



# Evolution of environmental law and policy in India: a critical overview

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Received 4 Jan 2024; Accepted 1 March 2024; Published 13 March 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.64171/JSRD.3.1.35-40>

## Abstract

The growing levels of industrialization, urbanization and environmental degradation have resulted in the fact that environmental protection has become one of the most important legal and policy challenges in contemporary India. The development of the Indian environmental law and policy can be seen as one of those changes that have been getting gradually transformed into ecological ethics to a legal and institutional framework oriented on the concept of sustainable development. Traditionally, the Indian civilization valued the role and balance of nature, which were manifested in ancient literature and social life where natural resources of land, water, air, and forest were sacred and vital to the existence of a man. The notion of environmental protection was exercised in the form of moral and religious obligations with overlay on the balance between human and nature. The contemporary history of environmental law in India however gained momentum in the second half of the twentieth century especially following the United Nations Conference on the human environment in Stockholm in 1972 as far as the international importance of environmental protection was raised and the linkage between development and environmental conservation was made. This foreign program affected India to have a more systematic approach to the law and policy of managing the environment. The environmental governance in India was influenced by a number of international conventions, declarations and agreements over the times like the Rio conference (1992), Kyoto Protocol (1997), and other global environmental efforts that promoted the incorporation of sustainable development principles into the national policies. On the national level, India has formulated a well-thought policy framework to resolve the environmental problems on both legislative and institutional levels and policy decisions. The National Forest Policy (1988), Policy Statement on Abatement of Pollution (1992), National Conservation Strategy and Policy Statement on Environment and Development (1992) and the National Environment Policy (2006) are important policy instruments. These policies are targeted to protect the environment, to reduce pollution and to maintain the sustainable management of the natural resources and economic development along with preservation of the environment. The National Environment Policy, 2006 specifically is a major stride in mainstreaming the environment issue in all developmental undertaking and enhancing the regulation reform and governance structures. The environmental legal system of India is also enhanced by the provisions of the constitution that places responsibilities on both the state and the citizens to preserve and even enhance the environment like Articles 48A and 51A(g). There are also pioneering legislations such as the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986; Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; and Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, which are the center of the environmental regulatory regime in India. These laws and judicial activism and litigation on public interest have played a larger role in the implementation of environmental rights and the establishment of the right to clean and healthy environment as a fundamental right to life as provided by Article 21 of the Constitution. Although these have happened, there are still a number of issues that remain in the successful enforcement of environmental laws and policies. The problem of rapid industrialization, population increase, urban pollution and poor enforcement mechanisms remain a threat towards environmental sustainability. Thus, a critical analysis of environmental law and policy framework in India indicates that there should be better institutional coordination, involvement of the people, and enforcement of stricter regulations to attain sustainable development. To sum up, the development of environmental law and policy in India is a dynamic process that is predetermined by the historical traditions, the global environmental movements, constitutional requirements, and the national policy practices. An integrated and broad approach that will ensure ecological conservation and social-economic development is still the key point in overcoming the modern environmental issues and providing environmental justice that will be an inseparable part of the current and future generations.

**Keywords:** Environmental Law, Environmental Policy, Sustainable Development, National Environment Policy 2006, Environmental Governance, Pollution Control, Natural Resource Conservation, Environmental Protection in India

## Introduction

The environment is crucial to human existence and societal progress. The purity of the ecosystem has been severely compromised due to increasing technological advances and industrialization. The imperative to safeguard and enhance the environment is crucial for the peaceful existence of humanity and other living forms on Earth, leading to the recognition of the right to a healthy environment as a fundamental human

right. Our environment comprises the 'Panchtatva' <sup>[1]</sup>, namely earth, water, light, weather, and air, which collectively sustain our existence. When equilibrium of Panchtatva disrupt human existence, it would pose a significant threat. Our survival is derived from the five elements, necessitating pollution-free air for respiration, uncontaminated water for hydration, nutritious food for sustenance, hygienic conditions for habitation, and a healthy environment for mobility. These factors are essential

for the healthy and strong evolution of the human personality. Without Panchtatva, humans cannot fully develop themselves. A pollution-free environment is a fundamental necessity for every individual; nonetheless, all have contributed to its degradation, resulting in a pervasive global phenomenon. A healthy environment is vital for our survival; nonetheless, we are contaminating and degrading our own surroundings, so endangering ourselves. The fundamental cause is that we are prioritizing development at the expense of health. Currently, economic progress is becoming more crucial for us than the quality of life.

Ancient Indian literature reveals evidence that society in that era prioritized environmental protection more than contemporary perceptions suggest. It was dharma [2] of each citizen in society to save nature. The populace venerated natural objects. During the Vedic era, the environment was regarded as a sacred entity of significant religious importance. "One tree is equivalent to ten sons [3]." This citation from Padmapurana [4] illustrates the significance of the environment. The mentality and necessity are dynamic concepts that evolve over time. The trees, water, land, and animals held significant importance in ancient times. For instance, several penalties were established for inflicting harm on plants. Govindraja differentiates between harm to shade-providing plants, flowering plants, and fruit-bearing plants, prescribing the least, moderate, and most severe penalties accordingly. Kautilya advanced the concept by determining the punishment according to the significance of the tree's component. Certain significant trees were even venerated as deities. Manu dictates that the human race should preserve the trees. Hence, pollution-free air, clean water, nutritious food, and a healthy ecological environment are the keys to the harmonious living of human life.

Irrespective of this long history of environmental consciousness, the contemporary world has experienced challenges in environmental issues like never before. Industrialization, urbanization, and technological advancement have aggravated the extraction of natural resources leading to environmental pollution, deforestation, climate change, loss of biodiversity, and degradation of ecosystems. Economic growth has been a priority to the role of protecting the environment, which has resulted in the downfall of the quality and state of the environment. As a result, environmental issues have evolved from local or regional concerns into global challenges requiring collective action at national and international levels. Before 1972, there was no significant worldwide initiative to address global environmental difficulties, but numerous international legislative instruments addressing environmental matters accidentally remain in effect. Examples include -

- The Nuclear Weapons Tests Ban Treaty of 1963.
- The 1967 Treaty for the Prevention of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America.
- The 1967 convention establishing the principles governing state activities in the exploration and utilization of outer space, including the Moon and other celestial bodies;
- The 1968 Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
- The 1971 pact prohibiting the placement of nuclear weapons on the seabed, ocean bottom, and its subsoil.

The significant international initiative for global environmental protection commenced in 1972, when the international community assembled for the inaugural 'United Nations Conference on the Human Environment' in Stockholm. The conference accepted, among other items, three significant non-binding measures which were: A declaration of seven fundamental truths and 26 principles; a resolution regarding institutional and financial structures; and an action plan featuring 109 recommendations. The Stockholm Conference highlighted the correlation between the environment and economic growth and formulated principles that formed the basis of the contemporary environmental law and policy in the global arena [5].

The Stockholm Declaration recognized that human beings have the fundamental right to live in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being. Meanwhile, it placed the duty on people, governments, and international organizations to conserve and enhance the environment of the current and future generations. Another impact of the conference was the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that emerged as one of the major international entities charged with the responsibility of organizing environmental activities and sustainable development. The guidelines that were used in the Stockholm Conference had a major impact on the national environmental policies and laws that were used by all the countries of the world including India [6].

A second wave of international environmental agreements and conventions that were formed after the Stockholm Conference reinforced the international environmental movement. Significant events are the Vienna Convention to the Protection of Ozone Layer (1985), Montreal Protocol (1987) on ozone-depleting gases and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio Summit) in 1992. The Rio Summit brought forth such concepts as sustainable development, evaluation of environmental impact and differentiated but common responsibilities principle [7]. It also produced significant instruments such as the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and conventions on climate change and biodiversity. These developments reinforced the idea that environmental protection must be integrated with economic development and social progress [8].

As an active actor in global environmental issues India applied most of these principles to the domestic law and policy system. Development of a complex grouping of environmental rules in the country was attained over time through provisions of the constitution, laws, policies, and institutional systems. One significant constitution change was the 42 nd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1976 that introduced the Articles 48 A and 51 A (g). Article 48A instructs the State to conserve and enhance the environment and preserve forests and wildlife and Article 51A(g) sets a basic obligation on all citizens to conserve and enhance the natural environment. These provisions point out to the constitutional promises of India to protect the environment and achieve sustainable development [9].

Besides the provisions in the constitution, there are other significant environmental laws in India that have been created to control pollution, the preservation of natural resources and sustainable development. Some of the important laws are Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, Air

(Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 and the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 which is a blanket legislation that gives right to the government to undertake holistic measures in protecting the environment. Additional laws such as the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, and the Biological Diversity Act, 2002 further strengthen the legal framework for conservation of biodiversity and ecosystems<sup>[10]</sup>.

Besides the legislative actions, India has also developed several policy statements that are used to govern the environment and the management of resources. These policies focus on solving certain environmental issues and ensuring sustainable growth in the good of different sectors. The major policy programs are the National Forest Policy (1988), the Policy Statement on Abatement of Pollution (1992) and the National Conservation Strategy and Policy Statement on Environment and Development (1992). The focus of these policy frameworks is directed towards protecting the natural resources, pollution, environmental education and consideration of the environment to development planning<sup>[11]</sup>.

The National Environment<sup>[12]</sup> Policy (NEP), 2006<sup>[13]</sup> is one of the most elaborate policy measures in India that offers a broad approach to environmental management and sustainable development. The policy seeks to mainstream the environmental issues in all the developmental matters, enhance environmental governance, and ensure that there is efficient utilization of the natural resources. It also highlights such significant principles as intra-generational and inter-generational equity, the precautionary principle, the polluter-pays principle and the involvement of the masses in the decision-making process regarding the environment<sup>[14]</sup>. The NEP aims at developing a middle ground that will ensure that economic growth is achieved without jeopardizing ecological systems and biodiversity<sup>[15]</sup>.

It is also noted in the policy that environmental degradation has a complex connection with poverty and economic development. The environmental issues facing India have a tendency to be strongly attributed to socio-economic influences like population increase, poverty, and un-sustainable consumption habits. In most societies, particularly the rural and the marginalized, natural resources like forests, water bodies, land among others form a vital source of livelihood. Environmental degradation thus has not only the impact on the ecological system, but also on social inequalities and economic vulnerability. It is important to note that environmental issues must be tackled in India on a holistic level that incorporates ecological sustainability, social justice, and economic development. The state should also increase its efforts as individuals whether natural and institutional should also recognize their roles to maintain and enhance the quality of the environment<sup>[16]</sup>.

The National Environmental Policy is meant to have a unification of environmental issues in every development undertaking. It provides the present and future environmental issues and policy targets, guiding principles, strategic themes, and institutional and legislative actions required. The policy focuses on the quality of life, admiration of limits of the biosphere, and seeking justice<sup>[17]</sup>. The policy, which was formulated after extensive consultations with the experts and stakeholders, outlines how it would be implemented and

reviewed as well. The policy seeks to establish partnerships among different stakeholders i.e. public agencies, academic institutions and scientific institutions, local communities, investment sector and international development partners to use their respective resources and strengths to manage the environment<sup>[18]</sup>.

Poverty and economic development go hand in hand with the major environmental issues in India. Such problems are connected with the state of the natural resources like land, water, air, plants and animals. The primary causes of the degradation of the environment are rapid population growth, inappropriate technologies, overconsumption, and poverty. These forces interfere with the equilibrium between human beings and ecosystems and are only exacerbated through human activities such as intensive agriculture, industrial pollution, and unplanned urban growth<sup>[19]</sup>. In addition, the urban environmental degradation, which is caused by insufficient or untimely waste management and sanitation, and also due to the industry and transportation pollution, has an adverse effect on the quality of air, water, and soil, unfairly affecting the health of the urban poor. This, therefore, incapacitates them in their endeavors to seek and sustain employment, obtain education and increases gender disparities all of which perpetuate poverty<sup>[20]</sup>.

The other important feature of environmental governance in India is the judiciary. The Indian judiciary, especially the Supreme Court and different High Courts have been actively involved in the interpretation of the constitutional provisions, as well as widening the area of environmental rights. By the process of Public Interest Litigation (PIL), the right to clean and healthy environment has been considered as a fundamental right to life in the Article 21 of the Constitution. Other legal doctrines of importance have also been presented through the judicial decisions which include precautionary principle, polluter-pays principle and the doctrine of public trust which has enhanced protection and responsibility of the environment<sup>[21]</sup>.

Although a complex legal and policy framework has been elaborated, there remain a number of challenges that make the effective implementation of environmental laws in India a challenge. The success of implementation of environmental policies is usually hampered by weak enforcement mechanisms, institutional inefficiencies, absence of public awareness and contradicting development priorities. The threat to the ecological sustainability is still active as a result of rapid industrial growth, urban pollution, deforestation, and climatic change. These problems underscore the fact that there should be enhanced regulatory institutions, better governance structures and that civil society should be actively involved in making decisions related to the environment<sup>[22]</sup>.

Moreover, the new environmental challenges in the world like climate change, loss of biodiversity and sustainable resource management demand more international collaboration and policy invention. India has been progressively participating in international environmental activities such as the Paris Agreement on Climate Change and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These programs underline the necessity of reconciling environmental protection with economic development, social justice, and technological breakthrough as the way to make the world sustainable over the long term.

The transformation of environmental law and policy in India in this respect is a dynamic and emerging process that is influenced by the historical traditions, international influences, constitutional requirements, legislative changes and policy reforms. The country has gone a long way in ensuring the formulation of a comprehensive environmental governance framework but still a lot needs to be done to ensure that the implementation process is effective and the developed countries are sustainable.

The paper thus attempts to critically assess the development of environmental law and policy in India through historical development of the environmental policy, constitutional bases of the policy, legislative basis of the policy, and significant policy initiatives in India. It also assesses the efficacy of the current environmental governance systems and brings out the issues and prospects of enhancing the environmental protection in the nation. Through the facets discussed, the paper seeks to offer an in-depth insight into the Indian environmental legal system and its contribution to solving the current environmental problems as well as enhancing sustainable development.

### Literature review

The environmental law and policy analysis in India has gained a lot of scholarly interest owing to the increasing issues related to ecological degradation, climate change, and sustainable development. The historical development, legal framework, and policy process that govern the environment in India have been discussed by different researchers and policy documents. In his writing on environmental management, A.S. Bal points out the fact that the development of environmental policies in India was mainly in reaction to the swelling agenda of environmental issues which were caused by the rapid growth of industries and population growth. According to Bal, the development of environmental policies such as the National Environment Policy, the National Forest Policy, and pollution control policies reflects the state's commitment to ensuring sustainable use of natural resources and environmental conservation. These policies aim to balance ecological protection with economic development and highlight the importance of sustainable development as a guiding principle for environmental governance [23].

V.S. Ganesamurthy looks at the issue of environmental economics in India and states that the phenomenon of environmental degradation is tightly connected with poverty, population increase, and the unsustainable forms of development. He observes that the environment resources like forest, water bodies and biodiversities are useful in the livelihoods and more so to the marginalized. Thus, the environmental policy should combine the economical and social factors to provide the fair and balanced consumption of the resources [24].

The other important input is made by U. Sankar who talks about the institutional and legal processes in India in the context of environmental protection. Sankar underlines the fact that the legal system of environmental protection in India has developed over time as a result of the combination of constitutional acts, legislative acts, and the intervention of the judicial system. He highlights the fact that environmental acts including, Environment Protection Act, 1986, Water Act, 1974,

Air Act, 1981, give the basis on which pollution can be regulated and the safety of environmental resources secured. This is however, a challenge as there are administrative inefficiencies and no mechanisms through which this is to be implemented [25].

Historical analysis of the environmental protection in India leads scholars to focus on the idea that the environmental consciousness in the Indian society has a strong cultural and philosophical background. Conservative Indian literature and religious books encouraged the environment and the responsibility of people to save natural resources like forests, rivers and animals. Environmental protection was thus seen as an ethical responsibility and not a legal one. The aspect of the culture has made a great impact on the contemporary thinking of environment in India [26].

In the literature, the impact of the global environmental processes on the environmental policy of India is a well-discussed issue. The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972 is widely considered to have marked a turning point in the environment management realm of the world. Scholars state that this conference was instrumental in ensuring that issues relating to the environment were given priority in the international law arena, and the countries, including India, were encouraged to enact proper policies and legislations in relation to the environment [27].

In the same manner, the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 established a stronger commitment towards the global environmental protection and sustainable development. It brought on board some of the most important principles including intergenerational equity, precautionary principle and sustainable development, which have informed policy-making on the environment in most countries. India being a member of these global environmental initiatives has integrated such principles in its environmental laws and policies [28].

The significance of the National Environment Policy (2006) is also highlighted in the recent literature, as the policy itself is a set of extensive policies regarding the environmental governance issues in India. The policy has the integration of environmental issues into development planning, rational utilization of natural resources and the necessity of participatory environmental governance that will deal with local communities, governmental institutions, as well as other stakeholders. Scholars believe that the policy indicates the Indian interest in the realization of sustainable development and overcoming the environmental issues related to the economic development [29].

Generally, the literature available has shown that the environmental law and policy in India has been a multicultural affair based on interaction of historical traditions, global environmental trends, constitutional directives, legislations, and policy programs. As much as a lot has been achieved to ensure that a comprehensive environmental governance framework is established, scholars still insist on the need to ensure the establishment of more powerful implementation mechanisms as well as involvement of more people to ensure the effective protection of the environment.

### Aim of the research

This study is mainly intended to critically study the development of environmental law and policy in India and also

to review the legal and policy mechanisms that have emerged in response to environmental issues. The research aims to discuss the historical context, overseas forces, provisions in the Indian constitutions and policy frameworks which have influenced the governance of the environment in India. It also seeks to test the effectiveness of environmental policies and laws in a bid to facilitate sustainable development and environmental protection. Furthermore, the research attempts to identify key challenges in the implementation of environmental policies and suggest possible measures to strengthen environmental governance in India.

### Methodology

This research is primarily based on a doctrinal and qualitative research approach. The research is based on the secondary data sources such as books, research articles, policy documents, government reports, and legal provisions of the environmental protection in India. The environmental laws, policy statements, and the provisions of the Constitution have been analyzed to appreciate how environmental governance has evolved and developed in the country. To examine the impact of the global environmental initiatives on the environmental policy framework in India, the study also examines the academic literature and international environmental agreements. The research, through critical analysis of these sources, tries to present a general overview of environmental law and policy development in India.

### Discussion

Over time, the Indian environmental law and policy has undergone numerous changes due to the increasing issues of environmental degradation and sustainability in development. The evolution of environmental governance in India is amenable to three significant periods, this being the traditional ecological view, the emergence of modern environmental laws, and the formation of the overall environmental policies. In the past, the Indian society was close to nature and environmental protection was a part of cultural and religious beliefs. According to the ancient Indian texts and philosophical teachings, it was important to keep a balance between the natural environment and human beings. Trees, rivers, mountains and animals were believed to be sacred and it was customary to protect them by social and religious customs. These primitive cultures portrayed a primitive approach to ecological balance and sustainable use of resources.

But with the ushering of the industrialization and modernization, environmental degradation became a major concern. Endless economic increase, urbanization and advancement of technologies brought about excess use of natural resources and environmental pollution. The emission of industrial materials, deforestation, water pollution and waste production started to endanger the ecological balance and human health. These changes provided the necessity of a legal and institutional framework to control the environmental activities and sustainable use of resources. The moment of the shift in the development of the environmental governance in India was after the Stockholm Conference in 1972 which has made the protection of the environment and the sustainable development significant throughout the world. After the conference, India started gaining a more organized attitude

towards the environmental regulation. Some major environmental legislations were passed such as Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974 and Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981. These laws had regulatory bodies that were in charge of the pollution levels and the implementation of the environmental standards.

The other significant achievement was the introduction of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, which is the umbrella act of environmental protection in India. This act gives the central government extensive authority to control the environmental activities, determine environmental standards and take the action necessary to avert environmental degradation. The act also helps in coordination of the different environmental regulatory agencies and the integration of environmental impact assessment procedures in case of development projects. Besides legislation, the environmental policies have also been instrumental in determining the environmental governance in India. The national forest policy (1988), National conservation strategy (1992) and the policy statement on abatement of pollution (1992) are some of the policies that show that the government is concerned about environmental protection and sustainable management of resources. Such policies focus on protecting and preserving the natural resources, control of pollution, and incorporating environmental in economic planning.

The National Environment Policy (2006) is a leading move in the direction of the holistic environmental governance in India. The policy acknowledges the fact that environmental protection is impossible outside of economic and social development. It thus highlights the need to bring the environmental issues into all the developmental processes and advance the idea behind sustainable development. Other principles that are emphasized by the policy include intergenerational equity, precautionary approach, and a polluter-pays principle in making environmental decisions. The other significant issue of environmental governance in India is the judiciary. Indian courts have also been proactive in interpreting the environmental laws and in ensuring that they are well implementation. The judiciary has put a wider scope to environmental rights and has acknowledged the right to healthy environment as a fundamental right to life through public interest litigation. Other significant environmental doctrine that have come up as a result of judicial interventions encompass the public trust doctrine and sustainable development principle.

Regardless of these developments, there are a number of challenges that environmental governance in India still experiences. The ineffectiveness in the application of the environmental laws and policies is mostly caused by weak enforcement mechanisms, poor institutional coordination and a general lack of awareness by the people. The process of rapid industrial growth and urbanization is still pressuring the natural resources and results in a negative environmental situation and ecological imbalances. Moreover, global problems like climate change, biodiversity degradation, and water shortage need intergovernmental and international action. The involvement of India in global environmental treaties and programs shows that it is concerned with these issues. Nevertheless, to attain sustainable development, there is need to have a more robust regulation frameworks, better governance structures, and more participation of local people and civil societies.

## Conclusion

The development of the environmental law and policy in India indicates how the nation has struggled to deal with the intricate issues of environmental degradation and sustainable development. Since the ancient times when the importance of nature was respected through various traditions and laws, up to the present time where several laws and policy frameworks are created to regulate environmental activities, the environmental governance in India has changed dramatically. The impact of the international environmental activities, specifically, the Stockholm conference and the succeeding global environmental conventions was significant in the formulation of the environmental policies and legal systems in India. The integration of the environment protection in the Constitution under the 42nd amendment further promoted the need of the country to conserve the environment. Acts of parliament like the Water Act, Air Act, and Environment Protection Act have given the environmental regulation a solid legal basis. Moreover, there have been policy projects that have developed a functional environmental governance system and they include the National Forest Policy, National Conservation Strategy, and the National Environment Policy.

Another role that has been very important in enhancing environmental protection is the judiciary which has facilitated the expansion of the environmental rights and accountability through judicial review to promote the protection of the environment. The activism of the judiciary and the public interest litigation has played a major role in the application of environmental laws as well as the identification of environmental protection as a human right and core issue. Nevertheless, with all these successes, there are still a number of challenges in terms of successful environmental governance in India. The laxity of enforcement measures, absence of coordination among the regulatory bodies as well as mounting pressure on natural resources remain issues that weaken the movement of environmental protection efforts. To meet these challenges, there is a need to strengthen the institutional systems, enhance the regulatory provisions and involve the people in making decisions related to the environment.

To sum up, the developing of the environmental law and policy in India is a process that has existed over time in order to strike a balance between the economic development and environmental sustainability. Environmental governance, sustainable development and the equitable access to the natural resources will be critical in protecting the environment and securing better quality of life by the current and future generations.

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