

Has the environmental crisis in India exacerbated?

What are the major factors which contribute to the current environmental crisis?

Tikender Singh Panwar

The story so far:

As we observe June 5 as World Environment Day, one takes stock of how the previous decade has exacerbated/mitigated existing environmental crises.

What are main environmental crises?

The world is grappling with three deeply intertwined planetary crises: carbon emissions, biodiversity loss, and pollution. Over the last 10 years, these crises have deepened, despite growing awareness and international efforts.

Between 2015 and 2024, global CO₂ emissions rose from around 34.1 billion metric tonnes to 37.4 billion metric tonnes, a nearly 10% increase. In the same period, India's emissions surged from 2.33 billion to 3.12 billion metric tonnes, persistent dependence on coal and oil. On the biodiversity front, mass extinctions and ecological disruptions are becoming the norm. India, with its mega-diverse ecosystems, faces growing threats from deforestation, wetland degradation, and monoculture agriculture. Meanwhile, pollution, particularly air pollution, has remained stubbornly high. India consistently ranks among the world's most polluted countries, with Delhi topping global lists.

What are the root causes?

There are myriad causative factors. First is fossil fuel dependency. Most global carbon emissions are driven by coal, oil, and gas consumption in power generation, transportation, and industry. In India, coal still accounts for nearly 70% of electricity generation. Second, we have deforestation and land-use change. In India, forest clearances for roads, mining, and dams have increased, especially in biodiversity-rich regions like the Western Ghats and the northeast. Third, agricultural intensification. High-input monocultures, especially driven by agribusinesses, destroy habitats and pollute water bodies with nitrates, pesticides, and plastics. Waste mismanagement and unchecked urbanisation is also a major factor causing environmental degradation. Unregulated landfills, untreated sewage, and industrial effluents have polluted rivers like the Ganga and Yamuna. India generates 62 million tonnes of waste annually, of which barely 20% is scientifically processed. And finally, overconsumption and industrialisation. The Global North's high consumption and global supply chains externalise pollution and ecological damage to the Global South.

How is India positioned?

As a developing economy, India has a smaller per capita carbon footprint (~1.9 tonnes/year vs. the U.S.'s 14.7 tonnes), yet its aggregate emissions are rising due to rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. The poor bear the brunt of pollution and climate shocks – whether in Delhi's smog-choked slums or drought-stricken villages in Maharashtra. Yet India is also a victim of the environmental damage caused by global forces. Climate change, largely driven by the historical emissions of richer nations, has intensified India's monsoons, floods, and heatwaves, while biodiversity loss has weakened India's food systems and health infrastructure.

What needs to be done?

A meaningful response must include accountability from nations of the Global North. Wealthy nations must drastically cut emissions, provide climate finance, and stop outsourcing dirty industries. Large polluting corporations must also be held accountable through strict laws and carbon taxation. Moreover, the future of development must be based on ecological concerns. For example, corporations that do not adhere to the 'green policy' should not be allowed to trade in the market. Creating such protocols will pave way for systemic changes. Sustainable development should be encouraged with a shift toward low-carbon livelihoods, ecological agriculture, and community-led conservation.

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THE GIST

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