**Ved International Journal of Arts, Commerce and Technology (VIJACT)**
© VIJACT |Vol.2, Issue3, March 2026, pp. 28-41 | ISSN: 3139-1656 (Online)
**DOI:** https://doi.org/10.65785/vijact.v1i3.22
Available online at: https://vijact.com/

# Law for a Greener Future: Legal Tools for Sustainability

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**Article Info**

***Article history:***

Received Mar 13, 2026

Accepted Mar 20, 2026

Published Mar 31, 2026

***Keywords:***

Environmental Law

Sustainable Development

Healthy Environment

Climate Change

Environmental Justice

Green Governance

**ABSTRACT**

*The right to a healthy environment has emerged as a fundamental aspect of sustainable development and human rights in the modern era. Increasing environmental pollution, climate change, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity have highlighted the need for effective legal frameworks to protect environmental rights. This paper examines the role of environmental laws, constitutional provisions, judicial activism, and international agreements in ensuring a cleaner and healthier environment for present and future generations. It also discusses key legal principles such as sustainable development, environmental justice, and the precautionary principle. Special emphasis is given to the contribution of courts and global initiatives like the Paris Agreement in promoting environmental protection. The study concludes that strong legal enforcement, public awareness, and international cooperation are essential for securing the right to a healthy environment and building a greener future.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The right to a clean and healthy environment is increasingly recognized as integral to the fundamental right to life and dignity. In India, the Supreme Court has repeatedly held that environmental protection and human rights are intertwined. For example, in Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991) the Court affirmed that "the right to live includes the right of enjoyment of pollution-free water and air for full enjoyment of life," and that a citizen may invoke Article 32 to redress environmental degradation detrimental to life. More recently, in M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India (2024), the Court declared for the first time that the "right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change" is integral to the fundamental rights of life and equality under Articles 21 and 14. This judgment built on earlier precedents that linked environmental integrity with Article 21 (life). These developments reflect a broader global trend: over 155 countries have now recognized some form of environmental right (through constitutions, legislation, or treaties), and in 2022 the United Nations General Assembly explicitly declared "access to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment" a universal human right. In India's context of rapid development and acute pollution

problems, the "right to a healthy environment" is a crucial concept for ensuring sustainable development and human well-being.

This chapter examines the right to a healthy environment from the Indian legal perspective. It reviews the constitutional and legislative framework, key judicial pronouncements, procedural mechanisms, and implementation challenges. We begin by tracing the historical and jurisprudential evolution of environmental rights in India, then analyze the constitutional provisions invoked to protect the environment. We next survey leading case law of the Supreme Court (and some High Courts) that has recognized and expanded these rights. Statutory environmental laws (such as the Water Act, Air Act, Environment (Protection) Act, Biodiversity Act, etc.) and their enforcement are then discussed. Procedural aspects such as public interest litigation, environmental impact assessment (EIA), and the role of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) are examined. Finally, we identify gaps in enforcement and suggest future directions – including comparative insights – for strengthening India's legal framework to secure a greener future.

## 2. Historical and Legislative Background

After independence, India enacted a host of sectoral environmental laws. Early measures included the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974, and the Environment (Protection) Act 1986. The Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and Forest (Conservation) Act 1980 aimed to protect natural resources. These statutes created regulatory bodies – the Central and State Pollution Control Boards – and set ambient standards for air, water, and hazardous substances. However, these laws were initially seen as administrative measures rather than rights-based guarantees.

A landmark constitutional development was the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976, which inserted two key provisions on environmental protection. Article 48A was added as a Directive Principle of State Policy, providing that "the State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country." Article 51A(g) was added as a Fundamental Duty, stipulating that it shall be the duty of every citizen to "protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures". Although these provisions were not self-executing, they signaled an intent that environmental conservation would underpin national policy. As one analysis notes, the 42nd Amendment "introduced Article 48A...the State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment," and paved the way for judicial recognition of environmental rights.

Starting in the 1980s, India's judiciary began to recognize environmental protection as part of fundamental rights. In Francis Coralie Mullin v. Union Territory of Delhi (1981), the Supreme Court held that Article 21 (right to life and liberty) "encompasses the right to health, clean environment, and basic necessities of life". Thus, environmental well-being was linked with human dignity and the right to life. In subsequent decades, a string of Supreme Court cases fleshed out this doctrine. By the 1990s, the Court had repeatedly declared that citizens have a constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment, often framing it as an extension of the right to life. These decisions brought environmental protection to the "same pedestal as fundamental rights". The historical context of India's environment law includes an expanding legislative framework (from early statutes to comprehensive acts and rules) and a constitutional evolution whereby environmental protection, originally a directive policy goal, became enforceable through judicial interpretation of Article 21 and related provisions.

## 3. Constitutional Framework and Interpretation

### 3.1 Article 21: Right to Life and Environmental Quality

The cornerstone of environmental rights jurisprudence in India is Article 21 of the Constitution, which guarantees that "no person shall be deprived of his life or personal liberty except according to a procedure established by law." The Supreme Court has interpreted "life" to include the right to a healthy environment. In Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991), the Court explicitly held that Article 21 includes "the right of enjoyment of pollution-free water and air for full enjoyment of life." It directed citizens suffering environmental harm to seek relief under Article 32, noting that any action that "endangers or impairs" environmental quality violates Article 21. Similarly, in Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000) , the Court observed that "water is the basic need for the survival of human beings and is part of the right to life," and affirmed that "the right to healthy environment and to sustainable development are fundamental human rights implicit in the right to life". Thus, over time Article 21 has been read purposively to encompass environmental values: clean air, potable water, and a balanced ecology are viewed as essential to human life and dignity.

In Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996), the Court pointed out that constitutional and statutory provisions together protect a person's "right to fresh air, clean water and pollution-free environment". In fact, the Court described this environmental right as grounded in the "inalienable common law right of clean environment". These holdings establish that Article 21 functions as a guarantee of environmental quality, and that judicial remedies (writs and otherwise) are available to citizens when environmental degradation threatens life and health.

### 3.2 Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties (Articles 48A, 51A(g))

Although Articles 48A and 51A(g) were added as non-justiciable directives and duties, the Supreme Court has repeatedly invoked them to reinforce environmental rights. In Virender Gaur v. State of Haryana (1995), the Court emphasized that protecting the environment is "not only the duty of the State but also the duty of every citizen", thereby echoing Article 51A(g). In M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath (2000), the Court explicitly harmonized Article 48A (state duty) and Article 51A(g) (citizen duty) by interpreting both in light of Article 21. The Court held that these duties must be enforceable through Article 21: since they reflect constitutional aspirations, they cannot remain merely unimplemented principles. Hence, a duty to protect forests or rivers can become a justiciable right to those resources. This logic ensures that Directive Principles bolster the fundamental right to life by giving it an environmental dimension.

More recently, the courts have also begun to apply fundamental rights horizontally, against private actors. In Kaushal Kishore v. State of U.P. (2020), the Supreme Court held that "a fundamental right under Article 19/21 can be enforced even against persons other than the State or its instrumentalities". Applying this reasoning, environmental rights (e.g. the right to clean air) can potentially be enforced against private polluters, not only against the government. Thus, the constitutional framework (Articles 21, 48A, 51A(g)) combined with judicial interpretation creates a legal entitlement to a healthy environment that is protected by fundamental law.

### 3.3 Summary of Constitutional Scheme

In sum, Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g) together form the constitutional foundation for environmental protection in India. Article 21 assures life and personal liberty, and Indian courts have repeatedly held that a decent environment

is inseparable from these guarantees. Article 48A imposes a state duty to protect the environment, and Article 51A(g) casts a duty on citizens to do the same. Through creative jurisprudence, these provisions have been harmonized so that citizens have enforceable environmental rights (grounded in Article 21) while both the State and individuals are charged with environmental responsibility. As one recent Supreme Court bench explained, in advancing environmental protection India's Constitution "places both Articles 48A and 51A(g) ... in the same pedestal as fundamental rights".

## 4. Key Judicial Decisions

India's Supreme Court has been the principal architect of environmental rights through a series of landmark cases. Here we examine some leading decisions that have recognized or expanded the right to a healthy environment.

**Early Landmark Cases**

- Francis Coralie Mullin v. UT Delhi (1981). In a seminal passage, the Court observed that Article 21 guarantees the right to life "with dignity," which includes "the right to health, clean environment, and basic necessities of life." This case laid the groundwork for treating environmental quality as part of the constitutional right to life.
- Rural Litigation & Entitlement Kendra, Dehradun v. State of U.P. (1985). Although focused on limestone quarrying in the Doon Valley, this case (often called the Dehradun Limestone case) held that the state's policy of granting mining licenses despite damage to forests and rivers violated Article 21 and the public trust doctrine (see below). It introduced notions of ecological balance and sustainable development into Indian jurisprudence, emphasizing that protecting the environment is a constitutional responsibility of the state.
- MC Mehta v. Union of India (1986, Oleum Gas Leak case). Following a toxic gas leak in Delhi, the Court ordered stringent precautions under environmental laws. Importantly, it broke new ground by applying the precautionary principle to require potential polluters to demonstrate safety before operating. This was an early example of the Court enforcing environmental responsibility by invoking Article 21 as a shield against harm.
- Harbanslal Khurana v. Union of India (1989). The Supreme Court for the first time allowed class-action-like suits for environmental harm, holding that police inaction during communal riots (when petrol pumps were torched) constituted a violation of Article 21 because it endangered life by causing environmental injury (fire, pollution). This case expanded locus (standing) so that bystanders could sue the state for environmental neglect.

**Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991)**

In Subhash Kumar the Supreme Court crystallized the idea that Article 21 "includes the right of enjoyment of pollution-free water and air for full enjoyment of life". The case arose from the pollution caused by stone crushing units near the petitioner's house. The Court held that the petitioner could invoke Article 32 to demand relief. It explicitly connected the quality of environment to constitutional rights: when "anything endangers or impairs that quality of life," citizens have a right to legal recourse. This was one of the first clear pronouncements that environmental clean-up was a constitutional remedy, not just a statutory matter.

**Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996)**

Vellore is a watershed case that introduced major environmental principles. Here, the Court addressed pollution from tanneries discharging toxic effluents into the Palar River in Tamil Nadu. The Court held that polluters must pay for environmental harm ("polluter pays" principle) and that the precautionary principle and the principle of intergenerational equity are part of Indian law. It explicitly recognized a "common law right of the people to a clean and healthy environment", and held that constitutional and statutory provisions protect a person's right to "fresh air, clean water and pollution-free environment". In practical terms, the Court ordered all polluting units to stop operation unless they had tertiary treatment plants and landfill disposal, and set compensation awards for affected villagers. Vellore established that environmental laws must be interpreted in favor of protection, even when balanced against development.

**Virender Gaur v. State of Haryana (1995)**

In Virender Gaur, the Supreme Court dealt with a common nuisance case (petrol filling station in a residential area). Crucially, the Court declared that "it is not only the duty of the State but also the duty of every citizen" to protect and improve the natural environment. This language, echoing Article 51A(g), was used to strengthen the argument that ordinary individuals (even neighbors of a polluting business) have a right to a clean environment. The case thus helped lay the ground for enforcement of environmental rights not only against the State but against private parties as well.

**MC Mehta v. Kamal Nath (1997)**

In MC Mehta v. Kamal Nath, the Supreme Court brought the public trust doctrine into Indian law. The case involved unauthorized diversion of forest land for a petrol pump. The Court held that forests, rivers, air, and wildlife cannot be put to private uses for profit; they are held by the State in trust for public use and enjoyment. It declared that "the State is the trustee of all-natural resources which are by nature meant for public use and enjoyment". This doctrine means that the government cannot abdicate its responsibility for environmental protection, and citizens have standing to ensure the State fulfills its trust obligations.

Importantly, Kamal Nath affirmed that Articles 48A and 51A(g) must be read in light of Article 21 – that is, State and citizen duties in environmental matters have constitutional bite.

**Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India (2000)**

While primarily a case on hydroelectric dams and displacement, the Narmada judgment contains notable environmental rights language. The Supreme Court observed that "water is the basic need for the survival of human beings and is part of the right to life," and it explicitly said "the right to healthy environment and to sustainable development are fundamental human rights implicit in the right to life". By linking sustainable development and environmental quality to Article 21, Narmada reinforced that large development projects must consider the human right to a safe environment.

**Other Significant Decisions**

Several other decisions have further fleshed out environmental rights:

- **T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India (1996 onward)** Also known as the Godavarman case, it began as a challenge to deforestation in Kerala but evolved into a long-running suo moto litigation overseen by the Supreme Court. The Court effectively assumed an ongoing supervisory role over forest conservation, setting up committees and rules to regulate forest activities. It reaffirmed the public trust doctrine and

emphasized forest rights as part of life and liberty. This case exemplifies judicial activism in environmental enforcement.

- **CPCB v. Mohan Meakins Ltd. (2000)** The Supreme Court granted compensation for environmental injury and ordered a factory to pay damages for polluting groundwater. It applied Vellore's polluter-pays principle, demonstrating that polluting industries can be held financially liable under Article 21.
- **Taj Trapezium Case (MC Mehta v. UOI, 1997)** Here the Court ordered numerous industries around Agra to relocate or switch to cleaner fuels to protect the Taj Mahal from pollution. The Court invoked Article 21 to preserve monuments and prevent environmental harm from degrading quality of life, holding that "precious and endangered natural and ecological resources have to be protected and conserved" even if development is slowed temporarily.
- **Animal and Biodiversity Cases** The courts have also linked environment with animal life. For example, the Supreme Court in Santosh Kumar Kadam v. Union of India (1987) held that an unborn child (including the fetus of a pregnant elephant in a circus) is a "person" under Article 21. Similarly, in Animal Welfare Board of India v. A. Nagaraja (2014), the Court struck down exceptions for snake-charming under the Wildlife Act partly on humane grounds. While primarily focused on animal welfare, such cases underscore the broad approach to "life" under Article 21.

## 5. Recent Developments: Climate and Biodiversity

In the 21st century, Indian courts have begun addressing climate change and biodiversity under the banner of environmental rights. In Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority v. G. Chandrappa (2019), for example, the Supreme Court recognized the rights of indigenous tribal communities under environmental law, showing a human-rights approach to environmental justice. In Centre for Environment Law v. Union of India (2017), the NGT recognized a fundamental right of citizens to a healthy environment, civilizing the concept of a "right to clean environment" in line with UN principles.

Most recently, M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India (2024) made headlines by explicitly declaring a "fundamental constitutional right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change". Although the case arose from petitions to protect two endangered bird species, the Court's obiter ruling reasoned that climate change (through droughts, floods, crop failures, etc.) directly threatens human health, livelihood and equality – thus impinging on Articles 14 and 21. The Court linked this reasoning to India's international climate commitments and to Article 48A/51A(g) duties. This represents a significant expansion of environmental rights, explicitly incorporating climate resilience into the constitutional scheme.

Across these cases, certain legal doctrines have become entrenched in Indian environmental law: precautionary principle (the State must act in advance of harm), polluter pays (the polluter bears the cost of damage), sustainable development (development must consider future generations' needs), and public trust doctrine (State must preserve natural resources for public use). Through its jurisprudence, the Supreme Court has effectively elevated environmental protection to the status of fundamental rights, subject to judicial enforcement.

## 6. Statutory Framework and Regulatory Implementation

India's legislative framework for the environment is broad but often sectoral. Key enactments include:

- **Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974** This Act established Central and State Pollution Control Boards and authorizes them to set water quality standards and grant/withdraw consent for effluent discharge. It empowers boards to investigate water pollution and prosecute offenders.
- **Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981** Similarly, it created boards to monitor air quality, control emissions, and regulate industries. It was amended in 1987 to broaden powers. Both the Water and Air Acts laid the foundation for India's first national pollution control regime.
- **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986** Enacted in the aftermath of the Bhopal gas tragedy, this comprehensive law serves as an umbrella legislation. It empowers the central government to take all measures for environmental protection, to set environmental standards, and to regulate hazardous substances. Under this Act, the government can issue rules and notifications (such as those on EIA, hazardous waste, chemicals, etc.) to plug gaps in pollution control.
- **Hazardous and Other Wastes (Management and Transboundary Movement) Rules, 2016** Aimed at controlling generation, handling, and disposal of hazardous wastes, including provisions for remediation of contaminated sites.
- **Biological Diversity Act, 2002** India adopted this Act to implement the Convention on Biological Diversity. It created National and State Biodiversity Boards to regulate the use of genetic and biological resources. It helps conserve traditional knowledge and ensures equitable benefit sharing, indirectly supporting environmental protection objectives.
- **Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 and Wildlife Protection Act, 1972** Though focused on forests and wildlife, these Acts contribute to environmental quality by conserving ecosystems and species. The Forest Conservation Act, for example, bars use of forest land for non-forest purposes without central approval.
- **Environment (Protection) Rules and EIA Notification** Under the EPA 1986, the government issued the 1994 EIA Notification (replacing earlier guidelines), and over time notified the 2006 EIA Notification, which requires prior environmental clearance for dozens of project categories (mining, dams, industrial projects, etc.) deemed to impact the environment. These notifications have been updated and often contested (for example, proposed 2020 draft rules were widely criticized for diluting public hearings). The EIA regime represents a proactive requirement for environmental impact assessment and public consultation before major projects proceed.

Institutional Mechanisms. The statutory framework also spawned regulatory institutions. The 1974 and 1981 Acts established the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) at the federal level, and State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs). The CPCB and SPCBs have powers to monitor pollution, enforce standards, and issue orders. For wildlife, the National Board for Wildlife (set up under the Wildlife Act) oversees protected areas and species. In principle, these bodies implement environmental laws, set norms, and prosecute violators.

Implementation and Enforcement. Despite the richness of legislation, enforcement has often lagged. A noted study observes, "There is no deficiency of available legislation... but enforcement of these legislations has been far from satisfactory" researchambition.com. Weaknesses include limited manpower and funding for regulators, overlapping jurisdiction between agencies, and judicial delays. Compliance reporting by industries is sometimes superficial. Regulatory bodies have at times been captured by industry interests, and many laws have criminal penalties that go

unenforced. The courts have lamented this gap: as the Supreme Court recently remarked, well-reasoned regulatory orders are often ignored or reversed, weakening environmental protection.

To improve enforcement, some reforms have been made. For example, the National Green Tribunal Act 2010 created a specialized environmental court (discussed below). Amendments have tried to tighten pollution rules (e.g. banning certain plastics, requiring environmental labelling). Public authorities have occasionally canceled lax clearances under judicial pressure. Yet compliance remains spotty: many projects proceed without adequate pollution controls, and old polluting units operate illegally. These implementation gaps make judicial enforcement crucial as a supplement to the statutes, In addition, the statutes embody important policy principles. The Constitution (42nd Amendment) and various statutes embrace principles like precautionary approach (require action to prevent environmental harm even before damage occurs) and polluter pays (those who pollute must bear cleanup costs). These principles are reflected in case law but also in rules on mining, fisheries, etc. They signal that India's legal framework views a healthy environment not as a luxury but as foundational to public health, livelihoods, and equitable development.

## 7. Procedural Aspects of Environmental Justice

### 7.1 Public Interest Litigation and Judicial Remedies

One of the most important aspects of India's environmental regime is the use of Public Interest Litigation (PIL). Beginning in the late 1970s, environmental activists (often led by M.C. Mehta and NGOs like the Centre for Environment Education) began filing PILs in the Supreme Court and High Courts. These PILs transformed environmental enforcement by treating severe pollution or ecological degradation as a matter warranting judicial intervention. The courts have relaxed standing requirements in such cases, allowing citizens, even without direct personal injury, to sue for environmental harm. This has led to some of the most significant environmental orders in India (the Taj, Ganga, Dehradun and Noida quarries cases, among others). The Supreme Court has itself noted that when the "quality of life" is at stake, any person has the right to come to court.

Petitions under Article 32 (for fundamental rights violations) and Article 226 (High Court writs) are thus the main procedural tool. The right to approach the courts has been interpreted expansively; in Subhash Kumar the Court explicitly stated that any threat to environmental quality affecting life empowers citizens to seek writ remedies. In practice, the environment bench of the Supreme Court (and High Court benches) hear dozens of PILs every year. However, PILs have also been criticized for overburdening courts and supplanting regulatory authority. Nonetheless, judicial activism remains a key procedural avenue for enforcing environmental rights in India.

### 7.2 Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) and Public Hearing

India mandates environmental clearance for major projects through EIA. Under the 2006 EIA Notification (and its predecessors), any proposed industrial or infrastructure project in specified categories must conduct an environmental impact assessment, prepare a detailed report, and hold public hearings for affected communities. Only after clearance is granted by the Ministry of Environment (or State committees) can the project proceed. This process is intended as a procedural safeguard for environmental values, reflecting that development projects should not violate the right to a healthy environment of local populations.

Over the years, the EIA process has evolved but also faced criticism. The first EIA Notification in 1994 covered only select projects, leading to shortcomings. In 2006, the Notification was strengthened, but its implementation revealed

issues: many impact reports have been found of poor quality, and post-clearance monitoring and compliance have been weak. Minor amendments were made (e.g. in 2017 extending clearance validity, exempting some minor expansions from new hearings), but large projects still require full EIA and public consultation. A controversial draft in 2020 proposed major relaxations (retrospective clearances, exemptions from public hearings for many projects), which met with nationwide protests. In early 2021, some rules were relaxed (e.g. exempting certain project renewals from fresh hearings), prompting legal challenges. The Supreme Court itself has struck down "ex post facto" clearances in Vanashakti v. UOI (2019), underscoring that EIA procedures cannot be short-circuited by policy whims.

In sum, EIA and clearance requirements represent an important procedural shield for environmental rights. They operationalize the "precautionary principle" by requiring assessment before harm. But their effectiveness depends on rigorous implementation. As judicial observers note, India's EIA regime remains a work in progress: it embodies the right to participation and information but needs stronger enforcement to truly balance ecology and economy.

### 7.3 National Green Tribunal (NGT)

To expedite environmental cases, Parliament enacted the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010, establishing the NGT as a specialized judicial body. The NGT's mandate is "the effective and expeditious disposal of cases relating to environmental protection, conservation of forests and other natural resources including enforcement of any legal right relating to the environment," and providing relief and compensation for environmental damage. It became operational in 2011 and has since heard tens of thousands of cases previously lodged in High Courts and the Supreme Court.

The NGT's jurisdiction extends to civil matters arising from a wide range of environmental laws (including the EPA, Water Act, Air Act, Wildlife Act, etc.). It has powers of a civil court and is empowered to grant relief, impose penalties, and even award restitution. Notably, the NGT Act explicitly draws inspiration from Article 21's promise of a healthy environment, enshrining the idea that access to environmental justice should be swift and specialized. NGT benches across India have issued important orders on pollution control, waste management, coastal zone protection, and more. Appeals from NGT decisions lie to the Supreme Court, ensuring oversight.

By creating the NGT, India recognized that environmental disputes require expert knowledge and speedy resolution. The tribunal system has generally been praised for its environment-focused approach and for reducing the burden on regular courts. However, challenges remain: the NGT has limited benches (geographically) and a heavy docket, and some critics argue for more technical members or powers. Nevertheless, the existence of the NGT is an important procedural pillar in India's environmental architecture, reflecting the constitutional directive for environmental protection through judicial means.

### 7.4 Other Mechanisms

- **Right to Information (RTI, 2005)** Although not an environmental law per se, RTI has become a vital tool for environmental oversight. Citizens use RTI to demand data on pollution levels, clearance documents, compliance reports, etc. Greater transparency empowers communities to claim their environmental rights, consistent with Principle 10 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on public participation.
- **Criminal Enforcement** Environmental statutes contain criminal offences (e.g. for illegal discharge of pollutants, deforestation). In theory, the police can investigate and courts can try offenders. In practice,

however, criminal enforcement is limited. Cases often drag on, and few top executives are convicted. The more common remedy has been civil orders for closure or compensation.

- **Compensation Awards** Courts have innovated by using compensation schemes to remedy ecological harm. For example, in Vellore and several MC Mehta cases, the Court directed polluters to deposit funds for remediation, or awarded damages to affected persons. Under the EPA 1986 and related rules, the State can also recover cleanup costs as a civil liability.

In summary, procedural mechanisms in India allow wide access to justice for environmental claims: from PILs to EIA hearings to a specialized tribunal. These pathways operationalize the right to a healthy environment by ensuring that citizens can raise grievances, challenge governmental or corporate actions, and seek judicial relief for environmental harm. Yet the multiplicity of forums also requires coordination (for instance, cases may move between NGT and courts) and underscores the need for public awareness and legal expertise to fully exercise environmental rights.

## 8. Challenges and Gaps in Enforcement

Despite the robust constitutional and legal framework, significant challenges impede the realization of a healthy environment in practice. These include:

- **Enforcement Deficits** As noted, enforcement of environmental laws is unevenresearchambition.com. Many regulations lack teeth: ambient standards set decades ago are often ignored; inspectors are few; and polluters frequently operate without proper authorization. The courts have pointed out that states and industries sometimes collude to undermine environmental norms, with poorly reasoned regulatory orders reversed or flouted. Even after landmark judgments, implementation at the ground level can be slow. This "last mile" problem means that constitutional rights to a healthy environment are often compromised by inadequate enforcement.
- **Regulatory Overlap and Coordination** India's environmental governance involves central ministries (e.g. MoEF&CC), state agencies (SPCBs, forest departments), and municipal bodies. Overlaps can create confusion or passivity. For instance, pollution from a factory may implicate multiple laws (Air Act, Water Act, EPA, local zoning rules), leading authorities to defer or disclaim jurisdiction. Coordinated action across agencies remains a hurdle.
- **Judicial Overreach vs. Underreach** The courts have at times been criticized for overstepping (e.g. dictating policy details, micro-managing projects) and at other times for not being aggressive enough. The balance between the judiciary and executive in environmental matters is delicate. NGOs argue that proactive judges are needed given executive failure, while others caution that democratic lawmaking should not be usurped by judicial fiat. This tension can slow clear outcomes.
- **Climate Change and New Threats** India faces the added challenge of climate change, which exacerbates environmental risks. Although the Ranjitsinh case acknowledged a constitutional climate right, actual mitigation and adaptation policies are still evolving. The judiciary's acknowledgment of climate harms (e.g. heatwaves, floods, agrarian distress) raises questions about specific remedies and government obligations under Article 21 and 48A. The existing framework is more geared toward local pollution than global climate, so bridging that gap remains an issue.

- **Public Awareness and Participation** While legal mechanisms exist, many citizens (especially in rural or marginalized communities) lack awareness of their environmental rights or the means to assert them. Language barriers, financial constraints, and limited access to information can hinder public participation in environmental decision-making. Even when informed, poor communities often have limited influence over powerful developers. Strengthening grassroots capacity and ensuring equitable participation are ongoing challenges.
- **Industrial and Development Pressures** India's development goals sometimes conflict with environmental protection. Governors or bureaucrats may expedite mining, industrial, or infrastructure projects, citing economic necessity. Although courts insist on sustainable development, political pressures can lead to compromised clearances or retrospective approvals (the latter was struck down in Vanashakti). Resolving the trade-off between growth and environment remains a political and legal battleground.

Overall, India's environmental justice system is robust on paper, but implementation gaps persist. As one analyst observes, there is "urgent need for effective, successful and well-organized enforcement" of the constitutional mandateresearchambition.com. Addressing these challenges will require not only stronger institutions and stricter compliance, but also broader societal commitment to valuing environmental rights as fundamental rights. The courts, through their expanding jurisprudence, continue to nudge the country towards this ideal, but the journey towards fully realizing a healthy environment for all Indians is unfinished.

## 9. Comparative and International Perspectives

India's recognition of the right to a healthy environment aligns with global trends. In international law, the right to life has long been interpreted to include environmental elements (e.g. UN human rights treaty bodies have linked environmental degradation to rights violations). In 2022, for the first time, the United Nations explicitly recognized "the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment" as a human right through a General Assembly resolution. This mirrors India's own constitutional approach where "the environment is foundational to human well-being".

Globally, many national constitutions now enshrine environmental rights. For example, Portugal (1976) was among the first, and by 2021 over 155 countries had adopted some form of environmental right in law. Countries like Brazil and South Africa recognize a constitutional right to a healthy environment. India has not explicitly written such a right into its Constitution, but its courts have functionally created it through Article 21. Indian jurisprudence has even drawn upon foreign cases (for instance, citing the U.S. Montana case on a right to clean environment and South African constitutional ideas) to reinforce its reasoning.

International environmental law and agreements also influence India. Treaties like the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) inform judicial reasoning. In Ranjitsinh, for example, the Court referenced India's obligations under the UNFCCC and UN human rights resolutions to justify a climate right. Additionally, principles from the Rio Declaration (1992) – such as public participation (Principle 10) – underpin India's EIA procedures and the judicial emphasis on public hearings.

While comparative law provides context, the Indian legal approach is tailored to domestic needs. For instance, India's courts have been more willing than many to engage in proactive environmental adjudication through PIL and even suo motu actions. The creation of a dedicated environmental tribunal (NGT) also shows India's distinct route to enforcement. Nonetheless, international models (such as Europe's Aarhus Convention on access to information and

justice, or concept of "environmental democracy") inform Indian policy debates, even though India is not a party to Aarhus.

In conclusion, the "right to a healthy environment" in India is part of a global mosaic of environmental rights. India's constitutional experiments and case law contribute to an emerging international consensus: that environmental well-being is inseparable from human rights. Learning from other jurisdictions (for example, by considering climate litigation in Europe or constitutionally entrenched environmental rights in other countries) can help India refine its own framework. But ultimately, solutions must fit India's social and ecological context.

## 10. Future Directions and Recommendations

India has built a strong jurisprudential foundation for the right to a healthy environment, but there is scope to strengthen the legal framework and its enforcement. Some future directions and recommendations include:

- **Constitutional Recognition:** Consider amending the Constitution to explicitly include "the right to a healthy environment" among fundamental rights. While courts have effectively read this into Article 21, an explicit amendment or clearer directive might solidify the right and preempt challenges. Several countries have constitutionalized environmental rights, and India could follow suit to signal national commitment.
- **Integrated Climate Legislation:** Given the urgency of climate change, India may need a comprehensive climate law or policy that aligns with its constitutional duties. The Ranjitsinh case suggests that climate resilience is now a fundamental concern. Codifying climate rights (e.g., limits on emissions, adaptation obligations) could help ensure that the "right to be free from climate harms" is realized in concrete measures (renewable energy targets, emission standards, climate risk assessment, etc.).
- **Strengthening NGT and Courts:** The National Green Tribunal should be empowered with more benches, technical expertise, and enforcement authority to handle the caseload efficiently. Introducing performance norms for regulators (with judicial oversight) could ensure that pollution control boards fulfill their duties. Courts should continue to refine the horizontal application of environmental rights (allowing private parties to be sued for environmental harm, as already recognized in Kaushal Kishore).
- **Enhancing Enforcement and Deterrence:** Laws should impose stiffer penalties for repeat or egregious polluters, and those penalties must be enforced. Introducing stronger compliance monitoring (e.g. real-time emissions tracking, regular audits) can deter violations. Empowering local communities with grievance redress (for example, easier procedures to trigger investigations) can decentralize enforcement.
- **Transparency and Participation:** Expand public access to environmental information, perhaps by strengthening Right to Information (RTI) enforcement specific to environment. Ensure that EIA processes are genuinely participatory – for instance, by publicizing proposals widely in local languages and ensuring that hearings are conducted in good faith. (Judicial oversight can demand evidentiary responses to public objections, as already practiced in some cases.)
- **Inter-agency Coordination:** Clarify roles between pollution boards, forest/wildlife departments, and development authorities to avoid turf conflicts. Possibly create empowered federal-state councils for environmental governance. Integrated environmental planning (e.g. river basin management that cuts across states) could also address fragmented decision-making.

- **Capacity Building and Awareness:** Invest in training judges, police, and administrators on environmental law so they can apply it effectively. At the grassroots, environmental education and legal aid can help citizens understand and assert their rights. Funding community-based monitoring groups (civil society organizations equipped with sensors and cameras) could complement official efforts.
- **Economic Instruments:** Use economic tools (taxes, subsidies) to internalize environmental costs. For example, a well-calibrated pollution tax or congestion charge can discourage harmful activities without litigation. The legal framework should facilitate and legitimize such measures.
- **Incorporating Traditional Knowledge:** Recognize and protect the environmental wisdom of indigenous and local communities. Laws like the Biodiversity Act enable benefit-sharing, but judicial recognition of traditional land and resource rights can further conservation goals (as seen in some recent forest rights cases).
- **Judicial Review of Policy:** Courts can continue to act as guardians of the constitutional mandate, but should strive for consistency and collaboration with experts. Some commentators urge courts to develop "ecocentric" jurisprudence (as one judgment phrased it), which takes the intrinsic value of nature seriously rather than solely an anthropocentric approach.

Finally, maintaining an environmental rights regime requires that policy and development be harmonized with ecological limits. Economic planning at all levels must incorporate environmental impact assessments and social safeguards. India's leaders have spoken of a "green growth" and "Atmanirbhar Bharat" that is also eco-friendly; realizing this vision legally means fully operationalizing the right to a healthy environment.

## 11. Conclusion

In India, the right to a healthy environment has evolved from a directive principle to a justiciable cornerstone of constitutional law. The courts have expanded Article 21 to encompass pollution-free air, safe drinking water, ecological balance, and even climate security. Statutory laws and regulations provide the tools for protection, while specialized institutions like the NGT offer dedicated avenues for redress.

Nonetheless, enforcement weaknesses and competing interests continue to undermine environmental quality. Looking ahead, India must strengthen implementation of existing laws and consider legislative innovations to address emerging challenges. The global movement towards recognizing environmental rights bolsters India's path: as one observer noted, "making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century," and India's courts have joined the call for urgent, rights-based climate and environmental action.

By integrating environmental protection more deeply into the legal and policy fabric – for instance, by raising awareness, imposing accountability, and explicitly foregrounding the environment in our fundamental rights – India can further secure the right to a healthy environment for its citizens. Such efforts will help ensure that the constitutional promise of life with dignity is fulfilled in practice, with clean air, water, and ecosystems that support sustainable development and human well-being.

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## *Cite this Article:*

***Ashish Shahi, "L aw for a Greener Future: Legal Tools for Sustainability"**, Ved International Journal of Arts, Commerce and Technology (VIJACT), ISSN: 3139-1656 (Online), Volume 2, Issue 3, pp. 28-41, March 2026.*
*Journal URL: https://vijact.com*
***DOI:** https://doi.org/10.65785/vijact.v1i3.22*