



POLITICS, POLICY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE: POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA'S TRAJECTORY OF ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Since independence, India's environmental politics has evolved through a complex negotiation between developmental imperatives, democratic accountability, and global environmental norms. The post-independence period marked a steady transformation of India's environmental policy from fragmented regulation toward institutionalised governance. This paper examines India's engagement in environmental improvement as a political process. It also traces major policy milestones, institutional reforms, and the interaction between state, civil society, and international actors. The paper identifies three phases in India's environmental trajectory: the emergence of legal and institutional frameworks in the 1970s–80s, the liberalisation-era environmental politics of the 1990s–2000s, and the contemporary climate-oriented phase from 2010 onward. Drawing on political economy and environmental governance perspectives, the paper argues that environmental improvement in India is contingent on the state's capacity, intergovernmental coordination, and the democratic mobilisation of environmental justice.

Keywords: *Environmental Governance, Environmental Justice, Climate Politics, Environmental Rights*

Introduction

Environmental improvement in India cannot be understood merely as a technical process of regulation and conservation. It is deeply rooted in the country's post-independence political trajectory, shaped by the priorities of development, democracy, and state-building. India emerged from colonial rule in 1947 with a developmental vision influenced by Nehruvian socialism, which prioritised industrialisation, infrastructure, and agricultural expansion as the foundations of national progress. Within this paradigm, environmental concerns were largely subordinated to economic growth imperatives (Gadgil & Guha, 1995). However, as ecological degradation intensified during the 1960s and 1970s, environmental issues gradually entered the political mainstream.

Political awareness of ecological issues in India was shaped by both domestic and global forces. At the domestic level, increasing deforestation, industrial pollution, and land degradation began to directly affect the livelihoods of rural communities and forest-dependent populations. At the same time, global developments like 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm placed environmental protection firmly on the international policy agenda, influencing debates and policy thinking within India. India's participation in these dialogues forced the government to integrate environmental considerations into its developmental planning. The subsequent establishment of the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) in 1972 and the adoption of major environmental legislations in the following decades marked a significant shift toward state-led environmental governance.

India's environmental improvement reflects a complex negotiation among competing values and interests. Scholars such as Ciecierska-Holmes et al., (2019) have argued that India's environmental policy evolved through a layered political process balancing development imperatives, global expectations, and domestic legitimacy. India's environmental trajectory has continually shifted between centralised technocratic authority and participatory democratic pressures, reflecting similar tensions embedded in the country's wider governance framework. Federalism, party politics, bureaucratic structures, and judicial activism have all played significant roles in shaping the environmental policy.

Environmental politics in India also reveals the interdependence of state and society. Movements such as Chipko in Uttarakhand and Narmada Bachao Andolan in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat demonstrated how ecological issues became vehicles for broader political mobilisation, linking environmental protection with social justice and grassroots democracy (Mallick, 2025; Sharma,

2025). These movements not only influenced specific policies but also transformed the discourse on environmental rights, sustainability, and community participation.

Over the decades, India has shifted from responding to environmental crises through reactive regulation to developing a more comprehensive framework that attempts to incorporate sustainability into the core of national planning. The Constitution was amended in 1976 to include provisions directing the State and citizens to protect the environment, while the establishment of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (1985) institutionalised environmental governance. The liberalisation reforms of the 1990s further redefined the relationship between the state, market, and environment, introducing new challenges such as balancing foreign investment with ecological regulation (Nayak, 2015).

In this context, this paper examines India's engagement in environmental improvement within its broader political economy. It explores how environmental policy evolved as part of state formation, how institutional arrangements mediated the relationship between development and ecology, and how democratic practices have influenced environmental governance.

Literature Review

Scholarly literature on India's environmental politics has expanded significantly since the 1980s, paralleling the rise of global ecological consciousness and domestic environmental movements. Early scholarship situates India's environmental trajectory within the Nehruvian developmental state, which privileged industrial and agricultural modernisation over ecological sustainability. Gadgil and Guha (1995) in *Ecology and Equity* argue that post-independence planning reproduced colonial patterns of resource extraction and centralised control, relegating ecology to a technocratic concern. The Planning Commission's five-year plans incorporated environmental aspects only marginally until the 1970s, and even then largely through the lens of resource management rather than environmental justice (Williams & Mawdsley, 2006). This growth-centric paradigm established a persistent tension between economic development and environmental protection that continues to structure Indian policy debates.

A second set of literature examines the institutional consolidation of environmental governance. The 1972 Stockholm Conference prompted India to establish the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) and later the Department of Environment in 1980 and Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1985. However, Sharma (2020) cautions that this "greening" of development discourse with creation of institutions and various policy interventions did not automatically translate into environmental improvement. Ciecierska-Holmes et al. (2019) describe Indian environmental policy as incremental and reactive characterised by periodic crisis-driven legislation rather than proactive strategy. The Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 is often cited as a watershed, granting wide powers to the central government. However, in practice the act largely remained regulatory, with little integration of community participation or local governance.

Political-economy perspectives within environmental scholarship highlight that environmental policy cannot be understood in isolation from broader structures of federalism, economic reform, and power distribution. In the Indian context, the liberalisation reforms of 1991 introduced new tensions between environmental regulation and market-led growth, reshaping the terrain of policy negotiation (Bedajna, 2014; Banerjee & Sood, 2012).

A large interdisciplinary literature focuses on environmental movements as expressions of democratic politics. Guha (2000) and Narula (2009) document how the Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan movements transformed ecological conflicts into struggles over rights, participation, and justice. Rzedzian (2023) conceptualises these as counter-hegemonies to state-centred development. Environmental justice theorists, drawing from feminist and subaltern perspectives, critique top-down conservation for marginalising forest-dwellers and tribal communities (Baviskar, 1999; Agarwal, 2010; Kodiveri, 2016). These movements also altered legal and institutional discourse. The Supreme Court's expanding environmental jurisprudence and the creation of the National Green Tribunal 2010 are often attributed to sustained civil-society activism (Niyati, 2015)

Recent scholarship has begun to examine how global environmental regimes intersect with domestic ideological shifts in shaping India's environmental trajectory (Guha, 2000). Joseph (2023) argues that political ideology plays a significant role in framing environmental priorities. Earlier socialist regimes emphasised equity and public ownership, whereas subsequent governments increasingly comprised market-oriented notions of "green growth" (Banerjee & Sood, 2012). Extending this line of analysis, Francavilla (2015) understands India's role in global climate seeks as an effort to find a middle path between protecting the environment and safeguarding its energy sovereignty. At the level of policy discourse, Sharma & Singh (2016) shows how global concepts such as "sustainability" and "climate resilience" are not simply adopted, but reinterpreted and embedded within India's developmental vocabulary.

Despite rich scholarship, several analytical gaps remain. First, most policy analyses treat environmental improvement as an administrative outcome rather than a dynamic political process. Comparative political analysis of how federalism, party competition, and institutional reform affect environmental performance is still limited (Francavilla (2015)). Second, while movements have been widely studied, their long-term policy impacts require deeper evaluation, in relation with decentralisation and participatory governance (Ballal et al., 2023). Third, the integration of climate-change governance into domestic politics is a relatively recent focus. The relationship between India's global commitments such as the Paris Agreement and sub-national implementation deserves continued empirical scrutiny (Ratha & Barik, 2025; Islam, 2024).

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, historical-interpretive approach to examine India's engagement with environmental improvement as a political process shaped by state formation, institutional change, and international diplomacy. Rather than treating environmental policy as a purely technical domain, the study situates it within broader political and historical developments.

The analysis draws primarily on secondary sources from a wide range of academic and policy materials. Government documents including the Five-Year Plans, the National Environment Policy (2006), and the India State of Environment Report (2021) to provide evidence of institutional evolution and shifting policy priorities. International reports from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the World Bank, and the IPCC help position India within the wider framework of global environmental governance. In addition, the study engages with key scholarly works and analytical commentaries on environmental movements and policy reforms to contextualise state responses and public contestations.

Trajectory of Environmental Governance

The political history of India's environmental engagement underscores that ecological reform cannot be understood apart from questions of democracy, state capacity, and global power. India's environmental engagement reflects the evolution of its political development from a centralised postcolonial state pursuing industrial modernisation to a globally engaged democracy negotiating ecological justice and growth. Each period in this trajectory reveals how environmental policy emerged not as an isolated technocratic reform but as an outcome of political negotiation, ideological shifts, and institutional adaptation. This section analyses four phases of India's environmental improvement emerges as a negotiated political process rather than a linear policy evolution. Environmental governance reflects contestations between growth imperatives and justice claims, between central authority and local autonomy, and between global environmental norms and domestic political legitimacy.

1) Developmentalism and the Absence of Environmental Politics (1947–1971)

The early decades of India's independence were dominated by the Nehruvian developmental model, grounded in faith in science, planning, and industrialisation. Nature was viewed as a resource for national reconstruction rather than an autonomous sphere of concern. Gadgil and Guha (1995) describe this period as where dams, steel plants, and agrarian modernisation symbolised development. The state prioritised sovereignty and economic growth, neglecting environmental protection to secondary importance.

While the Constitution of India made implicit references to environmental concerns through Directive Principles (Articles 48A and 51A g) were added later in the 1970s), the early planning documents reflected little ecological awareness. The first three Five-Year Plans (1951–1965) largely framed environmental concerns under the rubric of resource management. Forest and wildlife policies continued colonial-era approaches of extraction and control (Meher, 2023).

However, two developments began to challenge this orthodoxy by the late 1960s. First, growing evidence of soil erosion, deforestation, and water scarcity revealed the ecological costs of industrialisation. Second, global environmental debates particularly Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) deepened public and policy awareness of the environmental and health risks associated with modern industrial practices. The UN's emerging focus on human environment influenced Indian bureaucrats and scientists. Yet, environmental concerns at this stage were "absorbed into technocratic planning" rather than being treated as a political or ethical issue. The environmental question thus entered the Indian policy discourse through developmental rationality, not ecological consciousness.

2) Institutionalisation and the Rise of Environmental Governance (1972–1991)

The 1970s marked a significant turning point in India's environmental politics. The 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment marked an important turning point in India's environmental trajectory, prompting the creation of new institutions and policy initiatives. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's participation in the conference signalled India's formal engagement with the emerging global environmental agenda. However, this engagement was articulated through her well-known assertion that "poverty is the greatest polluter." The phrase captured India's position that environmental degradation could not be understood or addressed without confronting deep-rooted socio-economic inequalities.

Following Stockholm, the National Committee on Environmental Planning and Coordination (NCEPC) was established in 1972. Subsequently, major laws such as the Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act of 1974 and Air Prevention and Control of Pollution Act of 1981 institutionalised environmental regulation. The establishment of Department of Environment in 1980 and later the Ministry of Environment and Forests in 1985 reflected growing bureaucratic commitment. Sharma (2020) identify this period as the "greening of the Indian state," though he also note that implementation remained weak due to limited administrative capacity.

This period also witnessed the emergence of environmental movements that politicised ecology from below. The Chipko Movement in the Garhwal Himalayas (1973–1979) redefined forest protection as a social justice issue rather than merely a conservation policy (Guha, 2000). Women's participation in Chipko, as noted by Jain (1984), transformed environmentalism into a democratic claim for livelihood and dignity. The Silent Valley campaign in Kerala (late 1970s) successfully opposed a hydroelectric project, influencing the environmental consciousness of policy elites (Kallyani & Narayanan, 2023).

A major institutional milestone was the Environment Protection Act of 1986, enacted after the Bhopal Gas Tragedy happened in 1984. This act consolidated environmental governance under a single legal framework and empowered the central government to issue rules and notifications. It also introduced the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) mechanism, a significant regulatory innovation. However this phase remained largely reactive, driven by crises and international pressure rather than participatory environmental planning.

3) Liberalisation, Federalism, and Environmental Politics (1991–2010)

The liberalisation of the Indian economy in 1991 reconfigured the relationship between development and environmental protection. Market reforms and globalisation generated new pressures on land, water, and forests while simultaneously inviting transnational environmental scrutiny. The post-liberalisation era intensified contradictions between economic liberalisation and ecological regulation (Nayak, 2015)

Two major dynamics defined this phase. First, environmental regulation became a key component of India's federal politics. State governments, competing for investment, often diluted environmental clearances to attract industries. Also, EIA process turned into a political instrument, reflecting local political economies rather than ecological assessments. This phase exposed the limitations of centralised control and the need for decentralized environmental governance.

Second, judicial activism emerged as a significant force in environmental protection. The Supreme Court and High Courts expanded the scope of Article 32 of the Constitution to include the right to a clean and healthy environment. Landmark cases such as *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India* (1996) and *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India* (1988–1998) established principles like sustainable development and the polluter-pays rule (Verma, 2024; Niyati, 2015).

Civil-society activism also expanded in this era. The Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), launched in the late 1980s, mobilised national and international attention on displacement and ecological damage caused by large dams. According to Narula (2009), such movements transformed environmentalism into a grammar of democratic rights. Despite the political fragmentation of the 1990s, environmental activism institutionalised new vocabularies of justice, participation, and sustainability in public discourse.

4) Climate Diplomacy and the Politics of Green Development (2010–Present)

Since the 2010s, India's environmental engagement has been increasingly shaped by global climate politics. The establishment of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in 2010 professionalised environmental adjudication and enhanced transparency, though its effectiveness varies across states. Meanwhile, the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) of 2008 and subsequent state-level climate action plans marked a strategic shift from reactive regulation to integrated policy frameworks.

At the international level, India's participation in the 2015 Paris Agreement and its leadership in the International Solar Alliance in 2015 signal a new phase of environmental diplomacy. India's commitments to renewable energy and carbon intensity reduction are positioned within its broader demand for climate justice, emphasising historical responsibility and equity.

Domestically, environmental improvement initiatives such as the National Clean Air Programme (2019) and the Namami Gange Mission have demonstrated mixed outcomes. While they illustrate policy innovation, scholars caution against the technocratic capture of environmentalism where data-driven governance obscures local participation. The growing intersection of environmental politics with digital governance and corporate sustainability frameworks indicates a complex transformation in which market and state logics coexist uneasily (Kloppenborg et al., 2022).

Furthermore, India's environmental politics now intersects with questions of energy security, climate adaptation, and urban resilience. The green developmental state seeks to reconcile growth with climate imperatives, yet deep inequalities persist in access to clean energy, water, and air. The post-COVID-19 policy environment has further reoriented environmental priorities toward resilience and self-reliance (*Atmanirbhar Bharat*), linking environmental improvement to national development narratives.

Conclusion

India's trajectory of environmental improvement reflects a dynamic interplay between political priorities, institutional reforms, and global pressures. From the developmentalism of the post-independence decades to the contemporary era of climate diplomacy, environmental governance in India has remained deeply political mediated by contestations over justice, sovereignty, and growth. The study finds that environmental improvement in India cannot be understood as a purely technocratic or administrative achievement. Rather, it is the outcome of political negotiation among multiple actors: the central state, federal units, judiciary, civil society, and transnational networks. Each phase of India's environmental history reveals distinct configurations of power and policy orientation.

Thus, environmental improvement in India is not merely a story of state regulation or international compliance, but a political history of evolving democratic consciousness. The Indian experience shows that environmental transformation, to be sustainable, must be both ecologically sound and politically just. The future of India's environmental politics depends on the extent to which democracy can internalise ecological limits without compromising its commitment to equity and freedom.

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