and resource utilization, they do not challenge the anthropocentric view, rather they encourage a reaffirmation of human centrality, framing the natural world as valuable only insofar as it satisfies human needs or desires. Deep ecology, as described by Naess, demands for a transition from within, concerning values, intrinsic worth of non-human beings, co-dependency with nature. Naess's critique is especially relevant in post-colonial India, where sustainability debates use indigenous environmental knowledge as rhetoric rather than in practice. The indigenous environmental knowledge is grounded in the Deep ecology, where humans, lands and settlements are part of everyday moral practices. They treat nature as they treat their fellow human beings. When it comes to practical policy making, these concepts are often left out or remain unseen.

Stephen M. Gardiner also highlighted the limitation of such managerial environmentalism adopted by thin sustainability models. In his work, A Perfect Moral Storm' (Gardiner, 2011), he explains how thin sustainability with its mechanical frameworks, tries to conceal ethical failures by highlighting the quantifiable outputs brought by them. Such a form of managerial environmentalism, as explained by Gardiner enables actions of conveniences and procrastinations, deferral of moral responsibilities, and corruption. Gardiner's critique of such environmentalism further strengthens the need for a model of sustainability that reframes itself not as a solution of optimization but as an ethical model which gives clarity over duties, obligations and shared vulnerabilities among humans and their natural environment.

Recent Indian urban systems are also based on technocratic systems of rationality. They give preference to functionality models based on data-driven management, digital ecosystem for productions, engineering optimization and mechanical pathways to development instead of sustainability. Such paradigms, however, often effectively sideline community-based wisdom, culturally relevant practices, and nuanced ethical guidelines towards the ecosystem and people. Dominance of thin sustainability in India can be traced back to the colonial period, with a global diffusion of western urban models by the colonial forces. Cities were seen as machines for production, and attracted people because of economic growth, infrastructure expansion, and other opportunities. But as discussed earlier, these urban development models created a human-nature separation and focused only on primacy of consumption (Srivastava et al., 2021).

This paper examines how incorporating selected concepts from the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) into urban development programmes can provide a more effective way to address sustainability challenges in cities. IKS gives us a strong grounding where models of sustainability can be rebuilt by focusing on cosmic order, community self-sufficiency and environmental mutuality. This can significantly enhance urban sustainability programs in India; and can also be part of the global debates involving sustainability by demonstrating how the ancient traditional knowledge can be used for building ecologically mutual cities.

With the help of examples from various urban planning projects in India integrated with IKS and urbanization, this paper will try to find a path to sustainable urban futures which is not in a complete discarding of innovation and modernity; rather, it is in its philosophical reorientation by a lens that emphasizes ethics and cultural wisdom. Urban sustainability, as it is conceived as a whole, is not merely an engineering problem of a technical nature. It is in essence a moral, civilizational and philosophical undertaking.

Rethinking Urbanization: Reassessing Western Paradigm and Its Threat to Sustainability

The Indian urban developmental programmes are highly influenced by the adoption of the western models. Although the western paradigm has been effective in speeding up the developmental process; however, this has also affected the urban lifestyle by making it more secluded from its ethical and ecological foundations. Thin urban framework operates on the notion of extraction and fundamentally views land as a resource and not as part of nature. In this system, land is transformed into an administrable object through property regimes, zoning classifications and other urban metrics. This separates it from its ecological, cultural and moral relations. As a result, it views nature as external to human flourishing, and the city represents a mechanical tool which focuses only on production and economic growth.

To highlight the systematic threat posed by *thin sustainability* model within the Indian context, we must locate India's urban development trajectory with the post-colonial lenses. Partha Chatterjee mentions in his work (2004), that postcolonial developmental states often adopt the western framework of development to copy and catch up with the West. The Western development lens tends to see urbanization in terms of control, extraction and segregation of nature, community and labor. This approach is like the notion of what Arturo Escobar (2018) terms “development imaginary," a worldview that is universally based on western modernity and argues that it is the sole viable path to progress. This epistemological dominance makes inaccessible alternatives to the paradigm of living in harmony with nature, creating an ontological structure in which the word "urban" is equated with the human control over the environment.

Ananya Roy, in her essay *urban informality* further demonstrates how the western planning framework, when applied to India, produces exclusions to formalize lands, capital, resources and infrastructure. She mentions that what we call informal settlements, such as slum dwellings, unplanned settlements or unauthorized markets are created by the western development models. According to Western frameworks, a legitimate urban life must be officially registered, which means that infrastructure must adhere to bureaucratic standards, land must be titled, and capital must be documented. Large segments of the populace are instantly labeled as "illegal," "unauthorized," or "encroachers" when these standards are implemented in nations like India. These informal settlements are forced to be excluded from the western understanding of developmental planning. Populations who cannot fit into these narrow definitions of property or legality become illegible to the state, not because they lack order, but because the state lacks the conceptual tools to recognize their forms of living.

African and Asian cities function using a very different model for urban development as compared to Western theories (Simone & Pieterse, 2017). Here, the cities are characterized by relationality (social networks and mutual dependencies shape access to resources), fluidity (people move between formal and informal systems depending on need), and improvisation (urban residents constantly "make do" with limited or unstable infrastructures) rather than static, grid-like order (Smit, 2021).

These are ways of living in cities, not signs of failure. However, these dynamics cannot be explained by Western urban theory, which is based on the principles of predictability, stable infrastructure, and formal regulation. As a result, rather than viewing these cities as operating through various ontologies of urban living, it perceives them as chaotic or underdeveloped.

This is also relevant in India's context. Recent developmental programmes in India also try to copy the western model. Nikhil Anand, in his research has shown that the ethnography of Mumbai water systems as operated by the Municipality is a form of western framework (2017). Water is governed by engineering standards and bureaucratic procedures rather than by principles of equity or democratic participation. This strategy turns access to water into what he refers to as "hydraulic citizenship," a type of urban belonging that is dependent on one's ability to negotiate state bureaucracies, build connections with municipal engineers, and obtain unofficial political patronage rather than being based on constitutional rights.

India which initially adopted this western model has been both enthusiastic and uncritical, particularly visible in the recent push toward high-density, infrastructure-driven 'modern cities'. These initiatives prioritize surveillance, mobility, and digital management. It is believed that the "convenience" of these cities is in their ability to regulate consumption and manage flows, instead of fostering self-sufficiency and ecological reciprocity. Sustainability within this context becomes an administrative rather than moral matter and results in a kind of paradoxical fusion of green technologies and increasing inequality in socio-ecological terms, spatial segregation, as well as ecological fragility (Roy 2009; Raghunathan 2016; Srivastava et al., 2024).

Philosophically, this concerned issue goes beyond urban policy development to the metaphysical assumptions that underline modernity's notion of urban. According to philosopher Bruno Latour (1993), a modernist thought rests on a recurring dualistic concept that divides the natural world from the social and the ecology from culture. Within this ontological rift the concept of sustainability has been reduced to just a problem of efficiency, which makes the process of growth

"greener" rather than an underlying philosophical and ethical rethinking of human-nature relationships. The modern city emerges as a fake realm of human control, which stands against Indian spiritual traditions that place the human being within, and not separate from, the rhythmic and moral structure of the universe.

Globally, indigenous philosophical philosophies like *Buen Vivir* in Latin America and *Ubuntu* in Africa have been embraced as alternatives to the technocratic model of sustainability (Gudynas, 2011; Metz, 2011). Such frameworks are examples of how ecological reciprocity and rationality can be part of urban models which redefines sustainability. India also possesses rich traditional and philosophical resources. By locating India's policy discourse within its own philosophy traditions and philosophies, this study can be a contribution to national debates about urban governance as well as international discussions regarding sustainability in a pluralistic way.

This kind of urbanization in India, which is guided by these Western structures, poses an obstacle to sustainability because it breaks the ethical connection between environment and culture. It is a known fact that Indian cities are battling environmental problems such as- air pollution, global warming, waste management, depleting groundwater. Such problems are not something that can be resolved with technology alone. They are the results of a larger problem of people's lifestyle choices. To be able to reverse or solve these issues, we need not only focus on modern technological solutions but also adopt a different lifestyle. The cities are facing a larger disconnect from forests, rivers, and nature itself. The community rituals of caring that brought people together have vanished. All this points towards a philosophical gap that is exiting within societies.

Analysis of Indian Knowledge System

Compared to the western models of development focusing only on thin sustainability, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) sees it as an ongoing ethical connection. According to IKS, to sustain is to live in accordance with the *ṛta* (cosmic order) and the *dharma* (duty towards all living things), which goes beyond simply managing resources effectively.

Ṛta, as defined in the Vedic system is 'a fundamental idea in ancient Indian philosophy; the Vedic concept of *Ṛta* (Sanskrit: ऋत) embodies both the cosmic order that rules the universe and the moral code that directs human behavior. The Sanskrit root 'ऋ', which means 'to go' or 'to move', is the source of the term '*Ṛta*'.

> *"Ṛta and satya were born from tapas… from them the night and day took shape." This signifies that ṛta is the principle underlying cosmic rhythm. (Ṛg Veda 10.190.1–3)*

Within the Vedic framework, *Ṛta* is the fundamental law that upholds cosmic balance and includes the natural, moral, and ceremonial systems. It governs the movement of celestial bodies, the cycle of seasons, the flow of rivers, and the stability of society. In other words, *ṛta* will not allow nature to be separated from morality. The regulation of the physical world and the rightness of human behavior are expressions of the same underlying principle. It forms a trio that supports Vedic philosophy and is intimately linked to '*Satya*' (truth) and '*Dharma*' (righteousness). (Panda, 2025)

When human behavior upsets this balance created by *Ṛta*, is viewed as a disturbance of the universe's basic nature rather than mere a violation of moral rule. In this way sustainability gains a metaphysical meaning: it is the constant act of bringing human conduct into alignment with the principles of *ṛta* and *dharma*. When viewed from the perspective of

IKS, sustainable development is not just about achieving technical equilibrium, but is instead restoring moral and cosmic equilibrium.

IKS also incorporates *dharma* as a social and ethical principle which extends the concept of ṛta to the realm of human actions. Across texts such as the *Manusmṛti*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavad Gita*, *dharma* is defined as the principle that protects life, maintains justice. According to *Dharma*, it is a moral obligation to live in harmony with the rules of the universe as well as the welfare of all creatures (*sarva-bhuta-hita*).

When it comes to sustainability in urban areas, dharma translates into the obligation of all people to protect the justice of nature and to ensure social equity. In other words, when we mention dharma in the context of cities, it is not fulfilled through its infrastructural or GDP expansion, but rather through its ability to foster life, encourage compassion, and preserve their social and natural systems. The ethics of urban life is inseparable from the ethical aspects of ecological and governance, in which planning and design must be guided by the principles of restraint and care instead of dominance and excessive. The city that pollutes the air and water or has its inhabitants marginalized, is not just unsustainable but it is a violation of dharma by violating the ontological framework of interconnectedness.

Another impoṛtant ethical concept to this debate can be found in *aparigraha* (the concept of non-possession). It is an impoṛtant element in both Jain and Vedic morality and ethics. Aparigraha is the decision taken up by individuals to limit one's purchases and consumption to the extent required and emphasizes on the balance of sufficiency over accumulation.

When we apply *aprigraha* to the urban setting, it challenges the notion of consumerism and overproduction. Thin sustainability is based on its production aspect but at the root of it lies the evil of capitalism. In an urban setting, built on the principle of *aparigraha*, we will prioritize a modest lifestyle, sustainable economies and push for practices which involve sharing resources in a communal manner rather than hoarding and overconsumption. A practice of *aprigraha* within the city will reorient sustainability from efficiency to sufficiency, focusing on true well-being that lies in the practice of thoughtful consumption and healthy restraint *(samyama)* rather than in unbounded growth.

Together, the concepts of ṛta, dharma as well as aparigraha form an ethical framework consisting of *"Dharmic Urbanization"*. This conception of urbanism acknowledges that moral and physical orders are inseparable. The health of a city is dependent on the morality of its residents in the same way as its infrastructure. This is akin to Gandhi's critique of modernity within *Hind Swaraj* (1909), where he highlighted the principles of aparigraha as well as the concept of *swaraj* (self-rule) to be moral principles for individual as well as collective life. When Gandhi argued for *aprigraha* and *swaraj*, it was not just moral advice, but it is a philosophical alternative for the Indian thought which is rooted in western paradigm.

To *swaraj*, Gandhi explicitly linked *swadeshi* which focused on local production. When localized production is prioritized community sufficiency is also put into more focus. This in turn gives impoṛtance to ecological proximity, while encouraging economic development over centralized industrial growth. Swadeshi was not simply a protest against colonialism; it expressed the philosophical conviction among people that communities grow when production, consumption, and responsibility remain a part of the moral aspects of life. These ideas became part of the practical life, which turned into everyday practices. Such practices included village rejuvenation, khadi, sanitation, community education, panchayat

self-governance, and systems of decentralized production. Gandhi's *Constructive Programme* gave us a mode of social organization grounded in restraint, care, mutual service (*seva*), and self-sufficiency.

Once you shift your epistemic focus from Western developmentalism to Indian Knowledge Systems, new sustainable models become apparent, rooted not in technology but rather in the ethical cosmic cosmology. The indigenous models are an urban culture based on the *dharma*, governed by the *ṛta*, and participatory rather than extractive. This model can be understood as a type of cosmological urbanism in which the city is seen as a moral entity that is a part of the greater social order rather than as an autonomous center of power within the village, temple, and landscape. The issue before India is, therefore, not in abandoning modernity but in changing its epistemic bases. A sustainable future for urban life requires a shift away from thin sustainability adaptation and shift towards an ethical model, where policies are influenced with insights from Indian Knowledge System (IKS). This inclusion is a form of reimagined sustainability as an interaction between knowledge systems.

Integrating IKS into Practice to evolve models of sustainability

Recent urban developmental projects in parts of India have hinted towards a gradual but significant shift towards traditional ecological knowledge. The principles of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), views ecology not only as an inert domain for resource management but also as an irreplaceable component of moral, relational, and spiritual relationships, are increasingly being brought back. Therefore, the integration of IKS into urban sustainability represents a philosophical shift from technological control to ecological attunement and from managerial rationality to moral relationality.

One of the most prominent examples of such integration is Mission Kakatiya in Telangana. In this Mission, they have rebuilt nearly 46,000 village tanks. These tanks have once formed the basis of agricultural life in those regions but with modern intervention lost their significance (Mission Kakatiya | Yadadri Bhuvanagiri District, Govt of Telangana, India, n.d.).

The construction of these tanks highlights the ecologically ethical system rooted in Jala-*dharma*. Jala-dharma is the idea that water is not merely a physical resource to be used and exploited. Water (Jala) is a life-sustaining element that is to be shared, conserved and treated with reverence. Communities have the duty to use water wisely, maintain its purity and ensure that its distribution is equitable (Agarwal & Narain, 1999). *Jala-dharma* is one of the core elements in Indian philosophical and cultural tradition.

In Mission Kakatiya, these tanks have been revitalized by merging technology with traditional knowledge. The successful execution of this mission has brought a shift from centralised control of water infrastructure to a decentralised community-based system; thus, making clean water accessible to common people. This signifies a philosophical continuity from past practices of moral cosmology to present policy making. It is an affirmation of sustainability's goal not through neglecting nature but by maintaining bonds within it.

We also have the sacred groves ("kavus" in Kerala, "devrai" in Maharashtra) which are maintained by the tribal communities. These groves are protected by the tribes not because of any legal document or order, but due to their cultural or spiritual norms; it is also forbidden to cut down trees or disturb the wildlife in these regions because they are considered sacred. These groves act as biodiversity reservoirs, protecting native species, helping maintain soil and water balance, and reflecting an

ecological ethic rooted in cosmology and religion (Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) and its role in sustainable resource management in India, 2025).

Examples of such sacred stepwells and temple tanks can be found across India. Places like Rani-ki-vav in Gujarat, the sacred tanks of Kumbakonam in Tamil Nadu, and Hampi in Karnataka have all been restored. This signifies more than just the preservation of architecture; it sheds a new light on the view that built places and nature are not separate categories but rather are inseparable parts of each other. These water systems were once an example of sacred urbanism, where hydrology, spirituality, and community were all related to one another. It is essential that these restoration projects, which often remain within tourism or heritage-related frameworks, should become standard models for sustainable urban planning.

The purpose served by these initiatives is to avoid over commercialization of 'Green Development' by modelling the environmental action on indigenous moral philosophy. They offer an ethical system of sustainability, where people, society, and the planet all exist within mutual obligation to each other. The integration of IKS into urban models will help transform cities into places of co-existence rather than places of consumption, thereby redefining the very meaning of sustainability.

Conclusion

When we look at the history of urban development within India, we notice its growth is the story of its epistemic journey. The timeline can be traced back to the post-colonial era, during which India followed the path of western industrial model. As a result, the focus of urban development shifted from growth to expansion, sustainability with optimization and civilization with control. This western industrial model relies on the dualistic world view which separates culture and nature, subjects and objects as well as man from the environment. It has transformed cities to become tools of consumption and production and separate them from their ethical and ecological aspect that was once an integral part of these cities. Urbanization, influenced by this paradigm has become less about coexistence and more about conquering. In this paper, we categorised this form of sustainability as '*thin sustainability*'.

This paper discussed extensively how the thin sustainability model has enabled rapid growth in terms of expansion and profiting the digital and engineering solutions; they have, however, failed to address the ethical, relational and ecological questions that sustainability entails. Such models treat ecological challenges as technical problems that can be solved using managerial efficiency and infrastructural optimization. However, this overlooks how ecological challenges also require moral conditioning that is achieved through a particular way of inhabiting and utilizing space. In this way, contemporary urbanization risks reproducing the exact ecological and social problem, which it seeks to resolve. The main argument in this paper is not to reject technological advancements or modern planning outright. It is to highlight how these models are not adequate or sufficient without incorporating the required ethical orientation. Technologies can help us optimize our current systems, but they don't determine the end towards which these systems should operate.

In this backdrop, we have the traditional but advanced knowledge in the form of Indian Knowledge System (IKS), which can be used for addressing such normative deficits. IKS draws primarily on the Vedic and post-Vedic sources. According to our traditional Vedic perspective, ecology is viewed through a relational ontology where settlements, environment and the people are all one and inseparable. Concept of *ṛta, dharma, and aparigraha* are used in this paper to elaborate

this moral ecology that humans share with nature. These concepts are not mere symbols, or spiritual ideas but they constitute an order in which human conduct can be governed. Together, they form a foundation for this paper to establish a *Dharmic Urbanization*. Here, the understanding of the city as moral ecologies where physical infrastructure and ethical life is mutually reinforced. The health of the city is measured through its capacity to foster justice, care and ecological balance along with quantitative metrics of economic productivity or technological advancements.

By adopting Dharmic Urbanization, sustainability is no longer an external objective, rather it becomes an ongoing ethical practice which is performed in our everyday lives. This integration of IKS into modern urban policy is further exemplified by the finding resonance in several contemporary projects and historical practices that are discussed in this paper. Initiatives involving the restoration of traditional water systems, temple tanks, or lake rejuvenation all demonstrate how community-based approaches can enhance ecological resilience and its stability. The integration of IKS into the modern-day policy process is not returning to the past, but it is the way forward weaving both strands of urbanisation and renewed traditional wisdom.

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