



# Social Dimensions of Environmental Issues

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## Abstract

Environmental and social structures are closely interconnected. They influence one another in a way that social hierarchies, power dynamics, and patterns of inequality give rise to environmental concerns. The social factors of environmental issues go beyond just ecological harm. They raise vital questions about justice, fairness, participation, and accountability. This paper looks at environmental problems via four key questions that highlight their social aspect: Who suffers from environmental damage? Who benefits from exploiting the environment? Who becomes a part of environmental decisions? Who gets access to justice? The study places these questions within the ambit of environmental justice and fairness. It shows that vulnerable communities mostly bear the burden of environmental risks, while the benefits of resource extraction and development typically go to economically and politically powerful groups. It also looks at community-based natural resource management as an alternative that includes local communities in the preservation, management, and sustainable use of natural resources. This approach seeks to shift power balances and promote fairness in decision-making. Moreover, the paper emphasises the significance of education and awareness campaigns in building environmental consciousness and encouraging public participation. By raising awareness of ecological rights, responsibilities, and governance systems, education fosters community involvement and contributes to achieving environmental justice. The paper argues that tackling environmental issues requires a blend of social fairness, inclusive governance, and knowledge sharing. Ultimately, it stresses that we cannot achieve environmental sustainability without addressing social justice. We must consider the social aspects of environmental issues to ensure fair, inclusive, and just environmental governance.

**Keywords:** Environmental justice; Social Dimensions; Vulnerable communities; Participatory Environmental Governance

## Introduction

The environment is the domain in which life exists and interacts across natural, social, and economic dimensions. It supplies the necessary resources for human survival and development. Nevertheless, when natural resources are misused, overexploited, or degraded, it can disrupt ecological balance, negatively impact human health and livelihoods, and threaten long-term sustainability, leading to environmental challenges. Negative changes in the natural environment are often caused by pollution, over-exploitation of natural resources, climate change, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity. Historically, these problems have been studied from scientific and ecological perspectives, primarily focusing on their physical and biological aspects.

However, such an approach, often disregards a critical dimension of environmental harm, the role of social structure. It has been correctly noted that "*Only the technology, law or a mere policy cannot solve the problem of environmental pollution... without the contribution of society all have less effects.*" This remark stresses the crucial part that society plays in tackling environmental problems and points out the defects of solely relying on technical or legal solutions if social realities are overlooked.

Social structures shape how societies function and influence the behaviour of individuals and groups within them. Significantly, social systems and the environment are complexly linked. Environmental consumption, control, and destruction are shaped by social institutions that, on the one hand, determine who can exploit natural resources and who cannot, thereby continuing environmental harm. However, environmental factors have naturally changed social structures by affecting livelihoods, migratory patterns, health outcomes, and social stability.

Power dynamics, gender bias, class hierarchy, economic status, and geographical location greatly impact both the likelihood of facing environmental hazards and the ability to access environmental advantages. Marginalized and vulnerable communities often face disproportionate environmental burdens, whereas those with economic and

political influence usually benefit from development and resource extraction. These imbalanced results demonstrate that environmental issues are not just ecological but are inherently social as well.

The social dimensions of environmental issues, therefore, raise fundamental questions of justice, fairness, accountability, and participation. Who suffers from environmental damage? Who benefits from the exploitation of natural resources? Who takes part in environmental decision-making? And who ultimately gets access to justice and remedies?

This research paper intends to explore environmental challenges from the angle of social aspects and environmental justice. The goal of this study is to investigate how social frameworks influence environmental results and to clarify the allocation of environmental damage, pros-cons, decision-making authority, and access to legal recourse. By emphasising inequality, participation, and governance issues, the research aims to illustrate that achieving environmental sustainability requires addressing social justice. Embracing and incorporating the social aspects of environmental challenges is crucial for promoting fair, inclusive, and efficient environmental governance.

## Methods

This study adopts a qualitative, doctrinal, and socio-legal methodology to examine the linkages between social factors and environmental concerns, focusing particularly on issues of inequality, governance, and environmental justice. This study is descriptive and analytical, relying entirely on secondary sources of data, including judicial decisions from the Supreme Court, High Courts, and the National Green Tribunal, as well as environmental legislation and policies, government notifications, scholarly literature, peer-reviewed articles, and institutional reports.

The data obtained was analysed using qualitative content analysis, employing a doctrinal analysis of legal texts and a critical literature review to distil key themes and trends. To reduce the risk of research bias, multiple authentic sources were checked against each other, and a variety of viewpoints were taken into consideration. These approaches were adopted because environmental problems are not strictly technical or legal but rather highly social and institutional in nature, and therefore a doctrinal and socio-legal approach is most appropriate for examining how laws function in practice and how social inequalities impact environmental degradation and justice.

## Results

### Social Dimensions Interlinked with Environmental Issues

Real development cannot be measured only by the construction of high-rise buildings, the expansion of businesses, or economic statistics. Real development lies in achieving economic growth while maintaining the integrity of the environment. This paper primarily focuses on the social factors that either create or aggravate environmental degradation, rather than treating environmental damage as a purely technical or legal issue.

Environmental issues are deeply interconnected with social structures such as class, economic disparities, population, and education. In India, sharp class and economic inequalities have produced two contrasting realities: Real development cannot be measured merely by the construction of towering buildings, expansion of businesses, or rising economic figures. True development lies in achieving economic growth while safeguarding environmental health. Social dimensions and environmental issues are deeply interconnected. This paper primarily focuses on the social factors that either create or aggravate environmental degradation, rather than treating environmental harm as a purely technical or legal issue.

Environmental issues are deeply interlinked with social structures such as class, economic inequality, population growth, and access to education. In India, class and economic inequalities have produced two contrasting realities: one marked by wealth accumulation and the other by the inability to access necessities such as food, water, housing, and healthcare. These inequalities directly influence environmental outcomes.

Class, economic status, and patterns of employment shape both the nature and extent of environmental impact. The divide between urban and rural areas, formal and informal work, and high-income and low-income groups results in unequal exposure to pollution and environmental hazards. Marginalized communities are more likely to live near industrial zones, landfills, and polluted water bodies, while affluent groups disproportionately benefit from resource exploitation. Rapid population growth and unplanned urbanization further escalate air and water pollution via vehicular emissions, fossil fuel consumption, industrial activities, and inappropriate waste management. Limited access to education and environmental awareness worsens unsustainable practices.

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### **Distribution of Environmental Harm and Benefits**

***Who suffers from environmental damage?*** - It is mainly experienced by marginalised and vulnerable communities, such as low-income individuals, indigenous populations, women, children, the elderly, and those with disabilities. These groups often inhabit ecologically sensitive regions, depend directly on natural resources for their livelihoods, and lack both the economic means and political influence to prevent or lessen environmental damage. These communities face higher exposure to pollution, resource scarcity, climate-related disasters, and displacement due to factors such as poverty, social exclusion, and inadequate access to healthcare, information, and legal assistance. In contrast, more privileged groups are in a stronger position to protect

***Who benefits from environmental exploitation?*** - The advantages of environmental exploitation are mainly enjoyed by economically and politically influential groups, such as corporations, industrial entities, real estate developers, and industries that consume significant resources. These benefits are obtained from activities such as mining, deforestation, major infrastructure projects, and intensive industrial production, although the related environmental and social repercussions are shifted onto marginalised communities. Government policies and development frameworks often prioritise economic growth and investment over environmental safeguards, allowing powerful players to exploit natural resources at minimal cost. The communities that rely on these resources for their livelihoods often receive insufficient compensation and are excluded from the decision-making processes.

### **Participation and Access**

***Who takes part in environmental decision-making?*** - Government and public authorities, such as federal and national agencies, including India's Ministry of Environment, state and local authorities, and the judiciary, actively participate in environmental decision-making. Despite their involvement, many environmental issues remain unaddressed. Environmental decision-making is also influenced by corporate project proponents, industry associations, scientific experts, and advisory committees. However, the dominance of these actors often results in limited attention to the lived realities of affected populations.

To fill this gap, it is necessary to involve the perturbed public, especially indigenous communities and affected groups, in the process. This can be done through their participation, especially in informal and deliberative democratic methods. While such participatory processes may not directly decide final policy outcomes, they would significantly enhance public awareness, construct informed perspectives, and strengthen community trust before formal participation. Most importantly, these approaches provide aid in identifying the root causes of environmental problems as experienced at the ground level. Effective environmental governance, therefore, requires sustained collaboration between public authorities and civil society to make sure that decisions are indeed inclusive, informed, and responsive to social and ecological realities.

***Who gets access to environmental justice?*** - The accessibility of environmental justice is frequently unequal and restricted. Legally, all individuals possess the right to seek remedies via provisions such as Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, the National Green Tribunal Act, and Public Interest Litigations (PILs). In reality, however, those with financial resources, educational backgrounds, and legal knowledge, including corporations and affluent groups, are better equipped to navigate the legal and administrative systems to safeguard their interests. On the other hand, marginalised and vulnerable groups face challenges encompassing a lack of awareness, restricted access to legal support, social marginalisation, and the high costs associated with litigation.

## **Discussion**

### **Impact on Marginalised Communities**

Environmental degradation has a greater impact on marginalised communities and plays a major role in public health inequalities and social injustice. Tackling these effects is crucial for promoting environmental justice and guaranteeing fair access to natural resources. Vulnerable groups, particularly indigenous and rural populations, elderly persons, children, women, and persons with disabilities, experience increased exposure to environmental hazards because of their socio-economic disadvantage and their direct reliance on natural ecosystems.

Due to their reliance on forests, land, and water resources for their livelihoods, rural and indigenous communities suffer immediate and severe effects from environmental deterioration. Deforestation, industrial pollution, and resource exploitation disrupt traditional occupations, reduce food security, and erode cultural ties to the

environment. The Chipko Movement highlights how environmental damage immediately jeopardises the social and economic well-being of communities that depend on forests.

The consequences of environmental degradation are particularly profound for certain vulnerable groups. Older adults experience increased health risks because of reduced physical resilience and compromised immune systems. Increased temperatures and climate-related changes have led to the spread of vector-borne diseases, putting senior citizens at a higher risk of illness and death. Children are exceptionally vulnerable to environmental damage because of their physical and developmental sensitivity. Exposure to contaminated air and water, food scarcity, and climate-related disruptions can result in malnutrition, infections, hindered development, and interruptions in their education.

Women face compounded vulnerabilities arising from ongoing social and economic inequalities. Their reliance on natural resources for household and livelihood requirements heightens their exposure to environmental hazards. Expectant mothers are especially at risk from the health impacts of air pollution, which can negatively influence both maternal and child health. Despite the crucial role portrayed by women in the management of natural resources, their participation in environmental decision-making is still low, and they are often left out of the benefits that come with environmental governance. Displacement caused by environmental degradation also exposes women to economic instability, violence, and exploitation.

*"Lack of resources, limited access to information, social and cultural norms, and limited political representation are significant barriers to environmental sustainability among weaker sections."* These obstacles have restricted access to healthcare, information, and justice, preventing affected communities from responding effectively to environmental challenges. Overall, environmental degradation does not affect all sections of society equally. Failing to address these impacts strengthens cycles of poverty, exclusion, and vulnerability.

### **Environmental Governance and Public Participation**

Environmental governance involves the ways by which institutions, regulations, and societal stakeholders manage the relationship between humans and the environment. Kotzé defines environmental governance as *"a management process executed by institutions and individuals in the public and private sector to holistically regulate human activities and the effects of human activities on the total environment, including all environmental media and biological, chemical, aesthetic and socioeconomic processes and conditions at international, regional, national and local levels by means of formal and informal institutions, processes and mechanisms embedded in and mandated by law, so as to promote the present and future interests human beings hold in the environment."* This definition highlights that environmental governance is not limited to state action alone but involves multiple stakeholders across various levels of decision-making.

Public Participation is a crucial element of successful environmental governance. Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration states that environmental challenges are best handled through the engagement of all relevant citizens. It highlights the necessity for individuals to have access to environmental information held by governmental authorities, including details regarding hazardous substances and activities in their neighbourhoods, as well as chances to engage in decision-making processes. The principle also signifies that governments should promote public awareness and participation by ensuring information is widely accessible and by providing effective legal and administrative avenues for redress and remedies. This underscores the notion that environmental governance should be driven by the people, acknowledging that citizens, with their goals and collective resolve, represent the most vital resource for environmental conservation.

Effective environmental governance is essential as it promotes transparency, accountability, and responsiveness in the decision-making process related to environmental issues. Important governance indicators such as effectiveness, efficiency, coordination, integration, adherence to the rule of law, neutrality, and public engagement are vital in determining the outcomes of environmental policies. Research suggests that governance indicators, especially transparency, accountability, and public participation, have a major impact on the environmental policy processes in urban areas of India. Furthermore, environmental justice necessitates recognising that communities experience environmental degradation and disasters unevenly, making it essential to adopt inclusive governance practices to safeguard vulnerable groups.

Local communities play an important role in providing effective environmental governance. Despite the crucial role played by women in the management of natural resources, their participation in environmental decision-making is still low, and they are often left out of the benefits that come with environmental governance. Displacement caused by environmental degradation also exposes women to economic instability, violence, and exploitation.

Despite its significance, environmental governance often experiences considerable deficiencies. Top-down environmental regulations frequently neglect the requirements and perspectives of underprivileged and minority

communities, leading to environmental injustice and ineffective policies. Such strategies usually prioritize economic or developmental goals over social equity and environmental sustainability. As highlighted by Banerjee, “*Policy approaches need to be less rigid and context-dependent in order to be successful.*” Inflexible, uniform policies do not take into account local socio-cultural and economic conditions, thereby restricting their efficacy in practice.

Another significant obstacle is the ineffective enforcement and the ongoing disparity between legislation and actual conditions. While environmental regulations and policies are in place, their shortcomings in execution, lack of institutional strength, and limited accountability diminish their effectiveness. This disconnect allows environmentally damaging activities to proceed without oversight, while impacted communities find it tricky to seek remedies and justice. In summary, effective environmental governance is crucial for addressing environmental issues in a just and sustainable way. Nevertheless, without substantial public involvement, local empowerment, and efficient enforcement, governance structures fall short. Closing the divide between legal frameworks and practical applications through inclusive, transparent, and context-aware governance is necessary in achieving environmental justice and lasting environmental sustainability.

### Legal and Policy Perspectives

India was among the first nations to provide constitutional recognition to environmental protection, imposing obligations on both the State and citizens. The Constitution of India has established a strong legal foundation through Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g), reflecting a rights-based and welfare-oriented approach to environmental governance.

Article 21 has been widely interpreted by the judiciary to include the right to a clean, healthy, and pollution-free environment, recognising that environmental quality is native to life, dignity, and health. Article 48A, as a Directive Principle of State Policy, mandates the State to protect and improve the environment, while Article 51A(g) imposes a corresponding duty on citizens. Though Directive Principles are non-justiciable, courts have now harmonised them with fundamental rights to ensure effective environmental protection.

The judiciary has been playing a pivotal role in strengthening environmental rights. In *L.K. Koolwal v. State of Rajasthan*<sup>1</sup> The court held that public health, sanitation, and environmental protection fall within the ambit of Article 21. In *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar*<sup>2</sup>, The Supreme Court affirmed that citizens may seek constitutional remedies where environmental pollution adversely affects the quality of life. Further, in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India*<sup>3</sup>, the Court recognized the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle as integral to Indian environmental law, aligning domestic jurisprudence with international environmental standards.

Indian courts have frequently relied on international environmental principles and multilateral agreements where domestic law is silent, influencing legislative developments such as reforms in forest governance and the enactment of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002. The constitutional vision of a socialist welfare state, as reflected in the Preamble, further reinforces that social welfare is unattainable without a clean and safe environment.

Access to environmental justice is facilitated through writ jurisdiction under Articles 32 and 226, the evolution of Public Interest Litigation, and the establishment of the National Green Tribunal, which provides specialised and speedy adjudication of environmental disputes. Through judicial activism, courts have sought to balance developmental needs with ecological protection by applying principles of sustainable development and intergenerational equity.

In recent years, the Indian judiciary has increasingly adopted a broad and purposive approach to statutory interpretation, moving beyond the traditional literal or strict rule that confines meaning to the plain words of a statute. This evolving approach is evident in the recent judgment of *Dr. Jaya Thakur v. Government of India & Ors.*<sup>4</sup> (January 30, 2026), where the Court recognised access to menstrual hygiene as a fundamental right, holding that its denial violates the right to dignity and the right to education. Despite increased recognition of menstrual hygiene rights, India lacks a clear and uniform framework for the classification, disposal, and management of single-use menstrual products. This regulatory gap has serious environmental consequences. India generates approximately 113,000–121,000 tonnes of sanitary waste annually, largely due to the consumption of nearly 12.3 billion disposable, plastic-based sanitary napkins. Daily, around 925 tonnes of sanitary waste, including sanitary napkins and diapers, is produced. These products take 500–800 years to decompose, contributing to microplastic pollution and destructive leachate.

<sup>1</sup> L.K. Koolwal v. State of Rajasthan 1987 (1) WLN 134

<sup>2</sup> Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar AIR 1991 SC 420

<sup>3</sup> Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996) 5 SCC 647

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Jaya Thakur v. Government of India & Ors. 2026 INSC 97

Improper disposal practices usually lead to sanitary waste entering open drains, landfills, and informal waste streams, exposing waste pickers and sanitation workers to infections and health risks. This situation has determined the intersection of gender, environmental governance, public health, and waste management, and emphasises the need for integrated legal and policy responses that address both rights-based access and environmental sustainability.

### Challenges and Gaps

A significant obstacle in dealing with environmental issues is determining who is responsible for environmental damage, as accountability is frequently spread across various parties, including industrial sectors and governmental bodies. The responsibility to prove harm often lies with impacted communities, who typically lack the resources, expertise, and legal means to demonstrate environmental damage. Furthermore, development is often given precedence over environmental rights and social equity, resulting in decisions that unfairly impact marginalised groups. The true challenge for any administration is to find a balanced approach where economic growth and environmental conservation progress simultaneously, rather than one being pursued at the expense of the other.

### Role of Education and Awareness

Education and awareness play a vital role in promoting environmental protection and sustainability. We need to shift our viewpoints. Even if it doesn't immediately affect our lives, it still matters. It's essential to begin taking action. There's no point in merely existing if this lovely environment ceases to exist. However, there is a significant disparity between literacy levels and environmental awareness. Many educated individuals display indifference toward their environmental rights and responsibilities, frequently overlooking the impact of their actions. In contrast, less educated populations often lack understanding of their rights, duties, and the long-term effects of environmental degradation. This gap informs and affects effective public participation in environmental policy-making, weakening collaborative efforts for sustainable governance.

Comprehensive environmental education, particularly initiating in schools plays a pivotal role in addressing degradation. Early interaction with environmental concepts helps cultivate eco-friendly habits in children, which in turn affects their behavior in adulthood. This knowledge can motivate them to encourage their families and communities to adopt sustainable practices, leading to wider societal changes. By weaving environmental issues into the curriculum, young learners gain the knowledge and tools necessary to make informed choices regarding their impact on the planet. Through hands-on initiatives, activities, and discussions, students become champions for environmental conservation, contributing to a generation dedicated to protecting our planet and reducing environmental degradation.

### Recommendations

Environmental problems are not recent developments; they are enduring issues that have been recognized and thoroughly debated for some time. Nevertheless, even with the awareness and suggested remedies, these issues remain unresolved. Addressing environmental challenges cannot rely solely on legal measures or technological advancements; they necessitate ongoing public involvement, inclusive governance, and successful execution at the community level.

**i) Community-Based and Inclusive Governance:** "Social integration and local knowledge are critical to adaptation success." Decisions regarding the environment should engage local communities actively, particularly those who are marginalized or belong to disadvantaged groups. Including a variety of perspectives fosters equitable decision-making, enhances trust, and results in solutions that align with local needs and circumstances. Involving communities enhances both environmental conservation and social equity.

**ii) Addressing Social and Economic Inequalities:** Individuals facing poverty, gender bias, and social marginalization often encounter greater environmental risks. Policies need to acknowledge these disparities and directly address them to decrease vulnerability. If social and economic inequalities are not confronted, efforts for environmental protection will be both incomplete and inequitable.

**iii) Effective Policy Implementation and Enforcement:** Strong laws mean little without effective enforcement. Environmental regulations, such as the Solid Waste Management Rules of 2026, require strict implementation on the ground. Ongoing monitoring, community awareness, and accountability within institutions are crucial to close the gap between the intentions of policy and actual practice.

**iv) Social Impact Assessments:** Social Impact Assessments should be carried out alongside environmental assessments to pinpoint those most affected by environmental damage or development initiatives. This helps policymakers understand community-level impacts and design targeted, evidence-based interventions.

**v) Capacity Building of Local Institutions:** Local institutions like Gram Panchayats and urban local authorities should be enhanced through training, financial support, and technical assistance. Strengthened local entities can facilitate improved execution of environmental policies and encourage grassroots community involvement.

vi) **Accountability of Private Corporations:** Industries and corporations should be held accountable for the environmental harm they inflict. Independent evaluations, clear reporting, community oversight, and stringent penalties for non-compliance are essential to avert environmental damage and safeguard at-risk communities.

vii) **Shift the burden of Proof away from affected communities:** Environmental harm should be presumed once credible risk is shown, especially in cases involving marginalised groups. Industries and project proponents must be required to prove environmental safety, not the other way around. This aligns with the precautionary principle.

### Conclusion

Environmental issues are inherently social, disproportionately burdening marginalised communities while benefiting powerful elites, demanding inclusive governance and justice. True sustainability requires addressing inequalities through participatory decision-making, community-based management, and robust enforcement of laws like those under Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g). Education and awareness are vital to empower citizens, bridge literacy gaps, and foster eco-conscious habits from childhood. Ultimately, humans are both the creators and the potential reason for destruction. Think and choose your steps wisely: Do you want to be part of the humans who create a better world or be part of those who will eventually destroy everything?

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JJ and SSG conceived the concept, wrote and approved the manuscript.

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