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Climate change, environmental communication, and its impact on policies in India

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Abstract

Climate change poses a significant challenge for India, manifesting in rising temperatures, erratic weather patterns, and unpredictable rainfall. This study explores the role of environmental communication in enhancing public awareness and shaping climate policies in India. By analyzing surveys, interviews, media reports, and policy documents, the study identifies key gaps in climate communication, particularly the disparities in awareness between urban and rural populations. Traditional media, social media, and grassroots initiatives have contributed to climate discourse, yet their effectiveness varies across communities due to socio-economic and digital divides. The findings highlight the need for more inclusive, technology-driven communication strategies to bridge these gaps. Ultimately, strengthening environmental communication can facilitate informed policy decisions, promote public engagement, and contribute to India's sustainable development goals.

Keywords: India, climate change, environmental communication, impact, policies

Introduction

Climate change represents one of the most significant challenges of the 21st century. Its effects are extensive, impacting ecosystems, economies, and communities. A nation such as India, with its substantial population, is particularly vulnerable to these changes. Rising temperatures, heat waves, and floods are among the observable effects. Extreme rainfall events, alterations in monsoon patterns, and rising sea levels pose threats to India's agriculture, water resources, public health, and overall socio-economic stability. Over the past century, India's average temperature has increased by 0.7 °C, and during the same period, sea level along the coast has risen by 8 cm, rendering the country highly susceptible to climate change ^[1]. To address these challenges, urgent and coordinated action is necessary. However, a key factor in effective climate action is public awareness. This is where environmental communication becomes crucial. Environmental communication involves the dissemination of information related to environmental issues through various media, including traditional and social media, public awareness campaigns, and educational programs. The efficacy of such communication is critical for public understanding, engagement, and support for climate policies ^[2].

In India, environmental communication has played a significant role in disseminating awareness about climate change, particularly in relation to agriculture, water resources, and human health. However, various challenges, including socio-economic inequalities, regional disparities in climate change impacts, and the politicization of environmental issues, are impeding communication efforts. This research paper examines the influence of environmental communication on climate policies in India, analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of current communication strategies, and provides recommendations to enhance their effectiveness.

Literature Review

Environmental communication serves as a crucial instrument in shaping public awareness and influencing climate policies. Numerous studies have examined the role of media, public engagement, and grassroots initiatives in the dissemination of climate information. While media platforms provide climate knowledge, socio-economic disparities and digital access continue to present communication barriers.

Research emphasizes the importance of localized, inclusive messaging to overcome these challenges and encourage public participation in climate action. In *The Role of Media in Environmental Communication* Boykoff (2011) ^[3] investigated how traditional media such as television, newspapers, and radio have been central to climate awareness. With the rise of digital platforms, Shanahan (2016) ^[4] asserts that younger audiences are increasingly relying on social media, blogs, and online news for climate information. However, Gupta *et al.* (2020) ^[5] argue that India's digital divide limits access to reliable environmental information, particularly in rural and marginalized communities. Consequently, climate communication efforts must address the urban-rural divide to ensure climate literacy for all. Public awareness is fundamental to policy, as Moser and Dilling (2007) ^[6] indicate. Nations with robust communication frameworks have more engaged citizens who support sustainable policies. Nisbet (2014) ^[7] examines how communication leads to public participation in climate action and policy advocacy. However, Joshi and Patel (2019) ^[8] assert that awareness in India is uneven, with urban populations possessing greater climate literacy than rural populations, which affects grassroots mobilization. Several studies address Climate Communication Challenges, identifying socio-economic disparities, political influence, and lack of education as the primary obstacles. Sharma (2018) ^[9] argues that these factors render climate messaging ineffective, especially among lower-income and rural populations. Dasgupta (2021) ^[10] contends that mainstream media frames climate change in a manner that is not localized, making it challenging for communities to relate to the issue. To overcome these challenges, targeted, culturally sensitive communication that connects global climate issues to local realities is necessary.

Conversely, Community and Grassroots Movements offer solutions to bridge the climate communication gap. Sengupta (2020) ^[11] demonstrates how localized, culturally relevant messaging enhances public awareness and drives climate action. Kumar and Singh (2021) ^[12] provide examples of NGO-led initiatives and village-level sustainability projects that integrate traditional knowledge with scientific findings. These grassroots efforts demonstrate the efficacy of community-led communication in fostering long-term environmental engagement. The literature reveals that environmental communication is fundamental to climate action and policy influence. While media and grassroots efforts contribute to spreading awareness on climate issues, challenges such as socio-economic inequalities, digital divide, and politicization of environmental issues persist. By addressing these barriers through inclusive communication strategies, India can enhance climate literacy, engage diverse communities, and drive meaningful climate policies for sustainable development.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and uses only secondary data to examine the role of environmental communication in climate policies in India. A literature review was done to look into existing research on climate communication and policy influence. Media reports, government documents, academic studies, public awareness campaigns, reports from environmental organizations and NGOs working on climate advocacy in India were examined to see the different

communication strategies. By combining these sources this study provides an overview of how environmental communication influences policy and public awareness.

Analysis and Findings

Climate Change in India

India is experiencing some of the most severe and diverse impacts of climate change. Temperatures are increasing, and heat waves are occurring with greater frequency in states such as Maharashtra and Gujarat, where summer temperatures exceed 45 °C. The melting of Himalayan glaciers is threatening the flow of rivers like the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Yamuna, which are essential water sources for millions of individuals. Furthermore, the unpredictable monsoon season with erratic rainfall poses a significant threat to agriculture, which is heavily dependent on seasonal precipitation. A 10% reduction in rainfall over the past 50 years has already affected crop yields, particularly for rice and wheat ^[13].

These climatic changes are having extensive impacts on India's water security, food security, and public health. Frequent flooding, droughts, and soil erosion have left communities vulnerable, especially in low-lying coastal areas. According to reports, the sea level along India's coast has already risen by 8 cm since 1901 and is projected to rise by an additional 50 cm by 2100, which will displace millions of people residing in coastal regions ^[1]. India's commitment to addressing climate change includes substantial efforts to mitigate its carbon footprint. The country has pledged to reduce its emission intensity by 33-35% by 2030 under the Paris Agreement, focusing on transitioning to renewable energy, promoting sustainable agriculture, and implementing climate-resilient infrastructure. However, challenges such as limited access to advanced technology, insufficient international cooperation on technology transfer, and political challenges in prioritizing environmental policies complicate these efforts ^[14].

Policy Framework

India has implemented numerous policies and legislation aimed at reducing carbon emissions and enhancing climate resilience. One of the most significant initiatives is the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), which comprises eight National Missions across various sectors, including solar energy, water conservation, and sustainable agriculture. Additionally, the government has enacted several laws, such as the Environmental Protection Act 1986 and Wildlife Protection Act 1972, to regulate and safeguard India's natural resources. While these laws and initiatives provide a robust framework for addressing environmental issues, substantial gaps exist in their enforcement and implementation. Rapid urbanization, industrialization, and inadequate monitoring mechanisms are undermining the effectiveness of these policies. The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1981 and Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act 1974 have achieved some success in reducing pollution; however, they have been criticized for poor enforcement, particularly in rapidly expanding urban areas ^[15].

Environmental Communication in India

Environmental communication in India has undergone significant development, encompassing diverse approaches

to raise awareness and promote sustainable practices. Educational initiatives such as the Environment Education Programme (EEP) have been instrumental in enhancing environmental literacy among children and youth, particularly in educational institutions. Various media platforms, including television, radio, print, and digital media, have played a crucial role in disseminating environmental information ^[16]. Governmental campaigns, notably Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) and Namami Gange (Clean Ganga Mission), have effectively raised awareness regarding sanitation, waste management, and water conservation. These initiatives have demonstrated the significance of environmental communication in influencing public opinion and action concerning climate change.

However, communicating environmental issues to a broad audience presents several challenges. India's linguistic diversity, limited technological access in rural areas, and pronounced socioeconomic disparities pose obstacles to effective information dissemination. While urban populations generally exhibit higher levels of awareness, rural communities, particularly those in remote regions, demonstrate less understanding of the long-term impacts of climate change. Addressing this disparity necessitates the development of innovative and inclusive communication strategies that engage even the most marginalized communities ^[17].

Challenges and Opportunities in Urban and Rural India

Recent studies have demonstrated a significant disparity in climate change awareness between urban and rural India, attributing this to disparate access to information and resources. According to the Climate Change in the Indian Mind, 2022 report by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, 41% of Indians report having "a lot" or "some" knowledge about global warming. However, this knowledge exhibits regional variation; in Gujarat 52% possess such knowledge, compared to 33% in Maharashtra. This suggests that urban areas may have higher awareness due to superior educational opportunities and information sources ^[18]. Another study conducted in Pune city revealed that 91.68% of urban respondents were cognizant of global climate change, with 81.40% attributing it to anthropogenic activities. The primary sources of information for these respondents were television (59.78%), newspapers and magazines (42.11%), radio (13.39%), and internet (9.23%). This indicates that urban populations have greater exposure to media and modern communication tools ^[19]. In contrast, rural populations have limited access to such resources, resulting in lower climate change awareness. Factors such as lower levels of education, limited internet connectivity, and fewer environmental awareness campaigns contribute to this knowledge gap. Addressing these disparities is crucial for effective climate communication and policy implementation in India ^[20].

The efficacy of communication channels varied significantly between urban and rural respondents. Traditional media, such as television and radio, were the most influential sources of climate information. In urban areas where television and radio are prevalent, these channels played a substantial role in disseminating awareness about climate change. Television programs, public service announcements, and news reports were the primary sources of information for urban respondents

regarding India's environmental challenges. For many rural respondents, particularly in the absence of internet access, radio served as a vital source of climate information, especially through regional programs that featured local language broadcasts on agricultural sustainability and disaster preparedness ^[21]. Although not as accessible to rural areas, social media was identified as a crucial medium for engaging urban youth. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube serve as platforms where climate discourse occurs in India. Global movements such as "Fridays for Future" gained particular traction in India, as youth activists utilized social media to mobilize demonstrations and disseminate messages regarding climate action. The capacity to share content, engage in discussions, and organize online renders social media an effective tool for climate communication, particularly for millennials and Generation Z, who are more digitally connected ^[22].

Interviews with environmental experts, policy advisors, and NGO representatives corroborated the significance of grassroots communication in rural areas. NGOs and local community groups in rural areas are employing participatory approaches to engage with communities. This entails direct interaction with communities through workshops, local meetings, and environmental education programs tailored to the specific needs and concerns of rural inhabitants. These programs have demonstrated greater efficacy in raising awareness and mobilizing climate action at the local level. The hands-on approach, which incorporates activities such as tree planting, water conservation training, and disaster preparedness drills, has contributed to demystifying climate change and linking it to immediate tangible benefits ^[23]. These grassroots initiatives frequently utilize local language and culturally relevant communication tools to enhance the accessibility of complex environmental issues. Community members are empowered to assume ownership of climate action, fostering a sense of collective responsibility that is essential for long-term success. Through these efforts, rural communities are exhibiting increased participation in sustainable agriculture practices, conservation, and climate adaptation ^[24].

India as a bigger loser of climate change compared to developed countries

India exhibits disproportionate vulnerability to climate change compared to developed nations due to its geographical diversity, high population density, and economic dependence on climate-sensitive sectors. In contrast to developed countries that possess advanced infrastructure, financial resilience, and robust climate adaptation policies, India contends with weaker governance, resource constraints, and socio-economic disparities, rendering climate impacts more severe and long-lasting ^[25]. A significant concern is India's agriculture-dependent economy, which employs approximately 50% of the workforce. Climate change has already resulted in erratic monsoons, prolonged droughts, and rising temperatures, severely affecting crop yields and food security. Research indicates that every 1 °C rise in temperature could reduce wheat yields by 6-10%, exacerbating India's food supply situation ^[26]. Conversely, developed nations invest in advanced agricultural technologies, climate-resilient crops, and large-scale irrigation systems, mitigating their vulnerability to changing climatic conditions.

Coastal vulnerabilities also place India at greater risk. With a 7,500 km-long coastline, urban centers such as Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata face substantial threats from rising sea levels and frequent flooding. Reports indicate that sea levels along India's coast have risen by 8 cm since 1901 and could increase by an additional 50 cm by 2100, potentially leading to mass displacement of coastal populations ^[27]. Unlike developed nations, which have invested in flood control infrastructure and urban climate adaptation, India struggles with inadequate coastal protection measures. India also faces severe economic losses due to climate change. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) estimates that climate-induced disasters could reduce India's GDP by 2.5% annually by 2050, affecting infrastructure, agriculture, and industries ^[28]. Developed economies possess stronger financial mechanisms, insurance policies, and disaster recovery frameworks, enabling them to recover more efficiently from climate shocks. In contrast, India lacks sufficient financial safety nets, resulting in slow and ineffective post-disaster rehabilitation.

Given these challenges, India stands to incur significantly greater losses from climate change than developed nations. Without urgent investments in climate-resilient infrastructure, sustainable resource management, and stronger policy enforcement, the country risks widespread displacement, economic instability, and worsening public health crises. Addressing these vulnerabilities through international cooperation, policy reforms, and inclusive climate adaptation measures is essential for India's long-term sustainability.

Global best practices in climate communication

Several nations have effectively implemented climate communication strategies to enhance public awareness and policy engagement. In Scandinavian countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, climate education is integrated into national curricula, ensuring early awareness of climate issues. Educational institutions emphasize sustainability, environmentally friendly practices, and scientific literacy, contributing to the development of a climate-conscious society ^[29]. India can adopt comparable education-driven models to address awareness gaps and promote early engagement with climate solutions. The European Union (EU) has developed interactive digital platforms under the European Climate Pact, enabling citizens to monitor carbon footprints, energy usage, and policy updates in real time. This approach enhances the accessibility of climate data and encourages public participation in policymaking ^[30]. Similarly, in the United States, initiatives such as NASA's Global Climate Change program provide satellite-based climate data, which is extensively utilized by researchers, policymakers, and the media. Furthermore, The Climate Reality Project promotes community-based advocacy and narrative dissemination to engage local populations in climate discussions ^[31]. India can leverage such digital tools and grassroots engagement models to strengthen climate communication.

Australia's Indigenous-led climate communication strategy represents another valuable model, wherein traditional ecological knowledge is integrated into modern climate adaptation policies. Aboriginal communities contribute insights into wildfire management, water conservation, and sustainable agriculture, which are subsequently amplified through policy frameworks and media campaigns ^[32]. India,

with its rich indigenous knowledge systems, can adopt similar localized communication approaches, combining scientific research with traditional wisdom to develop region-specific climate adaptation strategies.

National Initiatives in Climate Communication and Environmental Awareness in India

India has implemented numerous climate communication and environmental awareness programs to promote sustainable practices and public engagement. One of the most significant initiatives is Mission LiFE (Lifestyle for Environment), launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2021. This initiative encourages individual and community-driven climate action, promoting sustainable consumption, resource conservation, and environmentally friendly habits. Mission LiFE emphasizes behavioral changes at the grassroots level, urging citizens to adopt energy-efficient appliances, reduce waste, and promote water conservation ^[33]. In addition to Mission LiFE, India has implemented several large-scale environmental campaigns. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) focuses on sanitation, waste management, and plastic reduction, creating awareness through media campaigns and public participation. Similarly, the Namami Gange Program promotes river conservation and pollution control, integrating community involvement, policy measures, and scientific research to restore the Ganga ecosystem ^[34]. Furthermore, initiatives such as Unnat Jyoti by Affordable LEDs for All (UJALA) have significantly reduced energy consumption by encouraging the adoption of energy-efficient LED bulbs nationwide ^[35].

India has also strengthened climate education and outreach efforts through programs such as the National Green Corps (NGC), which engages school students in environmental activities, and the Eco-Club program, which promotes awareness of climate change, biodiversity, and conservation practices. The government has also launched State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs) to align regional strategies with national policies, ensuring localized climate communication and adaptation measures ^[36]. By expanding these initiatives and integrating digital tools, India can further enhance climate literacy and encourage proactive environmental behavior across diverse communities.

Discussion

Environmental communication plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and influencing policy decisions regarding climate change in India. However, disparities in access to climate-related information persist, particularly between urban and rural populations. While urban areas benefit from extensive media coverage and digital connectivity, rural communities often lack access to credible sources of environmental information, thus limiting their awareness and engagement. Traditional media channels such as television, radio, and newspapers remain primary sources of climate information, particularly in urban settings. However, the proliferation of social media platforms has enabled younger generations to participate in climate activism and policy discussions. Movements such as "Fridays for Future" in India exemplify how social media can mobilize youth and generate momentum for climate action. Nevertheless, the reliance on digital platforms exacerbates the knowledge gap for those with limited internet access.

Grassroots initiatives and community-based communication efforts have demonstrated efficacy in engaging rural populations. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local organizations employ participatory approaches such as workshops, environmental education programs, and sustainability projects to enhance climate literacy. By integrating traditional knowledge with scientific research, these initiatives foster localized climate resilience and behavioral change. Despite these efforts, political and economic interests often impede the implementation of effective environmental policies. Lobbying by industrial sectors and the politicization of climate narratives hinder the adoption of progressive policies. Therefore, a more integrated and multi-stakeholder approach is required to strengthen environmental communication, ensuring that diverse communities have equitable access to climate knowledge and opportunities for participation in policy formulation.

Conclusion

This study underscores the complex relationship between climate change, environmental communication, and policy development in India. While substantial progress has been made in policy formulation and public engagement, challenges persist in ensuring widespread climate literacy and inclusive participation. The research elucidates the role of traditional and digital media in shaping climate discourse, as well as the impact of grassroots initiatives in addressing awareness disparities. For India to effectively mitigate climate change, a comprehensive communication strategy is imperative. This encompasses expanding digital access to marginalized communities, promoting localized and culturally relevant messaging, and integrating climate education into public discourse. Future research should examine the long-term impact of communication strategies on behavioral change and policy implementation, exploring innovative methodologies to enhance public engagement. As India assumes a pivotal role in global climate negotiations, fostering a well-informed citizenry and evidence-based policymaking will be crucial in addressing climate challenges. Strengthening the nexus between science, communication, and governance will enable India to implement effective climate adaptation and mitigation strategies, ultimately contributing to global sustainability efforts.

Recommendations

Given the current climate emergency, it is imperative to incorporate Environmental Communication and Action as a mandatory subject across all educational levels, from primary schools to postgraduate, research, and management programs. This approach will promote climate literacy and enhance comprehension of the environmental challenges faced by the nation. Policy deliberations should be conducted to evaluate the efficacy of critical environmental information dissemination to policymakers. The communication strategies for ministries such as Environment, Transport, and Industry should be enhanced to ensure that decisions are informed by the most current environmental data. Moreover, the impacts of policies implemented by these ministries should be actively communicated by the relevant government bodies, non-governmental organizations, and media agencies. There is a distinct need for targeted communication strategies to raise

awareness. Considering the role of local communities in contributing to pollution and the broader environmental crisis, localized research should be conducted to analyze specific villages or regions. Understanding how each area contributes to environmental degradation, the impact of these activities, and potential solutions is crucial. This research should be paired with effective warning communication to local populations.

To engage the younger generation, popular media platforms such as social media and entertainment formats including short-form videos and podcasts can be utilized to disseminate climate-related messages. These tools should be leveraged to communicate critical climate information in a manner that resonates with the digital-first audience. The climate crisis should be addressed with the same urgency as the global COVID-19 pandemic. Immediate action is necessary, and all sectors government, businesses, media, and individuals must act collectively to address the climate emergency. It is essential to treat climate change as a serious, ongoing crisis that demands comprehensive and coordinated efforts. There is an urgent need for additional research on climate change and environmental communication. This topic should be regarded as an essential area for scholarly inquiry, and more research papers should be published to further explore the relationship between climate communication, policy, and societal change. Increased academic attention will provide the necessary insights for shaping long-term climate policies and actions.

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