



## India's Climate Diplomacy and Domestic Policy Balance: A Study of Environmental Governance and Political Commitment

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### ABSTRACT

*In the 21st century, environmental challenges have become a critical global concern, transcending national boundaries and acquiring both transnational and international dimensions. Despite their global impact, there is no single, centralized authority to oversee or regulate environmental issues at the international level. Instead, environmental governance is managed through a decentralized and intricate web of international treaties, multilateral institutions, non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations. Within this complex framework, India occupies a distinctive position in global climate politics. As a developing nation with historically low and per capita greenhouse gas emissions, India simultaneously represents a rapidly growing economy with rising environmental pressures. Like many other countries, India must operate within a fragmented global governance system shaped by overlapping international agreements and shifting power dynamics. This paper explores environmental politics from an Indian perspective, highlighting the unique challenges and strategic opportunities the country faces in engaging with global environmental governance. It further examines how India balances its domestic policy priorities with international environmental commitments, focusing on the dynamic interaction between internal governance mechanisms and external diplomatic engagements.*

**Keywords:** India, Environment, Politics, Treaties, Global, Climate, Organizations, etc.

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### INTRODUCTION

Environmental governance in India refers to the policies, institutions and processes through which the country's natural resources and ecosystems are managed and protected. Over the past few decades, environmental concerns have moved from the periphery to the center of political debates, driven by rapid industrialization, urbanization, deforestation, pollution and climate change. As India strives for economic development, environmental sustainability has emerged as both a challenge and a necessity, giving rise to complex governance mechanisms and vibrant political discourse.

India's environmental governance is characterized by a multi-layered system involving the central and state governments, judiciary (notably the Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal), civil society, media and international bodies. Landmark legislations such as the Environment Protection Act (1986), Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act (1981) and Forest Rights Act (2006) have shaped the legal framework. Political discourse around the environment has also expanded significantly, with political parties including environmental promises in their manifestos and public debates increasingly focusing on issues like clean air, water scarcity, climate justice and renewable energy.

Until the late 1950s, environmental concerns received minimal attention and occupied a marginal position in political discourse. Societies largely assumed that natural resources were abundant and self-renewing, leading to their unchecked exploitation without regard for long-term consequences. However, in the aftermath of World War II, a range of critical global challenges—such as hunger, rapid population growth, loss of biodiversity and depletion of the ozone layer—

began to surface with increasing urgency. These emerging issues demanded a coordinated response from international institutions originally established to promote peace and cooperation. Scholars have since argued that growing awareness of environmental degradation is closely tied to the concept of “ecological scarcity” and its potential to fuel violent conflict. A notable historical instance is the German invasion of Norway and Sweden during World War II, driven in part by the need to secure access to iron ore and other vital resources. This event underscored the strategic value of natural resources and marked an important turning point in recognizing the role of environmental factors in shaping global politics and conflict dynamics.

Environmental degradation has emerged as a critical driver of global challenges. While nations have clearly defined borders and resource allocations, the environment-comprising the atmosphere, oceans and shared ecosystems-remains a collective global domain without formal boundaries. This shared ecological space is unequally impacted, as developed nations, representing merely 27% of the global population, control nearly 75% of the world’s wealth and resources. Such stark disparities have intensified environmental stress, particularly in vulnerable regions. Meeting the legitimate developmental needs of all people without exhausting natural resources calls for an unprecedented level of international collaboration. Moreover, the persistent tension between economic growth and environmental sustainability underscores the divide between the priorities of developed and developing nations. This conflict influences global policy debates, raising complex questions about responsibility, equity and environmental justice-issues that lie at the heart of environmental politics. The emergence of this field reflects diverse interpretations by scholars, yet there is broad consensus that environmental politics involves the interaction of multiple actors-including nation-states, international organizations and non-governmental organizations-in shaping policies and making decisions aimed at environmental protection. Thus, environmental governance in India is no longer a technical or bureaucratic issue alone-it has become a dynamic field of political engagement, citizen activism and policy reform in the pursuit of sustainable and equitable development.

## THE GLOBAL BACKGROUND

Environmental challenges are inherently complex and deeply interconnected, with actions in one region often having far-reaching consequences across the globe. For example, industrial activities in the Pacific can lead to water pollution that disrupts ecosystems and communities in other parts of Asia. As awareness of the global nature of these issues has grown, it has sparked the rise of environmental movements; the formation of numerous NGOs dedicated to ecological protection and the emergence of green political parties. Simultaneously, there has been a surge in publications on environmental topics, further elevating public consciousness and prompting political engagement. A pivotal moment in global environmental governance came with the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm. This historic gathering of representatives from 113 countries led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and produced an action plan featuring 109 recommendations aimed at sustainable development and conservation.

The Stockholm Conference firmly established environmental concerns on the global agenda, laying the groundwork for future international agreements. A major breakthrough occurred with the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which targeted the elimination of substances that deplete the ozone layer and remains the only UN treaty universally ratified by all 197 member states. Another significant milestone was the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which reinforced the principle of sustainable development and underscored the need to balance environmental protection with economic advancement. In 1997, the Kyoto Protocol marked further progress by setting legally binding targets for greenhouse gas emissions among participating nations-an essential step in the global response to climate change. Nevertheless, achieving international consensus has often proven difficult. Conferences such as the 2002 Johannesburg Summit, the 2007 Bali Conference and the 2009 Copenhagen Summit revealed persistent tensions between developed and developing nations, hindering substantial progress. The 2015 Paris Climate Summit emerged as a critical turning point, where countries pledged to limit global temperature rise to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with efforts to restrict the increase to 1.5°C. The summit also introduced nationally determined contributions (NDCs), granting countries the flexibility to set

their own emission reduction goals. These initiatives reflect a growing acknowledgment of the need for global cooperation in tackling environmental problems. Consequently, most nations have now formally endorsed the principles of sustainable development, making environmental issues a central element of international diplomacy. Environmental advocacy has become a vital force in both national and global political arenas, with green parties gaining influence-especially in Europe-and mainstream political groups increasingly adopting eco-conscious agendas.

Despite these advancements, the state of the global environment continues to deteriorate. Many countries face difficulty in reconciling environmental objectives with their national economic priorities, limiting the effectiveness of international agreements. In particular, developing nations often prioritize rapid industrialization and economic growth, which leads to higher resource consumption, urban expansion and pollution. This pursuit of accelerated development has significantly intensified environmental degradation. Balancing economic growth with environmental responsibility continues to be one of the most pressing obstacles to achieving global sustainability. Although nations recognize the urgency of tackling climate change and other environmental challenges, their efforts are frequently limited by immediate economic interests and national agendas. Addressing this conflict will demand stronger international cooperation, innovative solutions and a steadfast commitment from all countries to ensure that future development adheres to sustainable principles.

### THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

One of the most enduring challenges in global environmental politics is the divide between the developed North and the developing South. This disparity reflects not only differences in economic development but also contrasting historical responsibilities and environmental priorities. The industrialized North-including nations such as the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand and developed parts of Asia-has historically been the primary contributor to environmental degradation through centuries of industrial activity and high greenhouse gas emissions. In contrast, the Global South-which encompasses Africa, Latin America and developing regions of Asia and the Middle East-has contributed relatively little to the problem but now faces the dual pressures of environmental sustainability and economic development.

Developing countries argue that, having reaped the benefits of industrialization while causing much of the environmental harm, the North should bear a greater share of the responsibility for mitigating climate change. They call for equitable treatment and greater flexibility in resource use, emphasizing their low per capita emissions and right to development. However, the North often rejects this approach, contending that the economic and structural differences between nations make uniform expectations unfeasible. This persistent tension between development needs in the South and environmental obligations imposed by the North continues to hinder effective international cooperation. Scholars note that this divide extends beyond a simple rich-poor dichotomy; it represents fundamentally different perspectives on environmental governance. While the North prioritizes sustainability, the South emphasizes development. This divergence has led to a growing blame game-developed nations downplay their historical responsibility while urging conservation efforts in the South, which in turn prioritizes economic growth over environmental commitments. As a result, despite widespread use of the term “sustainable development,” there remains little consensus on its meaning or implementation.

Today, both developed and developing nations contribute to environmental degradation, albeit in different ways. While the North continues its high levels of consumption and emissions, many developing countries are following similar paths of industrialization, further exacerbating ecological stress. Overcoming this divide requires climate policies that are fair, inclusive and proportionate to each country's historical and current contributions. Ending the cycle of mutual blame is essential. A global consensus must emerge-one that defines sustainability and development in universally acceptable terms and encourages cooperative efforts rather than competition. While the North must accept its historical responsibility and provide greater support to the South in addressing climate change, the South must also acknowledge its role in the current environmental crisis and commit to limiting future emissions. Only through shared responsibility,

mutual support and meaningful collaboration can the global community hope to build a more sustainable and equitable future.

### **INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS – WATCHDOGS OR FALSE ASPIRATIONS**

In the past, countries tried to solve environmental problems by signing agreements with one another, especially when those problems crossed borders. But over time, it became clear that this approach was not enough. Many environmental issues like climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss are global in nature and need cooperation between many countries. As a result, there has been a rise in international efforts to deal with these problems. Countries have created many global organizations and signed hundreds of environmental agreements, recognizing that no single nation can solve these challenges alone. To support these efforts, billions of dollars in "green aid" have been spent on environmental projects across borders. New international networks and systems have also been set up. However, many people now believe that these organizations are not doing enough. Critics argue that some international meetings and conferences, especially those under the United Nations, have become more about speeches and media coverage than real solutions. This growing disappointment shows that stronger and more effective global cooperation is urgently needed.

Studies of organizations like the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the 2009 Copenhagen Climate Agreement suggest that many of these institutions lack strong policies and are often set up in ways that limit their success. Some international organizations not only fail to help but may also harm the environment. For example, the World Bank, a major global development group, has funded large projects that damaged ecosystems, such as those leading to deforestation and pollution. One major project, the Sardar Sarovar Dam in India, heavily funded by the World Bank, was strongly opposed by environmentalists and called the "world biggest planned environmental disaster." Still, not all efforts have failed. Some international bodies, especially under the United Nations, have made real progress. The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) has worked with governments and NGOs to address issues like loss of wildlife, ozone depletion, desertification, waste management and protecting endangered species. But UNEP faces serious challenges: it does not have the power to enforce its decisions and struggles with a limited budget, as countries do not always provide enough funding.

A major step forward came with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, which led to important agreements such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This agreement created a long-term plan for countries to work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Each year, countries meet at the "Conference of the Parties" (COP) to check progress and discuss new strategies. However, while the goals are often ambitious, the results are mixed. Many countries struggle to cooperate or follow through and real progress is slow. To truly deal with today's environmental problems, countries need to work more closely, take responsibility and turn promises into action. Only then can international organizations move from good intentions to real impact.

### **INDIA'S STAND FOR ITS CITIZENS – DEVELOPMENT VS ENVIRONMENT**

India has always respected nature, with environmental values deeply rooted in its culture and traditions—even before independence. After independence, most discussions about progress focused on two goals: fairness (equity) and economic growth. But in recent years, environmental protection has become an important third concern. Now, India faces a big challenge: how to grow its economy while also protecting the environment. Supporters of development believe that economic growth is necessary to reduce poverty and improve people's lives, even if it harms the environment in the short term. On the other hand, environmentalists argue that nature must be protected for the sake of future generations. They believe that development should not come at the cost of clean air, water, forests and wildlife.

Famous Indian environmental activists like Baba Amte, Medha Patkar and Sunderlal Bahuguna, along with many organizations and local groups, have led important movements. Millions of people across India have supported these causes by joining protests, signing petitions and spreading awareness. One of the most well-known movements was the Chipko Movement, where villagers protected trees from being cut down, showing how important forests and natural



resources are-especially during a time of fast industrial growth. Other campaigns have promoted energy-saving devices, eco-friendly products and raised concerns about rising sea levels in coastal areas. Some critics say that focusing too much on the environment is a way for powerful countries to slow down India's growth. But it's important to remember that true development means more than just building roads or factories. It includes giving people the freedom to choose, live well and enjoy a healthy environment.

India needs to grow, but it must also take care of its environment. A balanced approach is necessary-one that allows both progress and protection. After the Stockholm Conference in 1972, India began building laws and systems to protect the environment. A major step was taken in 1976, when protecting the environment was added to the Indian Constitution. This gave both the central and state governments the responsibility to act. New laws were passed, like the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 and existing laws on air and water pollution were improved. But even with these laws, many problems remain. Pollution levels are rising, forests are shrinking and wildlife is at risk. Part of the problem is that economic development is often given more importance than environmental health. Also, many government pollution control boards do not have enough staff, money, or training to do their job properly.

These problems are also seen in reports and studies. In 2007, Greenpeace India pointed out that the country's richest people were causing more pollution, while the poor continued to suffer without seeing the benefits of industrial growth. This creates a gap within India, similar to the global divide between rich and poor nations. Some wealthy people use more resources, while many others struggle just to meet basic needs. This shows why India needs a fair and balanced strategy. It should focus on growing the economy in a way that also protects the environment and helps everyone-rich or poor. Only by working toward both goals can India ensure a better, cleaner and more equal future for all its citizens.

#### **INDIA AND GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS**

In the beginning, India was cautious about joining global environmental efforts and hesitant to sign International agreements. However, over the last decade, India has become more active and committed to playing a leading role in addressing climate change. The country has moved from being a silent observer to an important voice in global climate discussions. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, India joined the G77 plus China group and strongly represented the interests of developing nations. It continued this approach during the Kyoto Protocol negotiations, where it refused to accept emission reduction commitments, arguing that economic development and poverty reduction were its main priorities. This led to the creation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), where developed countries had to reduce emissions, while developing nations like India were not bound by such strict rules. Over time, India developed strong climate policies at home and actively supported international climate agreements. It introduced several laws to cut carbon emissions, promote clean energy and increase forest cover. India also played a key role in shaping the 2016 Paris Agreement, committing to reduce emission intensity, use more non-fossil fuel energy and create additional forest-based carbon sinks by 2030. According to a 2018 UN report, India is on track to meet these goals ahead of schedule. This progress shows India's serious commitment to sustainable development and its growing influence in global environmental politics.

#### **THE CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS**

Global environmental problems are too big for any one country to solve alone. Countries need to work together to protect the planet. But often, they don't trust each other, which makes cooperation hard. Even though there are many international agreements, they only work if countries choose to follow them-there is no global system to force them to obey. Rich and poor countries often see environmental issues differently. This causes arguments about how serious the problems are and what actions should be taken. Also, local politics and events in each country can affect what their leaders decide at international meetings. To make progress, countries need to build trust, talk openly and work as a team. We also need a clear meaning of what environmental politics is. People everywhere should learn more about environmental issues, including how animals and wildlife are affected. Technology can cause harm, but it can also help if

we use it in smart ways. Developed countries have more money and better technology, so they should lead the way. But developing countries are also important in this fight. Change must happen both through global plans and local action. Treaties should be strong and fair and countries that break the rules should face consequences. By working together-at all levels-we can protect the environment and build a better future for everyone.

## CONCLUSION

As our relationship with nature changes, we are facing many serious environmental problems. These problems affect the whole world and they are becoming more urgent every day. Protecting the environment is not just the responsibility of one country-it is a global concern that needs all nations to work together. No country can solve these issues alone. Global environmental politics have always been influenced by world events and political interests. As problems like climate change grow, environmental politics will become even more important. Developed countries have the money and technology to lead the way, but developing countries also have an important role. They bring different ideas and experiences that are just as valuable.

To protect the planet, we need both international cooperation and local action. People need to be aware and countries need to be held accountable. Environmental agreements should be clear and legally binding so that all countries follow them. Working together is the only way we can create a better, safer future for everyone. India, as a developing country with growing power, can help bring together the voices of poorer nations and work with richer countries to find fair solutions. India can be a strong bridge between the Global South and the Global North in global environmental politics.

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