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Farmer-Centric Environmental Policy in India

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“Environmental governance fails when sustainability is measured in targets, but not in the dignity of the cultivator.”

Introduction

The Indian agricultural sector represents not merely an economic sector but a social ecosystem. While nearly 86 percent of cultivators are marginal and small farmers with landholdings below two hectares, environmental policy continues to view the farmer as an object of regulation rather than as a stakeholder in resilience management.^{^1} The monsoon is becoming increasingly erratic, heat waves are reducing wheat yields, and groundwater depletion has intensified agrarian indebtedness.^{^2} The rural crisis now stands compounded by the climate crisis.

This paper argues that environmental policy in India must move from “green targets” to a farmer-centric framework by granting farmers the legal status of “climate stakeholders” and designing management systems that account for local vulnerabilities and human impacts.

1. The Field Reality: Climate Change as a Breach of Trust in Rural India

1.1 The Production Shock

According to the India Meteorological Department (“IMD”), over the past fifty years, the monsoon length has increased by approximately 0.8 days per year, while average monsoon rainfall has declined annually.^{^3} Rainfall deficiencies have been recorded in a majority of recent years, severely affecting agricultural productivity.^{^4} The March 2022 heat wave caused India’s wheat production to decline by approximately 4.5 percent.^{^5} Earlier estimates by the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare placed wheat production at 111.32 million tonnes,

but revised estimates following the heat wave reduced production to 106.84 million tonnes.^{^6} For a farmer cultivating one hectare of land, such a decline translates into substantial financial losses.

1.2 The Legal Fallout

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (“NCRB”), 11,290 suicides were committed by farmers and agricultural labourers in 2022, amounting to nearly one death every hour.^{^7} Of these, approximately 53 percent were agricultural labourers.^{^8} Studies have also suggested that rising temperatures may be linked to increased suicide rates among Indian farmers, raising concerns under Articles 21 and 39(b) of the Constitution of India.^{^9}

1.3 The Management Fallout

Data from NABARD indicates that banks exceeded agricultural credit targets by disbursing approximately ₹9.15 lakh crore against a target of ₹8.5 lakh crore during the financial year 2015–16.^{^10} However, the NSSO’s 70th Round revealed that approximately 52 percent of agricultural households remained indebted, with nearly 60 percent of loans originating from informal sources.^{^11} Climate uncertainty has also become a major supply chain concern for agribusinesses. IMD monsoon forecasts continue to predict heightened risks of rainfall deficits and irregular precipitation patterns.^{^12}

2. Why Current Environmental Policy is Not Farmer-Centric

2.1 The Target Problem

The National Action Plan on Climate Change primarily focuses on macro-level targets such as solar energy generation and afforestation.^{^13} Farmers, however, remain concerned with outcomes such as income stability, debt reduction, and crop resilience.

2.2 The Jurisdiction Problem

Agriculture falls within the State List under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution, whereas environmental protection lies within the Concurrent List.^{^14} Water governance is also largely administered at the state level. Consequently, governance becomes fragmented across panchayats, revenue authorities, banks, and market systems, leaving farmers without an integrated institutional framework.

2.3 The Voice Problem

The evolution of Indian environmental law has largely emerged through urban public interest litigation (“PIL”).¹⁵ Small and marginal farmers rarely participate in the legal and policy deliberations that shape climate-smart agricultural governance.

3. A Farmer-Centric Environmental Policy: Tools of Law and Management

3.1 The Legal Pillar: From Beneficiary to Right-Holder

a. Statutory Climate Risk Entitlements

The Disaster Management Act, 2005 should be amended to recognize rights arising from chronic climate stress and to designate “climate vulnerability zones” with enforceable entitlements relating to water planning, advisories, and parametric insurance.¹⁶

b. Agro-Ecological Zoning

The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 should be amended to establish “Agro-Climatic Legal Zones,” while minimum support price (“MSP”) systems should incentivize climate-resilient crops such as millets and pulses in drought-prone regions.¹⁷

c. Climate Clauses in Agricultural Contracts

Climate-adjustment clauses should be incorporated into contract farming frameworks, and the Reserve Bank of India (“RBI”) should introduce climate-based moratorium mechanisms for Kisan Credit Card loans.

3.2 The Management Pillar: From Schemes to Systems

a. Gram Panchayat Climate Balance Sheets

Using data from IMD and ISRO, local governments should prepare annual climate balance sheets measuring groundwater depletion, soil carbon levels, and debt-to-income ratios.

b. Krishi-Jalvaayu Mitras

Local youth may be engaged through MGNREGA and CSR initiatives to operate weather kiosks, seed banks, and insurance facilitation systems.

c. Market Architecture

A fixed proportion of MSP expenditure should be redirected toward climate-resilient crops, and locally grown millets should be procured for public nutrition programs such as the Mid-Day Meal Scheme.

3.3 The Accountability Pillar: Measuring What Counts

a. Farmer Impact Statements

The Comptroller and Auditor General (“CAG”) should conduct impact audits assessing whether schemes such as PMKSY and PMFBY reduce water burdens and distress sales.

b. District Climate Justice Index

NITI Aayog should publish an annual district-level climate justice index evaluating indicators such as indebtedness, migration, and child malnutrition.

4. Law and Management: Implications

From a legal perspective, environmental governance must evolve to incorporate concepts such as “climate fiduciary duty,” “agro-ecological due process,” and “adaptive contracting.”

From a management perspective, business schools should integrate climate operations management into their curricula, while agribusiness firms should co-invest with local communities in watershed protection and resilient sourcing systems.

5. Conclusion: From Stewardship to Trusteeship

Farmers are not merely beneficiaries of environmental policy but trustees of agricultural land and ecological sustainability. Conservation cannot succeed if cultivators abandon farming due to economic and climatic distress. By 2030, the success of environmental policy should be measured not only through emission targets but also through the well-being, security, and dignity of farming communities.

Footnotes

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5. Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare, Government of India, *Fourth Advance Estimates for Production of Foodgrains for 2021–22* (2022).
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8. Id.
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10. NABARD, *Annual Report 2015–16* (2016).
11. National Sample Survey Office, Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, *Key Indicators of Situation of Agricultural Households in India* (70th Round, 2014).
12. India Meteorological Department, *Southwest Monsoon Seasonal Forecast* (2026).
13. Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change, *National Action Plan on Climate Change* (2008).
14. INDIA CONST. sched. VII, lists II & III.
15. See generally M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, (1987) 1 S.C.C. 395.
16. Disaster Management Act, No. 53 of 2005, INDIA CODE (2005).
17. Environment (Protection) Act, No. 29 of 1986, INDIA CODE (1986).

