

November 2013

Book Review: *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*

Eliza F. Kent
Colgate University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/jhcs>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kent, Eliza F. (2013) "Book Review: *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability*," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*: Vol. 26, Article 24.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.7825/2164-6279.1563>

The *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* is a publication of the Society for Hindu-Christian Studies. The digital version is made available by Digital Commons @ Butler University. For questions about the Journal or the Society, please contact cbauman@butler.edu. For more information about Digital Commons @ Butler University, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

***Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability.* Pankaj Jain. Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2011. xiii + 213 pages.**

IN *Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities*, Pankaj Jain examines the practical conservation ethics of three Indian communities: the Swadhyaya movement, and the Bishnois and Bhils of Rajasthan. Advancing current scholarship at the intersection of religion and ecology, Jain uses historical and ethnographic methods to investigate the ways in which ecologically sustainable actions have arisen out of the teachings of the communities' gurus and leaders.

Central to his study is Jain's problematization of the label "religion" to describe the complex of beliefs, values, morals and actions that together constitute what he refers to as the "dharmic environmentalism" of these communities. His exegesis of how dharma is employed in these diverse movements lends insight into grassroots approaches to environmentalism that eschew both the excessive privileging of the non-human of deep ecology and the excessive anthropomorphism of utilitarian environmentalism. What Jain admires in these communities is how thoughtful attention to the natural world leads to practices of moral self-cultivation that improve both the self and the environment. For example, in the book's strongest chapter, Jain discusses how the 20th

century founder of the Swadhyaya movement, Pandurang Shastri Athavale (1920-2003), encouraged his followers to observe and emulate the inherent qualities and virtues of trees-- their capacity to endure harsh weather, their selfless generosity, etc. In doing so and actively caring for trees, Athavale urges, we cultivate our own virtue and come to see more clearly the presence of the divine in all things. Athavale is perhaps best known for his teachings on the Bhagavad Gita, but Jain draws our attention to the less-known practical dimensions to his teaching: the numerous *prayogs* (spiritual practices) Athavale created for his rural Indian followers through engagement with the natural world such as the tree-temples (*Vṛkṣamandiras*) and ground-water recharging projects (*nirmal nīrs*). These, however, were not motivated by environmental rationales. "Green" motives are in fact vehemently disavowed by the devotees whom Jain interviewed. And yet, Jain argues that in each different kind of *prayog*, loving service performed for non-human nature leads to clear ecological benefits.

Eliza F. Kent
Colgate University