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A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS ON CORPORATE RESPONSIBILITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH IN INDIA

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Abstract

In India, environmental laws are essential for controlling corporate social responsibility and protecting the general public's health. This essay analyzes the efficacy of important laws in reducing industrial pollution, such as the Air and Water Pollution Acts and the Environment Protection Act of 1986. Even with a robust legal system, issues like lax enforcement, corporate non-compliance, and regulatory gaps continue to exist. Case studies demonstrate how environmental deterioration affects public health, as evidenced by the rise in respiratory and waterborne illnesses. In order to guarantee sustainable development and the welfare of the general public, the study highlights the necessity of stronger enforcement, increased corporate accountability, and technological advancements.

Key Words: Environmental Laws, Corporate Responsibility, Public Health, Pollution Control, Sustainable Development, Regulatory Framework, National Green Tribunal, Industrial Pollution, Environmental Governance, Climate Change Policy.

Introduction

"The environment is where we all meet; where we all have a mutual interest; it is the one thing all of us share." – Lady Bird Johnson

The global priority now lies in the preservation of the environment, with numerous nations implementing legal structures to foster sustainable development. As one of the rapidly expanding economies, India encounters substantial environmental issues, such as industrial pollution, deforestation, and contamination of air and water resources. The environmental legislations of India strive for a harmonious coexistence of economic expansion and ecological sustainability, primarily focusing on corporate responsibility and public health.

The regulatory framework in India includes key legislations such as the Environment Protection Act of 1986, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1974, and the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981. These laws establish legal obligations for corporations to mitigate environmental damage and promote sustainable practices. However, despite stringent regulations, corporate non-compliance remains a major concern, often resulting in environmental degradation and adverse public health effects.

Environmental quality is closely related to public health. Marginalized communities have been disproportionately affected by the rise in respiratory disorders, waterborne infections, and other health risks brought on by industrial pollution. Enforcing environmental laws is essential to reducing these risks, but difficulties



still exist because of poor execution, a lack of corporate transparency, and regulatory gaps.

This research paper examines the impact of environmental legislation on corporate responsibility and public health in India. It reviews the effectiveness of the existing legal framework, identifies shortcomings in enforcement and discusses the role of regulatory agencies such as the National Court for the Environment (NGT). In addition, it highlights case studies of corporate environmental violations and their impact on public health. By examining these aspects, the document aims to provide insights on how to improve legal mechanisms to ensure stronger corporate responsibility and better environmental performance.

Meaning of Environmental Laws

Environmental laws are a collection of rules and laws that control how human activity interacts with the environment. These regulations are intended to protect the environment, stop pollution, and preserve natural resources. They set up laws that require companies, industries, and people to conduct their operations in a way that reduces environmental damage.

Importance of Environmental Laws

Environmental regulations are essential for safeguarding natural resources, controlling industrial operations, and advancing public health. These regulations support ecological balance by guaranteeing the sustainable use of species, forests, water, and air. Additionally, in order to prevent excessive pollution and resource depletion, they set emission and waste management standards for industries. Environmental laws also protect the public's health by limiting exposure to dangerous pollutants that cause respiratory conditions, waterborne infections, and other health hazards. Since these regulations hold businesses accountable for their environmental effects, corporate accountability is yet another crucial component. Environmental regulations also promote sustainable development, making

sure that environmental deterioration does not occur at the expense of economic expansion.

Need of Environmental Laws

India confronts significant environmental challenges as a result of accelerated industrialization, urbanization, and population expansion. Increasing pollution levels in prominent cities have resulted in perilous air and water quality, directly affecting millions of individuals. Uncontrolled land use and deforestation jeopardize biodiversity and hasten climate change. Furthermore, inadequate industrial waste management practices lead to soil and water pollution, presenting hazards to both human health and wildlife. Considering India's dedication to international environmental accords, it is crucial to implement stringent environmental regulations to meet global sustainability objectives and alleviate the negative consequences of climate change.

Overview of Environmental Laws in India

Historical Development

The basis of India's environmental legal system was established in reaction to increasing industrialization and worldwide environmental consciousness. The initial significant environmental legislation, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1974, was established due to worries about water pollution and its effects on public health. Subsequently, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981 was enacted to tackle increasing air pollution concerns. Nevertheless, the Bhopal Gas Tragedy of 1984 marked a significant turning point, resulting in the establishment of the Environment Protection Act in 1986, a thorough law enabling the government to implement actions for environmental safeguarding.

Environmental Laws

India has several key environmental laws regulating business activities and ensuring environmental sustainability:



The Environment Protection Act 1986 establishes a comprehensive framework for environmental management and control of pollution. It empowers the central government to adopt the necessary measures for environmental protection and improvement.

In order to prevent and control pollution, **the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974** was established. It has established a central and national pollution control board to regulate waste water discharges and maintain water quality.

The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act of 1981 establishes emission standards for automobiles and industries in an effort to lower air pollution. Regulatory agencies are also given the authority to keep an eye on air quality and implement remedial actions.

The National Green Tribunal Act of 2010 established a specialised tribunal to deal effectively with environmental disputes. The NGT has a key role to play in dealing with cases of pollution, deforestation and environmental degradation.

The Hazardous Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1989 regulate the disposal and management of hazardous waste in order to prevent contamination of the environment and to protect human health.

Regulatory Bodies

- The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)
- The State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs)
- The National Green Tribunal (NGT)
- The Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC)

Corporate Responsibility in Environmental Protection

Legal Obligations of Corporations

In order to lessen their negative effects on the environment, corporations in India are required by law to abide by environmental regulations.

The Air Act, Water Act, and Environment Protection Act all impose stringent rules on waste management, pollution prevention, and sustainable resource use. Additionally, some businesses are required to invest in environmental sustainability initiatives as part of corporate social responsibility (CSR) under the Companies Act of 2013.

Corporate Environmental Initiatives

Numerous corporations have voluntarily embraced sustainable practices like waste reduction, carbon footprint minimization, and green manufacturing. Businesses take steps to comply with international environmental standards, such as using renewable energy, afforestation initiatives, and eco-friendly packaging.

Case Laws of corporate environmental violations

- Case of the Sterlite Copper factory: The Tamil Nadu factory was closed because of excessive pollution and a breach of environmental regulations.
- Union Carbide (Bhopal Gas Tragedy): The 1984 incident brought to light the company's disregard for environmental and safety regulations.
- LG Polymers Gas Leak (Visakhapatnam, 2020): Inadequate safety precautions led to a hazardous gas leak that caused several fatalities and serious health effects.
- Coca-Cola Groundwater Exploitation Case: The corporation was accused of over-extraction of groundwater in Kerala, which caused local residents to suffer from acute water shortages.
- Vedanta's Niyamgiri Mining Scandal: Given environmental and indigenous rights issues, the business was not allowed to mine.

Challenges in Corporate Compliance

Despite existing legislation, enforcing corporate responsibility remains difficult. Corporate non-



compliance results from a lack of strong sanctions, corruption and weak regulatory frameworks. Corporate responsibility for environmental protection can be strengthened by strengthening enforcement and providing incentives to sustainable practices.

Environmental Laws and Their Impact on Public Health

Environmental laws are essential for protecting public health because they control pollution, industrial operations, and ecological deterioration. The welfare of communities is directly impacted by the application of these laws, especially those who live in urban and industrial areas. Environmental degradation continues to pose serious public health issues in India, even with a clearly defined legal framework.

Air and Water Pollution: A Major Public Health Concern

In the context of India, the environmental challenges of air and water pollution continue to be pivotal issues that demand attention. To tackle these problems, the Air Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, 1981, and the Water Prevention and Control of Pollution Act, 1974, were enacted with the purpose of regulating emissions and safeguarding water quality. Regrettably, the rising levels of industrial and vehicular pollution have led to serious health implications.

- **Air pollution and respiratory diseases:** The increase in particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) from industrial emissions and car exhaust is leading to increased respiratory diseases such as asthma, COPD and lung cancer. Cities like Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata often exceed safe levels of air quality, causing public health crises.
- **Water pollution and water borne diseases:** industrial discharges, agricultural runoff and inadequate waste management have resulted in water contamination, leading to diseases such as cholera, dysentery and hepatitis. The rivers Ganges and Yamuna,

although subject to several conservation initiatives, continue to suffer from high levels of pollution.

Soil Contamination and Agricultural Impact

The excessive use of chemical fertilizers and the disposal of hazardous waste both contribute to soil pollution, which has a direct impact on food security and agricultural productivity. In crops grown in contaminated soil, toxins bioaccumulate and can cause long-term health problems like cancer and neurological damage when ingested. Although the Hazardous Waste (Management and Handling) Rules, 1989, require that toxic waste be disposed of properly, enforcement of these regulations is still uneven, particularly in rural and industrially dense areas.

Noise Pollution and Psychological Health

Despite being frequently disregarded, noise pollution has a serious negative influence on both physical and mental health. Long-term exposure to loud noises from construction, traffic, and industry includes the following effects.

- Increased levels of stress and anxiety
- Sleep disorders and associated disorders
- Hypertension and Cardiovascular Diseases

Despite the Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000, cities still face high noise levels, particularly in commercial and industrial areas, which have a daily impact on millions of people.

Impact of Climate Change on Public Health

A new worldwide issue that has serious implications for public health is climate change. Extreme weather events, unpredictable monsoons, and rising temperatures increase health risks, especially for vulnerable groups. India has witnessed:

- **Heatwaves and Mortality Rates:** Death rates have increased as a result of heatwaves occurring more frequently,



particularly in northern states like Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

- **Vector-Borne Diseases:** Diseases like dengue, chikungunya, and malaria have spread as a result of temperature and humidity changes. Although health adaptation strategies are included in the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), their implementation is still lacking.

Role of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) in Addressing Environmental Health Issues

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) plays a key role in addressing environmental health issues through its judgments and interventions:

- **Sterlite Copper Plant Case (2018):** The plant was shut down by the NGT because of its high emissions, which were connected to respiratory conditions in the community.
- **Delhi Air Pollution Case:** The NGT has repeatedly instructed the authorities to take strict measures to control air pollution, including restrictions on construction activity and vehicle emissions.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, there are still issues with properly implementing decisions, and more robust systems are needed to guarantee adherence.

Case Studies of Environmental Health Crises

Multiple prominent environmental crises in India emphasize the connection between environmental deterioration and health hazards for the public:

- **Chennai Water Crisis (2019):** Intense drought and poor management of water resources caused a public health crisis, resulting in extensive water shortages impacting millions.
- **Uranium Contamination in Punjab:** High levels of uranium in groundwater have been associated with birth defects and neurological issues in impacted communities.

- **Delhi's Smog Emergency:** Delhi's yearly severe haze, which is brought on by industrial pollution, vehicle emissions, and stubble burning, has led to a public health emergency with a rise in respiratory conditions.

Corporate Accountability and Environmental Violations

Penalties and Legal Actions

Corporations that break environmental regulations face severe penalties. Companies may be subject to fines, operational suspensions, or even incarceration for responsible executives under the 1986 Environment Protection Act. Businesses that release hazardous waste in excess of what is allowed face steep fines and having to take corrective action. Due to bureaucratic inefficiencies and judicial process delays, enforcement of these legal provisions is still difficult.

Role of the National Green Tribunal (NGT)

The NGT is essential in maintaining corporate responsibility. It has issued significant rulings enforcing severe penalties on sectors that inflict environmental damage. The tribunal's assertive approach has resulted in heightened examination of industrial practices, compelling companies to implement improved compliance strategies.

Corporate Strategies for Compliance

Corporations are using cleaner manufacturing techniques, investing in sustainable technology, and strengthening corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives in order to comply with environmental rules. In order to guarantee compliance, many businesses are also putting environmental management systems into place and performing routine audits.

Case Studies of Environmental Violations

Numerous notable cases underscore the repercussions of failing to comply. Events like the Sterlite Copper Plant shutdown, LG Polymer gas leak, and unlawful sand mining illustrate the



urgent necessity for rigorous enforcement and corporate accountability.

The Role of Public Participation and Environmental Activism

Enforcing environmental laws, holding corporations accountable, and guaranteeing sustainable development all depend heavily on public activism and participation. The active participation of civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the judiciary has had a significant impact on environmental protection in India. Numerous legal tools have strengthened corporate responsibility and public health protections by enabling people and communities to take action against environmental violations over time.

Public Interest Litigation (PILs) and Citizen Participation

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has proven to be one of the most successful means of involving the public in environmental protection. The Indian judiciary has acknowledged that the fundamental right to life under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution includes the right to a clean and healthy environment. PILs give activists, NGOs, and concerned citizens the opportunity to ask the court to step in when environmental laws are being broken.

The following notable PILs have influenced environmental jurisprudence:

- **M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (1986) (Ganga Pollution Case)** – This landmark lawsuit resulted in the shutdown of several polluting companies along the Ganges and strengthened corporate accountability for water pollution.
- **Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991)** – The Supreme Court has ruled that the right to a non-polluting environment is an integral part of the right to life enshrined in Article 21.
- **Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996)** – The Court enforced restoration efforts and held companies

accountable for environmental damage by applying the "polluter pays" principle.

These cases demonstrate how important it is for judges to step in and force businesses and government officials to follow environmental regulations.

NGOs and Civil Society Organizations

NGOs have played a significant role in monitoring business practices, supporting communities impacted by pollution and environmental degradation, and pushing for stricter environmental laws. Groups like the Environmental Support Group (ESG), Greenpeace India, and the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) have vigorously pushed for more stringent environmental regulations and open business practices.

NGOs have made significant contributions, some of which include:

- Independently evaluating the effects on the environment and identifying corporate infractions.
- PILs and petitions are being filed in courts to contest deforestation and industrial pollution.
- Planning, awareness-raising events and teaching local communities about their rights and environmental laws.
- Partnering with government organizations to improve enforcement and policy frameworks.

Judicial Activism and Environmental Governance

When it comes to environmental issues, the Indian court has shown incredible activity, frequently taking over when regulatory bodies have failed to. In addition to enforcing concepts like the polluter pays principle, precautionary principle, and sustainable development, courts have broadened their interpretation of constitutional rights to encompass environmental preservation.



The following judgments demonstrate judicial activism in environmental law:

T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (1996) – Led to stricter forest conservation measures and protection against deforestation.

Sterlite Industries Case (2018) – The Supreme Court upheld the closure of the Sterlite copper plant in Tamil Nadu due to severe pollution and corporate negligence.

L.G. Polymers Gas Leak Case (2020) – The NGT imposed a ₹50 crore fine on L.G. Polymers for environmental negligence, reinforcing corporate liability for industrial disasters.

T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (1996) – Led to stricter forest conservation measures and protection against deforestation.

Sterlite Industries Case (2018) – The Supreme Court upheld the closure of the Sterlite copper plant in Tamil Nadu due to severe pollution and corporate negligence.

L.G. Polymers Gas Leak Case (2020) – The NGT imposed a ₹50 crore fine on L.G. Polymers for environmental negligence, reinforcing corporate liability for industrial disasters.

These cases highlight the judiciary's function in upholding environmental protections and guaranteeing corporate responsibility.

Challenges and Future Directions

Despite the positive impact of public participation and judicial activism, there are still some problems: late court proceedings often prevent early action against polluting industries. Limited access to legal mechanisms for marginalised communities, which limits their ability to challenge environmental violations. Political and corporate influence sometimes undermines enforcement. The lack of effective public awareness hinders widespread participation in environmental governance.

Challenges and Gaps in the Current Legal Framework

Despite having a strong set of environmental legislation, India is facing several challenges in

implementing and enforcing it. Weak regulatory mechanisms, corporate influence and bureaucratic inefficiency hamper the effectiveness of these laws. Judicial interventions have strengthened environmental governance, but systemic gaps in compliance remain.

One of the main problems is the lack of strict enforcement of the sunset clause. Many sectors continue to pollute because of weak monitoring and ineffective sanctions. The central and national pollution control boards (CPCBs) often lack the necessary resources, staff and technology to monitor violations and take immediate action. Moreover, delays in environmental litigation allow corporations to avoid liability for a long time.

Another critical issue is corporate greenwashing, where companies falsely claim to be pursuing sustainable practices while continuing to engage in harmful activities. Many corporations circumvent regulations through rigged Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA) and political lobbying. The lack of strict corporate transparency requirements allows industry to distort their environmental performance.

There are also gaps in environmental policy and obsolete legislation. Many laws, such as the laws on air and water, require amendments to incorporate modern pollution control technologies and more stringent liability measures. Ambiguity in some regulations leads to loopholes exploited by industry, which makes enforcement difficult.

Finally, public participation in environmental decision-making remains limited. Many affected communities, especially in rural areas, are not aware of their legal rights and of the mechanisms for filing complaints against polluters. Strengthening grassroots participation, improving access to environmental justice and increasing sanctions for corporate failure to comply with the rules are key steps to bridge these gaps.



Policy Recommendations for Strengthening Environmental Laws

Stricter sanctions and stronger regulatory oversight are necessary to improve enforcement of environmental laws in India. Agencies such as the CPCB and the SPCB need better resources and technologies to monitor pollution in real time.

Corporate responsibility should be strengthened through mandatory disclosure of environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues and independent audits. Commercial licences must be linked to strict environmental compliance in order to avoid greenwashing.

Public participation should be promoted by strengthening legal support for public-interest litigants, by involving non-governmental organisations in policy-making and by ensuring accessible redress mechanisms.

Finally, technology solutions such as artificial intelligence pollution monitoring and compliance reporting on the blockchain can increase transparency. Incentives for green businesses and the adoption of clean technologies will further promote sustainability.

Conclusion

Indian environmental laws play a crucial role in reconciling economic growth with sustainability. While legal frameworks for regulating pollution exist, corporate responsibility and enforcement remain major challenges. Weak compliance, regulatory inefficiency and the absence of strict sanctions have allowed environmental degradation to continue.

Public health remains a major concern, with industrial pollution still contributing to respiratory diseases, water pollution and damage to ecosystems. Strengthening corporate responsibility through better enforcement, harsher sanctions and technological solutions is essential to ensure compliance. In addition, increased public participation and judicial activism can lead to stronger environmental governance.

In the future, India needs to strengthen its environmental policy by integrating global best practices, promoting corporate transparency and using technology to monitor and enforce. A sustainable future depends on a collective effort by governments, companies and civil society to protect the environment and promote responsible economic growth.

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