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Environmental Sustainability in India: Progress, Challenges, and the Role of Society, Media and Legal Framework towards SDGs Implementation

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Abstract
Environmental sustainability lies at the heart of India's developmental ambitions in the 21st century, especially with reference to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Due to accelerating industrialisation, urbanisation, and demographic challenges, India has faced a host of environmental challenges that jeopardise its balance with nature as well as citizens' quality of life. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with particular reference to environmental-focused SDGs, present a globally accepted platform to uphold sustainable development. India, being a signatory to Agenda 2030 with a special reference to SDG 6, 7, 11, 12, 13, 14, and 15, has made remarkable advances but also encountered significant hurdles to effectively implement environmental SDGs. The paper critically looks into India's advances toward environmental sustainability, identifies major implementation bottlenecks, and assesses societal, media, and legal instruments roles to foster environmental sustainability. It stresses Indian societal roles, including civil societies, academic institutions, and NGOs, toward ground-level sustainability initiatives, along with increasing roles of both traditional and electronic media toward environmental awareness. The paper extends to a discussion involving national missions, renewable energy, a green Germany-inspired afforestation effort, and legal instruments, with a focus on initiatives by the government and international environmental diplomatic roles by India. The paper reflects a pressing need to adopt a holistic, participatory, and constitutionally enabled approach to environmental sustainability in India. The analysis emphasises a multi-stakeholder approach entailing combined initiatives by governments, civil societies, legal institutions, and media.

Keywords: *Environmental Sustainability, SDGs, Climate Action, Legal Framework, Media, Civil Society, Policy Implementation, Environmental Governance.*

INTRODUCTION

Environmental sustainability is one of the most critical challenges and imperatives of the 21st century. The concept of sustainable development received widespread recognition throughout the world, especially after the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals of 2015. India, as a key voice of the developing world, is called upon simultaneously to maintain high levels of economic growth while protecting its ecological base. With environmental degradation, climate change, and loss of resources gaining serious consideration, India's commitment to the environmental aspect of the SDGs is of utmost importance. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has been able to give us a unifying framework for the mainstreaming of the approach to sustainable national development plans. Of the 17 SDGs, the most environment-centric are SDG 6 (Clean water and sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and clean energy), SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities), SDG 12 (Responsible consumption and production), SDG 13 (Climate

Action), and the two most environment-centric SGDs, namely, SGD 14 and 15 (Life Below Water and Life on Land).

India, being a key player among the developing nations, has the double challenge of maintaining high economic growth while securing its ecological foundations. In spite of the undertaking of huge policies and schemes, there remain gaps in bridging environmental objectives with economic growth. The constructive interaction of civil society, media, and judiciary has been instrumental in spearheading the sustainability agenda. The paper assesses the performance of India, identifies key impediments, reviews the critical roles of society and media, and the legal support system for the achievement of environmental SDGs.

Overview of SDGs with emphasis on environment-related goals

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development embodies 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), of which a number are directly environment-related, and is a complete blueprint for averting global challenges, including environmental degradation, climate change, and inequality of resources [1]. The goals, taken together, address important global environmental challenges like water scarcity, pollution, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and unsustainable urbanisation. For example, clean energy under SDG 7 promotes climate mitigation (SDG 13), and urban infrastructure improvement (SDG 11) can help to decrease environmental degradation and support sustainable consumption (SDG 12). Literature stresses that environmental SDGs constitute a core pillar of the entire sustainability framework and should be dealt with in a holistic way [2].

Progress made in India towards environmental sustainability

India, being a signatory to 2030 Agenda, is a key player in achieving global SDG progress and has demonstrated keen commitment to SDGs by adopting several national strategies and monitoring frameworks. India has made significant environmental sustainability progress over the past few years by integrating national policies, renewable energy initiatives, conservation initiatives, and reforms in solid waste management. India has institutionalised SDGs by adopting frameworks led by NITI Aayog, which monitor subnational progress across all 17 goals at both national and subnational levels. NITI Aayog has been made the nodal agency for the implementation of the SDGs [3[. Various national indicators have been created to quantify and monitor progress by the country toward environmental SDG targets. Environmental action plans by India toward environmental goals consist of initiatives such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SDG 6), UJALA energy-efficient scheme (SDG 7), Smart Cities Mission (SDG 11), and National Action Plan on Climate Change (SDG 13) [4].

India's dedication to fighting global warming is best seen with the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) launched in 2008. The plan consists of eight missions aimed at solar energy, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, and water management. It informs state-level strategies to combat climate change and prioritises mitigation by renewables, adaptation by ecosystem resilience, and sustainable development [5]. The NAPCC, though marred by implementation issues, signifies a critical institutional milestone within India's climate policy structure [6]. India's renewable energy infrastructure capacity has increased very quickly, especially with regard to solar and wind energy. The government's Solar Mission within the NAPCC has given a boost to photovoltaic installation nationwide. Nevertheless, such development comes with new sustainability challenges, including end-of-life photovoltaic panel garbage management, which needs improved recycling policies [7]. Increased integration of renewable energy into national energy planning has been a major factor behind declining carbon intensity within India's economy [8].

India has taken up large-scale afforestation programs to reclaim degraded areas, particularly with programs like compensatory afforestation and Green India Mission. Scientists have focused on the environmental and socio-economic benefits of afforestation over wastelands, such as erosion control and carbon sequestration [9]. India has achieved remarkable success with solid waste management through adopting 3R values (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) and promoting circular economy measures. Urban and rural programs are shifting from disposal to a resource-recovery mode. Innovative methods, policy reforms, and citizens' initiatives have improved recycling rates and reduced reliance on landfills [10]. India's multi-faceted approach to

environmental protection, with policy structures, technological advances, and citizens' initiatives, demonstrates remarkable achievement, although implementation and enforcement challenges are still persistent.

Important challenges faced by India in implementing environmental SDGs

The continued industrialisation of India has resulted in a persistent tradeoff between economic development and environmental protection. Deforestation, pollution, and loss of biodiversity are often byproducts of infrastructure and industrial development, hindering achievement of SDG goals involving clean energy, climate action, and healthy ecosystems [11]. Attempts to balance these competing interests are piecemeal, with economic policies favouring immediate economic gain rather than future environmental protection [12]. The extremely large and expanding population of India puts enormous pressure on land, water, and energy resources. Urbanisation puts further stress on infrastructure and natural environments, including urban sprawl, increased pollution, and expanding populations with no place to go but into informal settlements or reductions in their standard of living to accommodate more people [13]. The Smart Cities Initiative seeks to counter these challenges but falls short by implementation owing to implementation deficits and a lack of funding [14].

Though India has extensive environmental legislation, enforcement remains a significant challenge. Corruption, inadequate monitoring infrastructure, and scarce public knowledge impede compliance, and district authorities are often unwilling or unequipped to enforce policies effectively [15]. Consequently, key sectors like air and water pollution, illegal mining, and trash management remain neglected [16]. Funding and infrastructure shortages are a major hindrance to environmental SDG achievement in India. Numerous programs, including those with SDG and Smart Cities initiatives, are inadequately funded and suffer from coordination deficits between departments and stakeholders [17]. There is a further necessity to augment green financial mechanisms to increase investments into renewable energy, garbage infrastructure, and climate-resilient infrastructure [18].

India is extremely vulnerable to the effects of climate change, such as floods, droughts, and unpredictable monsoons, which significantly impact agriculture and livelihoods. The risks posed by climate constrain development progress toward SDGs on zero hunger, cleaner water, and sustainable societies [19]. Current preparedness and adaptation remain inadequate in scope and pace, particularly across rural and economically poor regions [20]. India's path toward environmental SDG achievement is frustrated by long-standing structural, financial, and institutional impediments. Remedying them necessitates effective law enforcement, improved urban and environmental planning, greater investment, and local and national climate resilience measures.

Role played by Indian society toward environmental sustainability

Community-based conservation has a long tradition within India, with examples including the Chipko Movement. The Chipko Movement, which began during the 1970s within Uttarakhand, became a symbol of environmental campaigning, with villagers, especially women, hugging trees to prevent deforestation. It was based on Gandhian philosophy and consolidated rural societies by utilising nonviolent resistance to protect forests crucial to their livelihoods [21]. Other similar movements, including Appiko within Karnataka, followed similar trends, struggling against forest degradation and maintaining indigenous knowledge and sustainability [22]. The initiatives opened doors to policy change and broader recognition of rights to natural resources by societies [23].

Indian traditions often emphasise frugality and harmony with nature. Many rural and tribal lifestyles are inherently sustainable, relying on low resource consumption and traditional ecological knowledge. Activists like Vandana Shiva have promoted such lifestyles through initiatives like Navdanya, which supports organic farming, seed saving, and biodiversity preservation [24]. Educational institutions in India are instrumental in spreading awareness of the environment. National Education Policy integrates environmental education in the curriculum in a move to instill ecological awareness even from primary school. Moreover, youth have been motivated by Chipko and Navdanya movements to advocate for climate justice and sustainable living

[25]. The Chipko movement legacy has influenced the youth movements defending against deforestation and calling for renewable energy alternatives [26]. Civil society and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are major players in sustainable efforts in India. NGOs like Navdanya, Kalpavriksh, and the Centre for Science and Environment engage in policy advocacy, grassroots mobilisation, and public education. They also help mediate conflicts between development and conservation. The Chipko legacy is a prime example of how civil society has pressured the state into adopting more people-centered environmental policies [27]. Indian society contributes significantly to environmental sustainability through grassroots activism, traditional lifestyles, educational outreach, and strong civil society engagement. These efforts, rooted in cultural ethos and community cooperation, continue to shape India's environmental future.

Media's contribution to environmental sustainability and awareness of SDGs

The media in India assumes a significant role, forwarding environmental sustainability and Sustainable Development Goals awareness through public education, opinion formation, and campaign support such as Swachh Bharat and climate action campaigns. Through both digital and traditional media, it enhances policy-public linkages, though with challenges such as biased reportage and superficial coverage. Mass media campaigns have been significant influences, forwarding climate action and facilitating sustainable action. In nations such as India and Nigeria, they have been very effective in raising public understanding regarding environmental degradation, stimulating energy saving, and prompting action toward sustainability measures [28]. The campaigns are significant influences toward national agendas and societal action by bringing across a sense of urgency toward climate action [29]. Literature also focuses on how communication through the mass media remains important toward closing the knowledge-action divide, especially within developing countries where disparities remain regarding educational interventions [30].

Investigative journalism has been key to bringing environmental destruction to light and holding those responsible for pollution to account, promoting transparency and informed public discourse. But its effectiveness can be erratic from place to place. In Pakistan, environmental reporting by mainstream media outlets has been sporadic and inconsistent, with a correspondingly limited ability to shape policy or concerted public action [31]. However, with communications strategies, journalism can attain critical consciousness and long-term objectives toward sustainability [32].

Social media has revolutionised climate action by providing rapid dissemination of information and wider audiences. Analysis studying Twitter-based UN campaign-related climate communications determines that characteristics such as hashtags, visuals, and length boost public engagement significantly, but verified sources and positive sentiment may lower shares surprisingly [33]. Social media also provides a voice to influencers and civil action to challenge prevailing narratives and insist on environmental change [34]. Despite its potential, media reporting remains tainted by bias, sensationalism, and superficiality. Coverage remains biased toward sensational events to the disadvantage of systemic changes, creating an unbalanced understanding of sustainability challenges [35]. Moreover, excessive focus on measures of short-term engagement, especially over social media, tends to produce superficial awareness but no concurrent behavioral change [36]. Overall, even though mass media and social sites are solidly planted to advance environmental sustainability and SDG promotion, their practical impact depends on responsible reporting, participatory communications approaches, and critical media literacy.

Legal and policy infrastructure facilitating environmental sustainability in India

India's environmental commitment has been institutionalised by its constitution. Article 21, granting a right to life, has been interpreted by the judiciary comprehensively to embrace a right to a healthy and clean environment [37]. The Supreme Court, by way of a precedent, has held that right to life includes right to enjoyment of pollution-free air and water (Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar, 1991) [38]. Article 48A (Directive Principle of State Policy) binds the State to protect and improve the environment and conserve wildlife and forests. Correspondingly, Article 51A(g) provides a fundamental duty to citizens to protect and improve the natural environment. The constitutional mandates present an outline of environmental jurisprudence in India [37].

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, was enacted in the wake of the Bhopal Gas Tragedy. The Act is an umbrella Act for the protection and betterment of the environment [39]. The Act empowers the Central Government to do all that is necessary for the protection of the environment, such as the laying down of standards and the coordination of the activities of other environmental agencies. The Supreme Court in Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India upheld the provisions of the Act and gave importance to the "precautionary principle" and "polluter pays principle" as the cornerstones of environmental governance [40]. The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, provides for the prevention, control, and abatement of air pollution. Central and State Pollution Control Boards were constituted for the control of air quality [41]. The remarkable case in connection with this Act is the M.C. Mehta v. Union of India case of 1987 (Oleum Gas Leak case), in which the Supreme Court adopted the principle of "absolute liability" for industries that are harmful [42].

The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, was India's first major post-Independence environmental law and deals with the prevention and control of water pollution. It also gave rise to the constitution of Pollution Control Boards [43]. The most prominent among them is the case of M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Ganga Pollution Case), wherein the industries located near the Ganga River were compelled to install treatment plants or face closure [44].

The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, restricts de-reservation of forests or changing forest land to non-forest use without prior permission from the Central Government [45]. The Act was re-emphasized and re-strengthened by judgments including T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (Godavarman case), where the Supreme Court broadened its definition of 'forests' and took an active role to conserve forest cover across India and imposed a ban to cut down trees without permission [46]. The Wildlife Protection Act, 1972, provides full protection to species of flora and fauna mentioned under it and regulates hunting and trading of wildlife products [47]. In Centre for Environmental Law, WWF-India v. Union of India, the Supreme Court ordered re-introduction of Asiatic lions to their former range, re-emphasising species protection obligations under this Act [48].

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) was established by the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010, as a special judicial body to deal with environmental disputes. The NGT has significantly enhanced environmental justice and enabled faster case settlements [49]. In the case of Almitra H. Patel v. Union of India, the NGT made stringent directives regarding solid waste management in all Indian city municipalities, further reflecting its affirmative action. Judicial activism has been instrumental, in that the Supreme Court and High Courts frequently intervened to protect environmental rights when executive agencies failed in their duties [50].

India's environmental law and policy regime is robust, supported with constitutional guarantees, comprehensive legislation, and an effective judiciary. The public interest litigations (PILs) in particular have been key to the Indian judiciary's efforts, reinforcing environmental governance. Landmark decisions as well as the institution of the NGT have also made environmental protection the core of the Indian legal landscape.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

India is today at the crossroads of its pursuit of environmental sustainability in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. While commendable efforts through national missions, schemes for renewable energy, afforestation efforts, and actions through the judiciary are to be appreciated, major gaps remain. Environmental degradation resulting from speedy industrialisation, ineffective implementation mechanisms, and socio-economic inequalities continues to impede a country's capacity to achieve its SDG targets, especially SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 15 (Life on Land). The divide between national aspirations and ground realities points up the necessity to adopt a more holistic, accountable, and people-oriented approach to sustainability.

One area needing greater focus is integrating SDGs effectively into policies and local governance at the state level. Panchayati Raj Institutions, urban local governments, and district planning are to be synchronised with national targets for achieving SDGs so that they are contextually relevant and responsive. Decentralised

environmental administration, with adequate financial resources, capacity development, and real-time monitoring systems, can help play a transformative role to execute sustainability programs at the grassroots. In addition, environmental sustainability, in India specifically, cannot be attained with a faulty multi-stakeholder structure. The government needs to collaborate, in synergia, with civil society, academic establishments, private industry, and even media. Mass media and digital media, specifically, have to be better used to combat climate communications, disseminate awareness, and establish behavioral changes. The involvement of citizens, especially among youth and vulnerable sections, needs to be institutionalised by inclusive campaigning, education reforms, and participatory platforms.

To bridge the implementation gaps, a set of strategic recommendations are crucial. Firstly, environmental laws and policies must be reformed to reflect contemporary challenges, with stricter penalties and better compliance mechanisms. Secondly, environmental education should be mainstreamed across all levels of formal and informal learning. Thirdly, the judiciary must continue to play its proactive role in upholding environmental rights through Public Interest Litigations (PILs) and expansion of Article 21 jurisprudence. Lastly, the creation of a centralised SDG monitoring authority with clear jurisdictional mandates can significantly improve coordination and accountability.

Ultimately, India's environmental future must be rooted in the principles of climate justice, equity, and inclusive sustainability. Achieving the SDGs is not merely a policy obligation but a moral imperative to ensure that development today does not compromise the well-being of future generations. India's success in this endeavour will not only determine the health of its own environment but will also influence global sustainability trajectories.

Disclosure and conflict of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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