

# Reimagining *Prakriti* and *Sanskriti*: A study of Hindu eco-consciousness in Sudha Murthy's *The Magic of the Lost Temple*

Bibhudatta Dash, G. Lakshmi Narasimham and Priyanka Jinde\*

**Abstract:** Cultural practices serve as platforms for children to explore the heritage of varying traditions. Exposure to cultural practices and beliefs from an early age through literature and social interactions establish a sense of ethical value among children. Indian cultural tales introduce children to the multiplicity of languages, traditions, and festivals prevalent across the country. They often depict the village lifestyle with vivid descriptions of nature. Using pastoral ecology and cultural ecology as eco-critical theories this paper explores how rituals and customs of Hinduism teach the harmonious coexistence of humans with nature from early childhood. Through eco-critical reading and analysis of Sudha Murthy's novel *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, this paper aims to develop ecological consciousness in children from Hindu cultural perspectives.

**Keywords:** cultural ecology, Indian children's literature, human and nature, eco-consciousness

## Introduction

*Prakriti* is a Sanskrit term used to refer to nature or the fundamental elements of the physical world in Hindu culture. It encompasses the relationship between the environment, culture and human behaviour, recognising how nature affects cultural practices and how human activities impact the natural world.

In Hinduism, *Prakriti* is often personified as the feminine aspect of nature, akin to Mother Nature (*Atharva Veda* 12.1.12, 17). It is revered as the nurturing and life-sustaining force encompassing landscapes, ecosystems, flora, fauna, and the elements (Whitehead 2005). This concept emphasises the interconnectedness of all living beings with their natural surroundings (Salmón 2000). *Prakriti* manifests in various

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\* Bibhudatta Dash; G. Lakshmi Narasimham; Priyanka Jinde  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Visvesvaraya National Institute of Technology, Nagpur, India

forms, from the lush forests and flowing rivers to the arid deserts and towering mountains that dot the Indian subcontinent. The diverse topographies and climates across India have led to a rich tapestry of indigenous cultures and practices that harmonise with the specific environmental conditions of each region.

In rural areas, *Prakriti* plays a pivotal role in the daily lives of people. They engage in activities like tending to livestock, cultivating crops, and participating in traditional agricultural practices. Children in rural settings often grow up close to nature, which allows them to interact intimately with *Prakriti*. As they learn about the local wildlife, they also discover the various species and their seasonal migration patterns through the guidance of the elders. These interactions instil a sense of understanding and appreciation for the biodiversity that thrives within their environment. In addition to this “Environmental psychological theory suggests that contact with nature is important because it promotes a child’s creativity, imagination, and intellectual and cognitive development” (Summers 2019).

*Sanskriti* is the Sanskrit term for culture. It is a diverse amalgamation of traditions, beliefs, and customs shaped by centuries of history and social influence. Aspects such as family, religion, food, clothing, art, etc, are essential in promoting the culture (Isidienu 2021). Cultural practices constantly keep evolving because of globalisation however rural communities play essential roles in preserving traditional customs and beliefs (Luo et al. 2009). Villages are often centred on morals and virtues of its people who believe in upholding their traditions. These values are passed down for generations and are reflected in the customs and behaviours of the community. Therefore, the cultural practices of rural India are integral part of the country’s rich and diverse heritage.

It is important for individuals to learn about their *sanskriti* from a young age, as it provides an understanding of their traditions, and they gain a broader perspective on their history (Rüsen 2004). This knowledge strengthens cultural appreciation, encourages empathy, and celebrates unique heritages while respecting diversity. Cultural practices like participating in agricultural activities, making handicrafts, community cooking, and services such as cleaning and plantations drives need teamwork and collaboration. Therefore, these practices can help children to develop essential life skills, such as cooperation and communication.

Cultural practices support children's learning by engaging them in traditional activities alongside family members, providing them with a firsthand experience of customs. Hinduism through various cultural practices like daily worship and the *samskaras*<sup>1</sup> like *vidyarambha*<sup>2</sup> and *upanayana*<sup>3</sup>, etc., familiarize children with the cultural values like respecting natural elements, and sustainable living (Kaushal 2023). Through these *samskaras*, they also gain valuable insights about their cultural heritage while building a strong sense of identity and learning to appreciate diversity. By participating in activities like street plays, shadow puppetry and storytelling, children learn the values and beliefs such as honesty, trustworthiness and dharma (righteousness) that are integral to the Hindu culture (Vinitha 2019).

Practising religious customs, learning new art forms and being involved in traditional sports are some activities through which children get exposure to their nativity. Religious practices like visiting temples and attending spiritual gatherings like participating in *bhajans* (devotional songs) and *kirtans* (musical recitation of sacred texts), which are characterised by their repetitive nature, can aid in memory retention, making it easier for children to remember cultural and religious hymns (Eghbaria-Ghanamah et al. 2021). Painting helps children to express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences (Barton 2015). Learning traditional Hindu arts and crafts such as paintings like *Madhubani*<sup>4</sup>, *Pattachitra*<sup>5</sup>, *Kalamkari*<sup>6</sup>, etc. offers visual narratives of

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<sup>1</sup> *Samskaras* in Hinduism are a series of sacred rituals and ceremonies that mark significant life events and transitions such as birth, education, marriage, and death, aiming to purify and bless individuals throughout their life's journey.

<sup>2</sup> *Vidyarambha* is the initiation of learning, usually involving the first writing of the alphabet, to commence a child's education.

<sup>3</sup> *Upanayana* is the sacred thread initiation ceremony, marking a young boy's formal entry into Vedic studies.

<sup>4</sup> *Madhubani*, also known as Mithila painting, is a traditional folk-art form from the Mithila region of Bihar, India. It is created using natural dyes and pigments on handmade paper or cloths. These paintings often depict mythological and natural themes.

<sup>5</sup> *Pattachitra* is a traditional painting style from the Indian state of Odisha. It is known for its detailed narrative paintings. Artists use natural colours and paint on specially treated cloth or palm leaves.

<sup>6</sup> *Kalamkari* is a traditional Indian art form that involves hand-painting or block-printing on fabric. Two popular styles of it are *Srikalahasti* and *Machilipatnam*. Artists use natural dyes to create vibrant textiles and wall hangings.

culture and history which encourage children to connect to their roots through creativity and imagination (Zaidah & Ariyati 2024).

Toy making in Hinduism is a culturally rich practice that combines religious significance, educational value, and artistic heritage. Traditional toys from various states of India use natural materials to preserve ancient techniques and cultural narratives. Some of them are *Kondapalli* toys of Andhra Pradesh, *Thanjavur* toys of Tamil Nadu, *Channapatana* toys of Karnataka, and *Kavad* toys of Rajasthan. These toys impart religious stories and values, and these crafts play the crucial role of passing down cultural heritage and moral lessons to future generations. Toy-making enables children to grow their creativity and fine motor skills (Chinwe 2023). Using small muscles in the hands and fingers is an integral part of these activities, and they often require the use of both hands simultaneously, which is highly beneficial in developing ‘bilateral coordination’ (Chen et al. 2021).

Sports in Hindu festivals symbolize communal harmony and religious identity. Which helps to foster social cohesion and inter-generational cultural transmission. They are crucial in ritualistic practices, connecting physical actions to spiritual and symbolic aspects of festival observance. *Vallam Kali*<sup>7</sup> (boat racing) that mainly takes place during the harvest season (Onam festival), helps children to develop physical fitness, mainly hand-eye coordination and reflexes (Gulia & Dhauta 2021). It also teaches teamwork and sportsmanship to children. Playing sports and games like *Silambam*<sup>8</sup> (a martial art form) allows children to learn balance and coordination, improving muscle strength (arms, shoulders, legs, and core) and flexibility (Stamenkovic et al. 2022).

Environment has an intricate and symbiotic relationship with Hindu traditions and cultural practices. Traditional architecture, particularly the construction of temples and houses, exemplifies the correlation between culture and environment. The design and orientation of these structures often consider environmental factors like climate, the direction of the sun, and natural materials available in the region

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<sup>7</sup> *Vallam Kali* is a traditional snake boat race in the Indian state of Kerala, where teams row long, canoe-style boats adorned with ornate decorations.

<sup>8</sup> *Silambam* is a traditional Indian martial art that originated in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. This martial art primarily involves using a long bamboo staff known as ‘*silambam*’ or ‘*lathi*’. *Silambam* practitioners are skilled in various techniques, including strikes, blocks, and maneuvers with the staff, which can be used for self-defence or combat.

(Chawhan & Kamal 2021). For instance, Kerala's vernacular architecture incorporates sloping roofs, extensive use of wood, and open courtyards that promote natural ventilation and adaptability to the region's monsoons (Prakash et al. 2023). When children learn about these constructions, they not only understand the architecture of it but also know the correlation between *prakriti* and *sanskriti* in Hindu practices, which helps in creating environmental and cultural awareness from an early stage. This reflects how *sanskriti* has evolved to harmonise with the local environment, emphasising sustainability and practicality. Hindu culture emphasises the interconnectedness of all entities and believes that a relationship between humanity and the natural world is connected through spirituality (Billet et al. 2023).

The importance of eco-consciousness in maintaining *prakriti* through *sanskriti* is studied in this paper referring to various chapters of Sudha Murthy's novel *The Magic of the Lost Temple* which shows the positive influence of the Hinduism on Indian culture emphasizing the importance of preserving history, respecting elders, and upholding traditional values. The protagonist's visit to her grandmother's home symbolizes the revisiting of India's spiritual and cultural heritage, highlighting the enduring traditions in Hindu culture while critiquing their erosion in contemporary times.

The paper is divided into two sections – the first section discusses about the Hindu cultural perspectives that develop ecological consciousness in children, and the second section discusses about role of the Indian village lifestyle in connecting children with nature.

### **Hindu cultural perspectives that develop ecological consciousness in children**

This section highlights the nature centric practices ingrained in Indian society with reference to the chapters from the novel *The Magic of the Lost Temple* (Murthy 2015). It includes principles and values that preserve traditional ecology and promotes diversity through the cultivation of native plant varieties. It revisits sustainable living practices prevalent among different communities and explores cultural practices that foster social bonds within them. Additionally, it also explores how legends and folklores can contribute to preserving biodiversity.

Indian cultural practices have long recognised the importance of instilling ecological consciousness in children. Age-old traditions, beliefs, and practices shape these perspectives, highlighting the close

relationship between humans and nature. Samskriti emphasises reverence for nature and all living beings. It is a common practice to teach children from a young age to respect the environment and their surroundings (*Rigveda* 6:48:17).

Communities in India have ancient ecological practices, such as preserving their traditional agriculture systems, animal husbandry, and protecting forests, which have been passed down through generations (Ramakrishnan 2007). Forest in Hindu scriptures is categorized in three ways: *tapovana*<sup>9</sup>, *mahavana*<sup>10</sup>, and *shreevana*<sup>11</sup>, named after their utilitarian characteristics (Krishna 2017, 29). Rigvedic hymns also talk about the importance of plants and herbs and specifically says that forests should not be destroyed (*Rigveda* 8.1.13). There is a practice in south Karnataka where a section of woodland is protected (*abhayaranya*) and considered sacred for generations by the natives. It is called as ‘*Devara Kadu*’ (Krishna 2017, 49). Native plant species, including medicinal plants and trees such as neem and banyan, live undisturbed in these groves. This practice helps maintain the balance of biodiversity and conserve the ecosystem (Pranja 2018). Children growing up in these communities witness the conservation of sacred groves like ‘*Devara Kadu*’ as a part of their daily lives. They see the elders respecting and protecting these areas, instilling in them the value of preserving nature. In rural communities, animals are regarded not merely as working companions but as family members (Dash et al. 2024). For instance, Ajji (the protagonist’s grandmother), in the chapter ‘The Cow’s Delivery’, explains to her twelve-year-old granddaughter (Nooni) how animals feel good when someone stays with them and pats them; they feel like humans (Murthy 2015, 74). The lifestyle of rural localities is often associated with farming, agriculture, and other traditional occupations like oil extraction, weaving, beekeeping, handicrafts, etc (Sengupta 2019). They depend on the natural environmental conditions to meet all their needs and requirements to sustain their livelihood. Active participation in traditional occupations like oil extraction and weaving provides good physical exercise for hands, fingers, arms, and shoulders. Another essential practice that Indian farmers have followed to preserve their

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<sup>9</sup> *Tapovana* was a refuge for meditation in ancient India.

<sup>10</sup> *Mahavana* was known as the ‘great forest’ in which most of the wild species would find refuge.

<sup>11</sup> *Shreevana* was maintained by the people for economic prosperity.

traditional ecology is ‘agroforestry’ (Sinclair 1999). It nourishes the soil and serves as a habitat for numerous birds and insects, contributing to a more sustainable and environmentally friendly agricultural system (Viswanath & Lubina 2017). In villages, children are exposed to ecological practices like ‘agroforestry’ from an early age, which helps them develop ecological wisdom and connect with nature. By planting trees within crop fields, children can gain valuable knowledge on evaluating the compatibility of various tree species with crops and livestock. These activities help children develop their strategic and management skills by honing their ability to allocate resources efficiently.

The importance of biodiversity and the value of native species is deeply ingrained in cultural practices like backyard and kitchen gardening. The protagonist’s grandmother in the story ‘Aji’s Garden’ has a garden in her backyard with flowers and vegetables of native variety, which is an example of such practices (Murthy 2015, 52). People in the village focus on cultivating varieties depending on the suitable conditions (Yin & Wei 2023). By growing gardens, children learn about the various species and understand their natural order. By learning about indigenous varieties, children understand the importance of native species in their life and try to understand their region’s geography and climatic patterns that are essential for vegetation.

Activities like tree planting, cleaning rivers, etc., stress the importance of community practices (Dash et al. 2024, 121). Through these activities, children form strong social bonds and develop a sense of collective responsibility for the environment (Chawla & Cushing 2007). In the story ‘An Unusual Rain’, there are insights where the village kids are involved in making items like pickles and papads with the elders (Murthy 2015, 85). Active participation in these activities exposes the significance of teamwork, patience, and the spirit of hard work in young minds. Furthermore, as depicted in the story ‘Is It a Stepwell?’, the act of constructing a tiny pond for the deer to drink clean water teaches children to care for their own needs and those of the environment and its inhabitants (Murthy 2015, 95). This instils a ‘holistic and responsible attitude in children’, emphasising that their activities can positively impact the world around them.

The day-to-day activities of rural lifestyle create a sense of sustainable notions towards their surroundings in young minds from childhood. Participating in tasks such as tending to livestock,

preserving indigenous seeds, and helping with traditional crafts impart ecological awareness and an understanding of the interconnectedness of their surroundings. Aiji, the grandmother of the protagonist in the chapter 'Varada Hill', has a compassionate idea of leaving rice under trees for squirrels and other animals. She does this to give back to the creatures displaced when her house was built. Nooni, the narrator, finds it noble and thinks highly of her grandmother's kind-hearted nature (Murthy 2015, 79). Children participate actively in all these environmental and cultural practices rather than being passive observers. This participative method assists children in internalising the ideals and knowledge linked with environmental consciousness, ensuring that the principles are passed down to future generations.

Stories and legends are one of the primary mediums through which morals and values are taught to children (Rahim & Rahiem 2013). 'The Story of a Stepwell' - a child specific legend in the novel *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, is one such example in which an inscription reveals that the king, Somanayaka, was known for constructing numerous step wells, with seven *Shiva* temples, but his son's disregard led to water contamination and a severe epidemic (Murthy 2015, 57-63,71). Legends like this are effective tools for instilling ethical responsibility towards biodiversity conservation in children. They provide glimpses into the past and are also the repository of indigenous wisdom and values (Martin 2011). They help children to connect with their culture's historical and narrative elements (Nongbri 2006). These stories emphasise the moral duty to conserve ecosystems and protect the earth for future generations.

### **Role of Indian village lifestyle in connecting children with nature**

Indian village lifestyle is closely connected to nature. Children in villages grow up spending much time outdoors, helping their families with agricultural and other chores, which gives them a deep appreciation as they understand the importance of nature's role in these practices. This section explains the rural lifestyle, which weaves together agrarian practices, a harmonious relationship with plants, and reliance on natural resources.

In Indian village life, agriculture is a primary occupation for many (Thakare & Gore 2023, 154). because of agriculture rural children learn about the importance of seasons and their cycles through hands-on experiences in planting, tending to crops, and harvesting (Brune et al. 2020). They understand how different crops are sown during



specific times of the year and the get to know the significance of monsoons in this process. For instance, the character Ajja (grandfather of the protagonist) in the story ‘An Unusual Rain’ explains to Nooni (protagonist) and other villagers about the seasonal patterns (Murthy 2015, 85).

Additionally, children in villages are often involved in conventional farming practices during their leisure time, like assisting with farm chores such as feeding animals, seed sowing and weeding, etc. (Katz 1986). Involvement in these activities help children gain knowledge about handling cattle and develop a connection with the land and its natural cycles from an early age which teaches them the significance of perseverance, diligence, and the interrelationship between humans and nature.

Indian villages are often surrounded by diverse ecosystems, from forests to wetlands, which allow children to learn about various plant and animal species in their natural habitats. Each region has a unique environment with distinct seasons and natural offerings. Consequently, certain types of trees, shrubs, and vines thrive more readily in one place compared to others, and these plants are referred to as native to that particular land which is pertinent in the conversation between Nooni and her friends in ‘Aji’s Garden’:

Nooni, every terrain has a different environment with various seasons. So certain types of trees, bushes and creepers grow easily there compared to others and those plants are known as being native to the land. For example, you can’t grow apples in the south. Similarly, you can’t grow coconut trees in the north (Murthy 2015, 55).

Villagers mostly rely significantly on natural resources, and they can be observed bringing water from wells or rivers, gathering firewood from forests, using natural products for daily needs, and constructing houses from locally available materials to meet their everyday requirements (Dalu et.al. 2021). This symbiotic co-habiting with nature has been taught to humans from ages which is found in the Bhoomi Sukta or Prithvi Sukta of the Atharva Veda (*Atharva Veda*, 12). Indian villages still adhere to these Vedic principles and transmit them to their succeeding generations. Therefore, children who grow up in these rural locations acquire first-hand learning about how to access these resources sustainably. For instance, the characters in the story ‘Is It a Stepwell?’ use natural products like *Shikakai* and *Antalkai* as shampoo and mild detergent, and they also use dried *Bakula* flowers in the

cupboards to avoid termites (Murthy 2015, 94-96). These experiences help children understand the need to sustainably maintain and manage natural products. They also learn about the implications of overexploitation, which can lead to resource depletion and harm their community's livelihood.

## Conclusion

Incorporating cultural practices into the education and lifestyle of children help them to build a strong connection with nature with an understanding of human-nature interdependence (Srilatha 2023). This research sheds light on how it is essential for children to adapt to Hindu *sanskriti* in contemporary societal changes. Through exposure to indigenous culture this paper aims to enable them to understand the significance of conserving and sustainably managing natural resources. Furthermore, the explanations provided in this paper are crucial to help children understand the lessons they can learn from the Indian village lifestyle to connect with nature. This reimagining of *prakriti* and *sanskriti* through the tales of Sudha Murthy aims to recognise the interconnectedness of Indian culture and ecology, encouraging future generations to become responsible custodians of cultural heritage and the natural world.

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