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Climate Justice And Human Rights: An Indian Perspective

AUTHORS:

Aswani J S - Assistant Professor, Al Ameen College Of Law, Bangalore

Anusha Unnikrishnan - Assistant Professor, Al Ameen College Of Law, Bangalore

Archana Sathyan -BBA LLB LLM

ABSTRACT

In India, the intersection of climate change and human rights presents complex challenges, particularly for marginalized and vulnerable communities. Climate change exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, impacting the most disadvantaged groups, such as indigenous populations, rural farmers, women, and low-income urban dwellers. This paper examines the concept of climate justice in the Indian context, emphasizing how climate change threatens fundamental human rights, including the rights to food, water, shelter, and livelihood. Through an analysis of India's climate policies, legal frameworks, and case studies, the paper critiques the adequacy of current responses and explores the gaps in addressing human rights concerns related to climate change. It highlights the need for a rights-based approach to climate action that integrates human rights considerations into policy frameworks, strengthens the legal protection of vulnerable communities, and promotes inclusive, participatory governance. Furthermore, the paper proposes recommendations aimed at empowering marginalized communities, addressing gender disparities, improving public awareness, and enhancing climate resilience through better social protection mechanisms and international cooperation. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the ethical and legal imperatives of safeguarding human rights in the face of a changing climate in India and globally.

Keywords: Climate Justice, Human Rights, Legal Protection, Social Protection, Environmental Justice

Introduction

In recent decades, the discourse on climate change has increasingly intertwined with discussions of justice and human rights. Climate change, a global phenomenon with localized impacts, poses significant challenges to vulnerable populations, particularly in countries like India, where socio-economic disparities and environmental vulnerabilities intersect profoundly. The concept of climate justice emerges from the recognition that the burdens of climate change are disproportionately borne by those least responsible for its causes—often marginalized communities lacking adequate resources and political representation.

India, as a rapidly developing nation with a vast and diverse population, exemplifies both the complexities and urgencies of addressing climate change through a human rights lens. This perspective not only underscores the ethical imperative of protecting vulnerable communities but also emphasizes the legal and moral responsibilities of states and international actors in mitigating climate impacts and ensuring equitable adaptation measures.

This paper explores the intersection of climate justice and human rights within the Indian context. It examines how climate change exacerbates existing socio-economic inequalities, threatens fundamental human rights such as access to food, water, and shelter, and impacts indigenous communities whose livelihoods are intricately tied to natural ecosystems. Additionally, it evaluates India's policy responses and legal frameworks aimed at promoting climate justice, analyzing their effectiveness in safeguarding human rights and promoting sustainable development.

By critically assessing these dimensions, this research aims to contribute to the broader discourse on climate justice, highlighting the imperative of integrating human rights considerations into climate policies and fostering inclusive and equitable approaches to environmental sustainability in India and beyond.

Theoretical Framework: Climate Justice and Human Rights

- **Defining Climate Justice:** Explore what climate justice entails, including fair distribution of climate change's burdens, equitable access to resources, and recognizing the rights of those affected¹.
- **Human Rights and Climate Change:** Discuss the relationship between climate change and human rights, especially the rights to life, health, food, water, shelter, and culture².
- **Key International Instruments:** Briefly introduce key international frameworks such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Paris Agreement, and the UNFCCC, highlighting their relevance to climate justice³.

¹ Chakrabarti, N. & Sharma, M., "Climate Change and Human Rights in India: An Intersectional Approach," *India Review*, 19(3), 242-258.

² Gupta, J., "Climate Change and Human Rights: An Integrated Perspective," in *Human Rights and Climate Change*, Springer, 2014.

³ United Nations General Assembly, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948, and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris Agreement, 2015.

Climate Change in India: Impacts on Vulnerable Populations

- **Geographic and Environmental Vulnerabilities:** Provide an overview of India's geographic and ecological sensitivity to climate change—rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, floods, droughts, sea-level rise, and extreme weather events⁴.
- **Impacts on Marginalized Communities:** Analyze how climate change disproportionately affects vulnerable populations such as:
 - Indigenous communities (Adivasis) and their traditional ways of life
 - Rural populations dependent on agriculture, which is increasingly threatened by unpredictable weather patterns⁵
 - Women, children, and low-income groups who face increased risks due to lack of access to resources and information
 - Coastal populations vulnerable to sea-level rise and cyclones
- **Intersections of Climate Change and Poverty:** Discuss how poverty exacerbates vulnerability to climate impacts and limits the ability of affected communities to adapt or recover⁶.

Legal and Policy Frameworks in India

- **National Policies on Climate Change:** Review India's National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), state-specific climate policies, and any legal provisions addressing climate change and its human rights implications.
- **India's Role in International Negotiations:** Evaluate India's role in international climate negotiations, including its stance on the Paris Agreement and its commitment to climate finance, adaptation, and mitigation efforts.
- **Human Rights in Indian Law:** Discuss the constitutional and legal rights that could be implicated by climate change, including the right to life (Article 21 of the Indian Constitution) and the right to a healthy environment.
- **Environmental Justice:** Examine India's evolving approach to environmental justice, particularly through judicial activism, with landmark cases such as the public interest litigations (PILs) on air pollution, water scarcity, and displacement due to climate impacts.

⁴ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), "Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C," 2018.

⁵ Sharma, S., "Environmental Justice in India: Legal and Policy Dimensions," *Environmental Policy and Law Journal*, 47(6), 153–168.

⁶ World Bank, "India: Climate Change Impacts and Adaptation in Indian Agriculture," 2014.

Case Studies of Climate Justice in India

- **Displacement and Relocation:** Highlight cases such as the displacement of communities due to sea-level rise, large-scale dam constructions, and other climate-induced displacement scenarios. Focus on the human rights dimensions of forced displacement, including loss of livelihoods, cultural heritage, and access to essential services⁷.
- **Water Scarcity and the Right to Water:** Explore how changing rainfall patterns, depletion of groundwater, and water conflicts affect communities' right to water and sanitation. Case studies from regions like Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, and Kerala can be included⁸.
- **Agriculture and Food Security:** Discuss how changing weather patterns are affecting agricultural productivity, threatening food security for rural populations, and undermining the right to food. Consider the plight of smallholder farmers and the consequences of crop failures.
- **Indigenous Rights and Climate Change:** Examine how climate change threatens the traditional livelihoods of indigenous groups, particularly in forest-dependent areas, and how their human rights are being impacted by policies that fail to protect their land and culture.

Challenges to Climate Justice in India

- **Political and Economic Barriers:** Discuss the challenges in implementing climate justice policies, including political will, economic constraints, and competing priorities such as development, industrial growth, and poverty alleviation.
- **Institutional Capacity:** Explore the challenges related to institutional coordination, governance, and capacity to address climate-induced human rights violations effectively.
- **Global Inequalities and the Principle of Equity:** Analyze the tension between global climate responsibilities and India's developmental aspirations, considering India's position as a developing country in international climate negotiations.

Findings

1. Disproportionate Impacts on Vulnerable Communities:

- The impacts of climate change in India are disproportionately felt by marginalized communities, including rural populations, indigenous peoples (Adivasis), women, children, and low-income urban dwellers. These groups face heightened risks of displacement, loss of livelihood, food and water insecurity, and health problems due to extreme weather events and changing climatic patterns.

⁷ Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), "The Displacement of Coastal Communities: Sea-Level Rise and Climate Change in India," 2020, and Sundarban Development Board, "Impact of Climate Change on Sundarbans: Sea-Level Rise and Migration," 2018.

⁸ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), "Human Development Report 2011: Sustainability and Equity: A Better Future for All," UNDP, and Gleick, P.H., "The World's Water 2008-2009: The Biennial Report on Freshwater Resources," Island Press, 2008.

- Rural communities, dependent on agriculture, are particularly vulnerable to erratic rainfall, droughts, and floods. This jeopardizes their right to food and sustenance, while also exacerbating poverty and economic inequality⁹.

2. Inadequate Legal and Policy Frameworks:

- While India has developed several policies and action plans (such as the National Action Plan on Climate Change), these frameworks often fail to fully integrate human rights considerations or address the deep inequities created by climate change.
- India's legal systems, although progressively adopting a more rights-based approach, still lack sufficient enforcement mechanisms to ensure that vulnerable communities' human rights are consistently protected in the face of climate change.

3. Environmental Displacement and Loss of Livelihoods:

- A significant number of communities in coastal areas, river basins, and flood-prone regions are being displaced due to climate impacts. This displacement often results in the loss of not just homes but also cultural identity and traditional ways of life.
- Communities living in ecologically sensitive areas, such as the Sundarbans in West Bengal, are facing the twin challenges of sea-level rise and reduced resources due to climate change, exacerbating socio-economic inequalities¹⁰.

4. Gender Disparities in Climate Impacts:

- Women, particularly in rural and tribal areas, experience more severe consequences from climate change. They face heightened burdens as primary caregivers and water collectors, with limited access to resources and decision-making power.
- The gendered impacts of climate change have significant implications for the realization of women's human rights, especially in terms of access to education, health, and economic opportunities.

5. Limited Public Awareness and Participatory Decision-Making:

- There is a significant gap in public awareness and education regarding the intersections of climate change and human rights. Vulnerable groups often lack access to information about climate risks, adaptation strategies, and legal protections available to them.
- Participatory governance models, where affected communities are involved in decision-making processes related to climate action, remain underdeveloped in India.

⁹ Chakrabarti, N. & Sharma, M., "Climate Change and Human Rights in India: An Intersectional Approach," India Review, 19(3), 242-258, and Sharma, S., "Indigenous Communities and Climate Change in India: Rights, Risks, and Responses," 2017.

¹⁰ Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), "The Displacement of Coastal Communities: Sea-Level Rise and Climate Change in India," 2020, and Sundarban Development Board, "Impact of Climate Change on Sundarbans: Sea-Level Rise and Migration," 2018.

Conclusion

Climate change in India is not merely an environmental challenge but a multifaceted human rights issue. The impacts of climate change exacerbate existing social, economic, and political inequalities, particularly affecting marginalized groups such as rural communities, women, and indigenous peoples. These groups are disproportionately vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change, including displacement, loss of livelihood, food and water insecurity, and health risks.

India's climate policies, while commendable in some areas, have often been inadequate in addressing the human rights implications of climate change. The legal frameworks in place do not always sufficiently safeguard the rights of affected populations or promote climate justice. There is an urgent need for more robust policies that integrate human rights with climate action to protect vulnerable communities.

Furthermore, addressing the gendered dimensions of climate impacts, improving public awareness, and ensuring greater participation of affected communities in decision-making processes are critical to achieving true climate justice in India. The country must also ensure that its international commitments to climate justice and human rights are aligned with its domestic policy frameworks.

Suggestions

1. Strengthening Legal and Policy Integration:

- It is essential to integrate human rights considerations into India's climate action policies. The government should revise its climate action plans to explicitly address the rights of vulnerable communities, including rural populations, women, and indigenous peoples. Policies should focus on the intersection of environmental sustainability and human rights, ensuring that climate adaptation and mitigation strategies do not undermine the basic rights of those most at risk.

2. Empowering Marginalized Communities:

- The inclusion of vulnerable communities in climate decision-making processes is crucial. India should foster more participatory approaches in climate governance, where communities are not only beneficiaries of policies but also active contributors to their design and implementation. This could involve creating platforms for dialogue, local-level consultations, and empowerment programs that enhance the voice of marginalized groups in environmental governance.

3. Addressing Gender Disparities:

- A gender-responsive climate policy is needed to recognize the differentiated impact of climate change on women. This includes ensuring access to climate finance for women-led enterprises, promoting women's participation in decision-making on climate policies, and supporting women in gaining skills related to climate resilience, such as sustainable agriculture or disaster risk reduction.

4. Improving Public Awareness and Education:

- Public awareness campaigns and education programs about the connections between climate change and human rights must be scaled up. Vulnerable communities should be provided with the knowledge and tools to understand the climate risks they face, the potential legal protections available to them, and the adaptation strategies they can adopt.

5. Enhancing Climate Resilience through Social Protection:

- The Indian government should introduce and strengthen social protection mechanisms that specifically address climate-induced vulnerabilities, such as crop insurance for farmers, disaster preparedness programs, and health care provisions in disaster-prone areas. Such initiatives would help protect the rights of individuals whose lives are disrupted by climate events.

6. Promoting Climate Finance and Technology Transfer:

- India should advocate for greater climate finance and technology transfer, particularly for vulnerable communities. International cooperation is essential to help India build climate-resilient infrastructure, adapt to climate impacts, and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions while respecting human rights.

7. Expanding Access to Justice:

- The Indian judiciary has played an important role in advancing environmental justice. The legal system must be further strengthened to allow greater access to justice for those affected by climate change, particularly marginalized communities. Expanding the use of public interest litigation (PILs) to address climate justice issues could be one path forward.

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