Sustainable Entrepreneurship: Rooted in Indian Wisdom and Knowledge Systems — A Framework for Inclusive and Responsible Enterprise

S. Jayaseelan[1]* and S. Arul Prasad[2]

[1]*Research Scholar, Department of Rural Development Sciences, Arul Anandar College (Autonomous), Karumathur, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.*

[2]*Associate Professor, Department of Rural Development Sciences, Arul Anandar College (Autonomous), Karumathur, Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India.*

**Corresponding Author Email: jayassj@gmail.com*

Abstract

Sustainable entrepreneurship has gained importance because enterprise decisions affect livelihoods, communities and the natural environment. This paper examines how selected Indian wisdom traditions and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) can inform sustainable entrepreneurship and support more inclusive and responsible enterprise. The study follows an integrative qualitative literature review and conceptual synthesis. It brings together peer-reviewed literature on sustainable entrepreneurship, empirical studies from India, selected primary and authoritative Indian sources, and official material on IKS. The analysis focuses on dharma, lokasaṃgraha, aparigraha, ahimsa, Gandhian trusteeship and community ecological stewardship. These sources are read in relation to four entrepreneurial concerns: purpose, means, accumulation and scale. Dharma and lokasaṃgraha reframe enterprise purpose towards world maintenance and public welfare. Ahimsa constrains means by requiring avoidance of harm across the value chain. Aparigraha and trusteeship treat wealth as a trust, limiting accumulation and separating ownership from responsibility. Community ecological stewardship calls for local embeddedness, decentralisation and intergenerational fairness rather than endless expansion. Together these resources offer a framework that is duty-centred yet outcome-oriented, and that embeds enterprise within an interdependent universe of society and nature. The paper argues that IKS provides conceptual resources distinct from mainstream ESG and triple-bottom-line approaches.

However, the literature remains largely conceptual, and systematic empirical testing of these principles against actual Indian enterprise practice is still lacking. The study concludes by identifying directions for future research on bridging principle and practice in the Indian context.

Keywords: Sustainable entrepreneurship; Indian wisdom; Indian Knowledge Systems; Inclusive enterprise; Responsible enterprise; Ethical commerce

1. Introduction

Entrepreneurship has a direct influence on employment, production, consumption, local economies and the use of natural resources. For this reason, the meaning of entrepreneurial success has gradually moved beyond profit and business growth. Sustainable entrepreneurship places economic activity in relation to social and ecological concerns. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) describe the field through the relationship between what has to be sustained and what can be developed. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) connect sustainable entrepreneurship with sustainability innovation and market change. Belz and Binder (2017) explain a process in which social or ecological problems may be recognised as opportunities, followed by the development of solutions, enterprise formation and sustainable markets.

These perspectives are useful for the present study because they treat sustainability as part of entrepreneurial action. It is therefore relevant to ask how opportunities are identified, whose needs are considered, how resources are used and how enterprise benefits are distributed. The Sustainable Development Goals also place entrepreneurship within a wider development agenda. Goal 8 links productive employment and entrepreneurship with inclusive economic development and resource efficiency, while Goal 12 stresses sustainable consumption and production and more efficient use of natural resources (United Nations, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Sustainable entrepreneurship, therefore, has economic, social and ecological dimensions.

The Indian context adds another question. India has a long and diverse body of knowledge concerning duty, social welfare, restraint, non-harm, governance, production and relationships with nature. The Indian Knowledge Systems Division of the Ministry of Education describes IKS as an area for interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research,

preservation, dissemination and societal application. It also seeks to bridge traditional knowledge and contemporary knowledge systems (Indian Knowledge Systems Division, n.d.). This makes IKS relevant to current discussions on entrepreneurship when the relationship is examined carefully rather than assumed.

The present paper responds to the conference sub-theme on sustainable entrepreneurship inspired by Indian traditions. Its main concern is sustainable entrepreneurship. Indian wisdom and IKS are treated as the intellectual and ethical foundation. Inclusive and responsible enterprise is the intended outcome. The paper does not treat Indian wisdom as one uniform system. Dharma and lokasaṃgraha are examined mainly through the Bhagavad Gita; ahimsa and aparigraha are considered through Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra; trusteeship is drawn from modern Gandhian thought; and community ecological stewardship is considered through Indian empirical studies. These sources belong to different contexts. Bringing them together is therefore an analytical choice, not a claim that they form one identical doctrine.

A further caution is necessary. A traditional practice is not automatically sustainable. Some traditional practices may have changed with time, population pressure, markets and technology. Therefore, the research question is not whether Indian traditions are inherently sustainable. The question is more specific: how can selected Indian principles be interpreted for contemporary entrepreneurship, and how can their relevance be examined through actual enterprise practices and outcomes? This question guides the literature review and the proposed framework.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study has four objectives:

(i) To examine the conceptual relationship between sustainable entrepreneurship and selected principles from Indian wisdom and Knowledge Systems.

(ii) To identify Indian principles that may inform entrepreneurial decisions concerning responsibility, collective welfare, resource use, ownership and ecological stewardship.

(iii) To review contemporary Indian evidence on sustainability-oriented entrepreneurship, including enterprises connected with traditional and artisanal production.

(iv) To develop a Tradition–Value–Enterprise–Impact (TVEI) framework that links Indian principles with entrepreneurial practice and observable sustainability outcomes.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Sustainable entrepreneurship

Sustainable entrepreneurship emerged from the recognition that entrepreneurial activity can address environmental and social problems while creating economic value. Shepherd and Patzelt (2011) placed the field around the relationship between sustaining nature, life-support systems and communities and developing products, processes and services. Schaltegger and Wagner (2011) extended the discussion towards sustainability innovation and market impact. Their framework considers environmental and social responsibility, management practices and market effects. Belz and Binder (2017) provide a process model in which social or ecological problems and opportunities are followed by double- and triple-bottom-line solutions, enterprise formation and sustainable-market development.

These studies suggest that sustainability should enter the core of entrepreneurship. It concerns opportunity recognition, innovation, production, stakeholder relations and the measurement of outcomes. The implication for the present study is important. Indian wisdom should not be added as a cultural description at the end of a business model. If it is relevant, it should influence a decision, a practice or an outcome that can be examined.

3.2 Sustainable entrepreneurship in India

Indian research shows that sustainable entrepreneurship has a clear empirical basis. Argade et al. (2021) examined opportunity identification among sustainable entrepreneurs in India and found that individual and contextual factors interact in shaping entrepreneurial motivations. Their study is important because it also cautions against viewing India as a single entrepreneurial context. Khokhawala and Iyer (2022) used comparative cases of Indian ventures, including handmade leather footwear using traditional techniques and artisanal

fabrics. They examined social, economic and environmental outcomes and showed how sustainability practices can support value creation and longer-term enterprise development. Ghag and Sonar (2024) examined sustainability practices among Indian SMEs using fuzzy Delphi and best-worst methods and identified practices relevant to social and environmental dimensions of sustainable entrepreneurship.

Taken together, these studies show that sustainable entrepreneurship in India can be examined through opportunity recognition, enterprise practices and outcomes. They also provide a useful bridge to Indian wisdom. Traditional skills, local producer networks and community knowledge may create entrepreneurial opportunities. Yet the evidence also shows that sustainability involves practical challenges such as cost, efficiency, environmental performance and market development. Tradition alone cannot resolve these issues.

3.3 Indian wisdom and entrepreneurial ethics

Recent Indian scholarship has begun to connect indigenous concepts with entrepreneurship more directly. Singh and Awasthy (2023) examine lokasaṃgraha as an indigenous construct for social entrepreneurship. Their study uses content analysis of the Bhagavad Gita and develops a framework for handling tensions among social, economic and environmental objectives. This is relevant to the present paper because it demonstrates that an Indian concept can be studied as an analytical construct rather than used only as a cultural slogan.

Primary sources provide the deeper basis for this discussion. In the Bhagavad Gita, action is connected with duty and responsibility. Chapter 2, verse 47 places emphasis on action without attachment to its fruits, while Chapter 3, verses 19–20 connects responsible action with duty and lokasaṃgraha, the holding together or welfare of the social world (Easwaran, 2007). These passages do not present a modern theory of entrepreneurship. The present paper therefore does not claim that the Gita teaches sustainable entrepreneurship. Rather, it uses these passages to identify an ethical orientation that can be examined in contemporary enterprise.

Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra provides another primary source. Sūtra 2.30 places ahimsa and aparigraha among the yamas, or ethical restraints (Bryant & Patañjali, 2009). Ahimsa can be

read as a concern with avoiding harm. Aparigraha points towards restraint in acquisition or grasping. Their use in this paper is deliberately limited. They are not presented as ready-made environmental management tools. They are treated as ethical ideas from which contemporary questions about resource use, occupational harm, excessive consumption and responsible production can be developed.

Gandhian trusteeship provides a different but related source. It is modern Indian ethical-economic thought, not an ancient doctrine. Gandhi's practical trusteeship formula links the use of wealth with social welfare and states that the character of production should be determined by social necessity rather than personal greed (Gandhi, 1952). For entrepreneurship, this raises a question about the purpose and social responsibility of ownership. It can be related to stakeholder welfare, fair distribution and community benefit, but these links remain propositions to be tested.

Community ecological stewardship also requires a separate treatment. Studies of sacred groves in India show that beliefs, community institutions and local practices can support biodiversity conservation (Singh et al., 2017; Jeevan et al., 2023). Such evidence is not the same as a philosophical doctrine. It shows how ecological responsibility may become part of social institutions. For sustainable entrepreneurship, this may have relevance for conservation-linked livelihoods, local products and community-based resource management, provided that community rights, consent and benefit sharing are protected.

4. Methodology

The study follows an integrative qualitative literature review and conceptual synthesis. It is not presented as a systematic review, meta-analysis or primary field study. The source base consists of peer-reviewed research on sustainable entrepreneurship, empirical studies from India, primary or authoritative sources relevant to the selected Indian concepts, and official material on IKS and sustainable development.

Selection was based on direct relevance to the research question, scholarly credibility, conceptual clarity and usefulness for connecting Indian principles with entrepreneurship or sustainability. Greater weight was given to peer-reviewed studies for contemporary evidence and to primary texts for the meaning and context of Indian concepts. The Bhagavad Gita and

Patañjali's Yoga Sūtra are therefore used for the primary conceptual basis of selected principles, while contemporary studies are used to examine entrepreneurial and social applications. Gandhi's writings are used for trusteeship. Studies on sacred groves are used as empirical evidence of community ecological practices.

The analysis was organised around four questions: What principle is expressed? What contemporary value can reasonably be derived from it? How can that value enter entrepreneurial practice? What outcome could be observed or measured? The findings were then compared across the economic, social and ecological dimensions of sustainable entrepreneurship. The purpose is framework development. The paper does not claim causal evidence that Indian wisdom produces better enterprise performance. The proposed relationships therefore require empirical testing.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Ethical purpose and entrepreneurial opportunity

Dharma is used here as an ethical orientation towards duty and responsible action. The Bhagavad Gita repeatedly connects action with duty. Chapter 3, verse 19 advises action that ought to be performed, and verse 20 connects action with lokasaṃgraha (Easwaran, 2007). In entrepreneurial terms, this raises the importance of purpose. An entrepreneur may begin with a market opportunity, but the decision can also be examined in terms of whom the enterprise serves and what consequences it creates.

This interpretation has practical relevance. Opportunity recognition may include unmet social needs, local livelihood problems, unsafe production conditions or ecological stress. Product decisions can consider durability and safety. Labour relations can be examined through fairness and dignity. Sourcing can be assessed for its effects on producers and local resources. These are not direct prescriptions from the Gita. They are contemporary research propositions derived from the ethical orientation of duty. This distinction is important for scholarly accuracy.

5.2 Lokasaṃgraha and inclusive enterprise

Lokasaṃgraha gives the strongest direct connection between individual action and collective welfare. The Bhagavad Gita uses the term in the context of action for the holding

together or welfare of the world (3.20), and Singh and Awasthy (2023) show its relevance to social entrepreneurship. In a business setting, the principle can support a wider view of value creation. Workers, producers, consumers and communities may be treated as participants in enterprise value rather than as external groups affected by business decisions.

For rural and artisanal enterprise, this perspective is especially relevant. A business that works with local producers can be assessed by the income generated, continuity of skills, access to markets and participation in decisions. Inclusion should therefore be measured. Possible indicators include producer income, employment quality, participation, market access and the distribution of benefits. The principle becomes meaningful when these outcomes can be demonstrated.

5.3 Aparigraha, moderation and resource use

Patañjali places aparigraha among the yamas (2.30). Bryant and Patañjali (2009) discuss the principle within the ethical discipline of Yoga. In the present study, aparigraha is interpreted cautiously as a basis for questioning unnecessary acquisition and excessive consumption. It does not mean that an enterprise should reject growth. The relevant question is whether growth depends on wasteful use of materials, short product life or avoidable resource consumption.

This interpretation can be connected with sustainable production through durability, repair, reuse, material efficiency and circular practices. An enterprise claiming this orientation should be able to show evidence. Material input per unit of output, waste generation, product life and reuse rates are possible indicators. In this way, a philosophical idea is moved into a researchable business question.

5.4 Ahimsa, responsible production and trusteeship

Ahimsa is also listed by Patañjali as a yama (2.30). In a contemporary entrepreneurial reading, it draws attention to harm that may not appear in financial statements. Workplace injury, unsafe products, exploitative sourcing, pollution and damage to local livelihoods are examples. Sustainable entrepreneurship requires attention to such consequences because economic performance alone does not show the full effect of an enterprise.

Gandhian trusteeship adds the question of ownership. Gandhi's practical formula connects ownership and use of wealth with social welfare and argues that production should respond to social necessity rather than greed (Gandhi, 1952). The idea can be interpreted in contemporary enterprise as a responsibility to employees, communities and other stakeholders. It does not remove the need for profitability. It changes the basis on which profitability is judged. A responsible enterprise should ask how value is created, who bears the costs and who receives the benefits.

5.5 Community ecological stewardship

Indian studies on sacred groves show that ecological conservation may be supported by community beliefs, local institutions and customary practices (Singh et al., 2017; Jeevan et al., 2023). The entrepreneurial lesson should be stated carefully. The purpose is not to commercialise sacred traditions. The relevance lies in learning from community-based stewardship where ecological responsibility is linked with social norms and local participation.

This may support conservation-linked livelihoods, responsible tourism, local food systems and enterprises based on sustainable use of local resources. However, community consent, rights over knowledge and fair benefit sharing are essential. Otherwise, an enterprise may use the language of tradition while producing a new form of exclusion. Sustainable entrepreneurship must therefore examine both ecological outcomes and social justice.

5.6 Tradition–Value–Enterprise–Impact (TVEI) framework

The literature and primary sources reviewed above lead to the proposed Tradition–Value–Enterprise–Impact (TVEI) framework. The framework has four connected stages. First, an Indian wisdom principle or knowledge practice is identified. Second, its contemporary value is interpreted. Third, the value is translated into an enterprise practice. Fourth, the practice is assessed through observable outcomes.

The main strength of the framework is its emphasis on translation and evidence. It avoids assuming that a traditional label proves sustainability. A business may use traditional materials or cultural symbols and still have poor labour conditions, high waste or unequal benefit distribution. TVEI therefore asks what principle is being used, what value it represents, what the entrepreneur actually does and what results follow.

The framework also makes the argument open to empirical research. For example, lokasaṃgraha may be translated into producer participation and then assessed through income, decision-making and livelihood indicators. Aparigraha may be linked with resource efficiency and assessed through material use and waste. Ahimsa may be linked with safe production and assessed through workplace and environmental indicators. Trusteeship may be related to stakeholder governance and examined through benefit distribution. In this way, Indian wisdom becomes a source of researchable propositions rather than a symbolic claim.

Table 1: Tradition–Value–Enterprise–Impact (TVEI) framework

Indian Wisdom / Knowledge	Contemporary Value	Enterprise Application	Illustrative Outcome
Dharma	Responsibility and ethical judgement	Purpose, fair decisions and accountable governance	Trust and accountability
Lokasaṃgraha	Collective welfare and inclusion	Producer participation and inclusive value creation	Livelihood and community value
Aparigraha	Moderation and sufficiency	Durability, repair, reuse and resource efficiency	Lower material use and waste
Ahimsa	Non-harm	Safe production, responsible sourcing and pollution prevention	Reduced social and ecological harm
Trusteeship	Responsible ownership	Stakeholder-oriented governance and fair distribution	Employee and community welfare
Community stewardship	Shared ecological responsibility	Conservation-linked enterprise and local resource management	Biodiversity and livelihood outcomes

6. Implications

For entrepreneurs and MSMEs, the framework provides a practical way to connect values with business decisions. Local skills, materials and knowledge can be treated as

sources of enterprise opportunity, but they need market assessment, quality standards and sustainability indicators. For rural and artisanal enterprises, this can help connect local knowledge with wider markets without assuming that tradition alone guarantees responsible practice.

For entrepreneurship educators, the framework can be used as a simple learning sequence: identify a principle, examine a business problem, develop an enterprise response and assess the result. This can bring ethical reflection into entrepreneurship education without separating it from practical business analysis. For policymakers, enterprise support may combine finance and skills with local institutions, community participation and safeguards for traditional knowledge. Commercial use of community knowledge should also consider consent, ownership and equitable benefit sharing.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The study is conceptual and does not establish a causal relationship between Indian wisdom and enterprise performance. The selected principles also cannot represent the full diversity of Indian Knowledge Systems. Their interpretation for contemporary entrepreneurship is partly normative. Future research should therefore test the TVEI framework through case studies, interviews and quantitative measures. Studies may examine producer income, employee welfare, resource efficiency, community participation, ecological outcomes and enterprise viability. Comparative research across rural, urban, traditional and modern enterprises can further examine how Indian knowledge influences opportunity recognition and business-model design.

8. Conclusion

Sustainable entrepreneurship requires economic viability to be considered together with social welfare and ecological responsibility. The literature shows that this approach can be studied through opportunity recognition, enterprise practices, innovation and measurable outcomes. Indian scholarship provides a growing basis for bringing indigenous concepts into this discussion.

The present study argues that selected Indian wisdom principles can provide useful ethical orientations for sustainable entrepreneurship. Dharma highlights responsibility in

action. Lokasaṃgraha connects action with collective welfare. Aparigraha raises the question of restraint and unnecessary acquisition. Ahimsa directs attention to harm. Gandhian trusteeship links ownership with social obligation. Community ecological stewardship shows how responsibility for nature can be embedded in local institutions.

These principles should not be treated as ready-made management techniques. Their value lies in their capacity to generate questions, guide reflection and inform practices that can be tested. The proposed TVEI framework makes this movement explicit: Tradition, Value, Enterprise and Impact. Its central argument is simple. Indian wisdom becomes relevant to sustainable entrepreneurship when it changes enterprise practice and when the effects of that practice can be examined. This provides a basis for further empirical research on inclusive and responsible enterprise in the Indian context.

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