

# Environmental Justice in South Asia: Intersecting Social, Political, Economic, and Cultural Dynamics

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**Abstract:**

*Environmental justice is about connecting the right to life and health to the right to clean air, water, and land.* – Vandana Shiva.

In its fourth assessment report, the IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on climate change) goes on to conclude, “The cumulative scientific evidence is unequivocal: Climate change is a reality. The impacts of climate change are already being observed, and action must be taken now in order for future generations to remember the idea of humanity in any positive light.” South Asia has been identified as the second most affected global region regarding climate change impacts with a pervasive touch of social injustice. The history of environmental injustices in the South Asian context dates back to the late 1970s and incorporates interactions of several social, political, economic, and cultural facets amalgamated together.

In South Asia, there are entrenched economic and social injustices that co-exist alongside pollution, deforestation, and displacement due to changing climates that directly impact environmental justice. In this region, over 75 million individuals bear the brunt of eco damages costing 15 billion dollars each year (Asian Development Bank, 2021) which makes them even more vulnerable to climate change. The most affected by these challenges and struggles are the rural and coastal communities, who already deal with poverty and inequity on a daily basis.

Environmental justice in South Asia is a thin line that ties to the region’s socio-political, economic, and cultural aspects. Rural communities, women, the poverty stricken as well as indigenous populations are left to grapple with the rapid pace of industrialization, urbanization, pollution, and climate change alone. This paper aims to analyse the dire effects of social and governmental inequity coupled with weak economic and cultural frameworks has had on the environment in South Asia. And proposes that fostering grassroots movements and integrating indigenous cultural paradigms into policy will enable the region to be more sustainable.

**Keywords:** Cumulative, Entrenched, Grapple, Indigenous, Pervasive, Unequivocal, Urbanization, Vulnerable.

**Introduction:**

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.* – Martin Luther King Jr. (adapted for environmental contexts)

South Asia has a flourishing population of around 1.8 billion but is unfortunately home to some of the biggest environmental problems in the world. The effects caused by environmental degradation across the world are particularly visible and felt strongly in certain areas such as Bangladesh where there is severe climate change and Delhi where the air pollution is incredibly bad. What is rarely considered, however, is how terribly these issues are shared across populations in these areas. In this instance, south such as the most poverty-stricken in many of the South Asian communities are greatly impacted as they do not have the means to cope or even attempt to recover from these natural disasters In such a scenario, environmental justice is about creating an equitable environment where every person’s social or economic standing does dictate whether they have access to a clean environment and the ability to have an impact on the decisions concerning their environment.

As South Asia continues to face urbanization, industrialization, and climate change, there is a growing need for solving these inequalities. Environmental justice is human activism; it encompasses climate change, equity and the right to live in a healthy world.

Our focus in this paper will primarily lie in the political, societal, cultural and the economic dimensions with the goal to create recommendations that advocate for better equity in South Asia.

In Indian metropolises such as Delhi, the quality of air has steadily worsened and is almost **3 times** worse than the permissible limit set by the WHO, the amount of PM2.5 in the air exceeds upwards of **300 µg/m<sup>3</sup>**. Climate change has already submerged areas within Bangladesh resulting in an increase of **2.3 million** displaced people and an increase of around **17% of land loss** within its coastal regions is projected for the year **2050** (UNDP, 2020). All these factors only serve to highlight the urgency for tackling environmental and social problems within these affected areas.

#### **Social Dimensions of Environmental Justice:**

***“The poor and the marginalized are often the first victims of environmental degradation and the last to benefit from economic development.” – Sunita Narain.***

The social dimensions of environmental justice in South Asia show high heterogeneity in terms of degradation in the natural environment. In India, the Narmada Valley Project erected huge dams on the Narmada, dislocating more than 320,000 people - most of whom were Indigenous peoples with deep attachments to their lands. The Communities received poor compensation or rehabilitation that led to poverty and social unrest.

In Bangladesh, around 40 million people reside in coastal areas that are subject to flooding and rising sea levels. These communities face the double crises of poverty, environmental stress, and deprivation of healthcare, education, or economic opportunities. Nearly 70% of their residents depend on subsistence farming, which exposes them to severe effects of climate-related disturbances such as flooding and crop failures, according to research.

Like Delhi and Kolkata, urban centres are plagued by air pollution, and it becomes a current social justice issue, demonstrating the smoke-filled life that exists in cities like Delhi. Air pollution has made respiratory ailments rise by 40% over a decade among children, for instance, in Delhi alone. In global ranking regarding deaths caused by air pollution innesses, the city stands among the top ones, with a figure of about 1.2 million premature deaths attributable to poor air quality (Health Effects Institute, 2020). Most of these health impacts are more suffered by the poor who stay in the areas of highest pollution with the least access to healthcare.

***“When we destroy ecosystems, we deny communities the resources they need to survive.” – Wangari Maathai.***

#### **Political Framework and Governance:**

***“A healthy democracy depends on the participation of its people in the stewardship of their environment.” – Al Gore.***

The political framework and governance are vital for addressing challenges in the environment regarding justice in South Asia. Unfortunately, the region is at one with weak enforcement, corruption, and lack of public participation. This is where marginalized sections suffer most in terms of damage to their environment. Countries have gone ahead on various policies regarding the environment, but inconsistent implementation keeps exacerbating inequalities and environmental challenges.

##### **a. Weak Enforcement of Environmental Regulations:**

Most South Asian countries have elaborate environmental laws, but the enforcement is generally very low. In India, for instance, the Environment Protection Act of 1986 lays down specific terms; however, almost 60% of the polluting industries do not have environmental clearances, it is claimed. Likewise, in Bangladesh, the Environmental Conservation Act of 1995, still industries avoid regulations and cause much water and air pollution.

Such failures to enforce laws come mostly from political pressure. For example, in countries like Pakistan and Sri Lanka, powerful lobbies from industries and local corruption allow illegal activities such as deforestation and unregulated emissions from factories. Governance failures like these are mainly seen endangering marginalized groups, for instance, people living in rural areas and the urban poor who are natural resource-dependent for their livelihoods and have limited avenues to contest injustices.

##### **b. Limited Public Participation:**

Public participation in environmental decision-making is often missing in South Asia. Although there are international agreements like the Aarhus Convention that speak of access to information and public participation, these have not been fully incorporated into many national frameworks.

For example, India has a provision for conducting public consultations related to Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs). However, these consultations are mostly hurriedly done without public notifications and hence,

keep the communities unaware of the possible environmental hazards. In urban development projects in Bangladesh, slum dwellers are dislocated without adequate consultation or compensation, showcasing the pass-out of poor populations from the major decisions that impact their lives.

But some success stories exist. Nepal's community forestry programs that involve the communities directly in the management of forest resources have shown that participatory governance can lead to environmental protection and empowerment of communities. These initiatives highlight the capacity of inclusion in policy provisions to address environmental justice tangibly.

**c. Corruption and Accountability Issues:**

Corruption is perhaps one of the largest gremlins to good environmental governance in South Asia. Most of all, bribery and political favouritism subvert all environmental approvals thus failing to live up to the intent of such laws which were meant to protect the sane environment as well as the vulnerable groups therein. Transparency International keeps ranking up South Asia within some of the most corrupt in the whole world, and this corruption has stretched to the area of environmental governance.

For instance, in India, the Bellary mining scandal of Karnataka showed how illegal mining was thriving under political patronage with catastrophic effects on the environment besides displacing local communities. Likewise, in Sri Lanka, illegal timber operations are often undertaken under the 'shroud' of local political authority involvement, thus sustaining damage to ecosystems and the livelihoods of many.

Releasing such accounts to an ambit of freedom within which tools like the Right to Information Act (RTI) of India empower the citizens to take on the accountability process is likely to limit the extent of the act. Access to such mechanisms should be broadened, and innovative digital monitoring tools in project follow-up integrated into this process to improve transparency and governance.

**d. Regional and International Cooperation:**

Numerous environmental concerns in South Asia, such as air pollution and water management, are transboundary, and therefore require all the nations involved to cooperate on these issues. The Ganges and Brahmaputra waters cross several borders with no regard for national boundaries when air pollution is attributed either to agricultural burning or brick kilns.

South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization which has come up with several programmes such as the SAARC Forestry Centre, is often unable to sustain these initiatives for lack of finances and political will, rendering the scheme ineffective. Outside of bilateral agreements such as the India-Bangladesh Ganges Water Treaty are positive projects that require stronger enforcement mechanisms and better dispute resolution processes to see this through.

**e. Path Forward: Recommendations for Better Governance:**

Since South Asia is grappling with environmental justice issues, governance will have to become that much more inclusive, transparent, and effective:

- 1. Strengthening Institutions:** Governments must empower independent regulatory bodies to enforce laws without interference. India's National Green Tribunal (NGT) is a good example of how impartial judicial mechanisms could prove effective in resolving environmental disputes.
- 2. Enhance Public Participation:** Public Participation should be not just meaningful but profound. This should also include a set of mechanisms wherein the most-marginalized communities get to know what is going on with decision-making in their lives and how they can participate in it.
- 3. Tackling Corruption:** While stricter audits may help to curtail corruption, technology should also be turned towards monitoring environmental projects. Transparency will help develop systems under which environmental approvals are given purely on merits, instead of strings being pulled.
- 4. Foster Regional Cooperation:** South Asian countries need to work on collaborating to address common problems such as, for instance, pollution in air and water. Strengthening organs such as SAARC at the regional level and investing in environmental sustainability through cross-border initiatives will go a long way in this regard.

Governance plays a crucial role in delivering environmental justice to South Asia. The poor laws coupled with a lack of public participation and accountability will cause the marginalized to suffer from environmental

degradation in his or her region. Strengthening such institutions, embracing transparency, and promoting cooperation can take South Asia towards a future where environmental justice is no longer just an aspiration, but a reality.

***“Environmental justice cannot exist without political justice.” – Robert Bullard.***

#### **Economic Implications of Environmental Justice;**

***“The economy is a wholly owned subsidiary of the environment, not the other way around.” – Gaylord Nelson.***

In fact, the economic costs of environmental degradation in South Asia are greatest among those for any region. Air pollution caused about \$36.8 billion in health costs in India in 2020, or 1.7% of GDP (World Bank, 2020). By 2050, agricultural productivity in Bangladesh is estimated to decline by around 30% due to climate change, which will compromise food security for millions more. Over 40 percent of the country's work force is engaged in agriculture, which is highly sensitive to rainfall changes and rising temperatures.

The textile industry in Bangladesh, one of the biggest international exporters, is another source of pollution in the country. This industry releases about 0.5 million tons of untreated textile waste into the water bodies each year, resulting, as in other cases, in harm to the livelihoods of thousands of farmers needing clean water for agriculture and other purposes. Further, air pollution from the industry creates a very high incidence of respiratory diseases among the workers.

These costs from the economic impacts of environmental phenomena are added to calamities. Much of the damage, about \$13 billion, caused to India, Bangladesh, and Myanmar in 2020 by one of the most powerful storms in the history of cyclones, called Cyclone Amphan (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Most affected by such loss, the economically strapped poorer communities have no resource to put up what is required to rebuild after the calamities.

Sustainable economic models, like Bhutan's Gross National Happiness (GNH) index, are emerging in South Asia, giving hope. Environmental sustainability and well-being take priority over GDP growth. More importantly, since 2000, Bhutan has remained carbon-negative and has shown that economic growth can go together with environmental conservation.

So much more can be greater in South Asia with better sustainable economic models-the kind that takes into account the economy as well as the environment. Bhutan, which has GNH with measures that seem to somehow show how an economy can be made for the environment's sustainability and for social well-being and welfare without merely running it on industrial growth, is a good example.

#### **Cultural Perspectives on Environmental Justice:**

***“Our ancestors understood the value of harmony with nature; modernity must not forget it.” – Sunderlal Bahuguna.***

For long, different kinds of cultures and their traditions here in South Asia will always speak for a balance and harmony with nature. Sacred groves such as the one in Maharashtra, India, have long been preserved by the local communities for religious reasons. These groves cover more than 0.5 million hectares of forest across India, sustain diverse biodiversity, and provide crucial ecosystem services. But rapid urbanization and deforestation threaten such sacred places; an estimated 30% of forests in India are facing degradation.

Traditional modes of forest management are still prevalent in Bhutan. The community can participate in forest care, while the government has helped secure 72% of the country's total land area as a forest. Such cultural and spiritual relations with nature go a long way in appreciating the perfect habitat outside the biophysical aspect and creating and sustaining a sense of community and responsibility among members of the same community.

Religious and spiritual beliefs in South Asia also promote respect for nature. Take, for example, Hinduism, which regards rivers such as the Ganges as sacred, but finds them infested by pollutants of urbanization and industrial runoff. Similarly, Buddhism teaches compassion for all living beings and to have value for the environment while Islamic tenets lay enjoin duty to protect and keep nature intact.

Modernization is a most potent force undermining so much of the traditional dependency on stewardship of environment. For instance, the decline of tank and stepwell irrigation systems in India has contributed to the rural water scarcity problem. Once communities maintained these systems, but bigger projects are replacing them, which do not consider local needs and knowledge.

***“Culture and nature are intertwined; destroying one weakens the other.” – Vandana Shiva.***

### **Recommendations:**

A wide and comprehensive strategy must be adopted to ensure environmental justice in South Asia:

**Strengthen Governance:** Governments must empower independent bodies, such as India's National Green Tribunal for addressing environmental disputes, and ensure strict enforcement of environmental laws.

**Promote Equal Access:** Environmental policies should address the needs of the marginalized population and make them accessible to resources and opportunities to include them in decision-making.

**Invest in Sustainable Development:** Green energy extension programs, tree-planting initiatives, and sustainable farming methods would lead to economic growth without harming the environment. For example, India's solar energy sector has 39.2 GW installed capacity in 2020, which proves that renewable energy can make a significant contribution to the economy.

**Enhance Regional Cooperation:** Strengthening bilateral agreements among nations and cooperating through regional platforms like SAARC will solve common problems like air and water pollution.

**Tradition Ecologies Revival:** Tradition and culture-based ways of reviving the sacred groves and community-managed waters can be effective and durable solutions.

### **Conclusion:**

***"Climate change is a global issue, but its impacts are deeply local and often disproportionately affect the vulnerable."* – Ban Ki-moon.**

As millions of disempowered people suffer from the ill effects of environmental degradation in South Asia, environmental justice has become a reality-the evidence is:

Between 2050, more than 40 million people will be displaced from the coastal areas of Bangladesh as a result of rising seas (UNDP, 2020).

India has become the site of large-scale projects where, for instance, the Narmada Valley Project displaced over 320,000 people with nearly no rehabilitation or compensation.

Profoundly staggering, South Asia losses about \$36.8 billion every year to different economic costs due to health from exposure to air pollutants (World Bank, 2020).

Such cultural invaluable resources include sacred groves in India, which have begun to wilt under deforestation, while traditional water management systems have seriously atrophied, making water scarcity much worse.

Over 60% of polluting industries in India manage to evade proper clearance due to weak enforcement and corruption in governance systems (Centre for Science and Environment, 2021).

Nevertheless, all these evils have been somehow conquered presented by several initiatives in South Asia. The Nepal-based community forestry programs, Bhutan's carbon-negative commitment, and India's National Green Tribunal can be cited as examples of inclusive governance and sustainable practices to mitigate environmental justice issues. The Treaty on Ganges Water between India and Bangladesh is an example of such cooperation at a regional level, although the action would require tighter enforcement and larger participation.

Finally, achieving environmental justice in South Asia would entail a collective effort among governments, communities, and international organizations to actually address social inequalities and governance improvement as well as sustainable practices that can achieve an equal future, one resilient for the region. The challenges are formidable, however, with common action and proper strategies. Quite an achievement for a just and sustainable future in South Asia.

***"We must recognize that our fight for environmental justice is a fight for human dignity and equality."* – Naomi Klein.**

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