

Evolution Of Environmental Ethics In Education

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Abstract: *Environmental ethics in education has become increasingly important as societies face rising ecological challenges such as climate change, pollution, biodiversity loss, and unsustainable consumption. This research paper examines the meaning, significance, and implementation of environmental ethics within educational systems. It highlights how values such as responsibility, respect for nature, intergenerational justice, and ecological sustainability can be integrated into curriculum, pedagogy, institutional culture, and community engagement. The study analyzes global trends, identifies key challenges, and proposes a holistic framework for integrating environmental ethics into education. The paper concludes that environmental ethics must be a core component of modern education to build environmentally conscious future citizens.*

KEYWORDS: United Nations, Environmental ethics, Basic Education scheme, National Green Corps, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

INTRODUCTION

The development of Environmental Education began with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972. This was followed by the Belgrade International Workshop on Environmental Education in 1975, and later by the International Environmental Education Programme started jointly by UNESCO and UNEP. Public concern about pollution and other environmental issues had already been rising, which led to the celebration of the first Earth Day in 1970, marking the beginning of modern Environmental Education.

The 21st-century world is facing unprecedented environmental challenges. Global warming, deforestation, water scarcity, plastic pollution, and biodiversity loss are rapidly degrading the planet. These problems are not only scientific but also ethical, as they raise questions about human responsibility, fairness to future generations, and moral duty toward nature.

Education plays a central role in shaping values, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, integrating environmental ethics into education is necessary for building environmentally responsible citizens. Environmental ethics teaches learners to see nature not merely as a resource but as a living system deserving respect, care, and protection.

Environmental ethics refers to the moral responsibility and awareness that individuals develop toward protecting the environment and ensuring the well-being of both present and future generations. It emphasizes the need for humans to live in balance with nature, recognizing that our survival and quality of life depend on healthy ecosystems.

Human beings are only one part of the larger web of life, which also includes plants, animals, and other living organisms. While discussing the values and principles that guide our lives, we often overlook that these living beings share our world and contribute to it. They form an essential part of the environment and therefore deserve respect, consideration, and ethical treatment as members of the same life system.

Human beings are expected to fulfil certain responsibilities toward one another, and in the same way, we also have duties toward the environment. Environmental ethics teaches that our actions should be guided by moral principles that shape how we treat other living beings in nature. It emphasizes that ethical consideration must extend beyond humans to include animals, plants, and the wider natural world. Even if society often places humans at the centre, other forms of life are equally significant and deserve the right to exist and thrive.

Humans and all other organisms are interconnected through the food chain and together form a larger ecological community. The environment does not

belong solely to humans; rather, our survival depends on the support of both living and non-living elements of nature. Therefore, conserving natural resources is not only important for today but is also a fundamental responsibility of every individual.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea of environmental ethics in education has developed gradually in response to growing ecological crises and increasing awareness about human responsibility toward nature. Researchers in the fields of philosophy, education, environmental studies, and policy studies have looked at how education can foster environmental ethics.

Early philosophical writings on environmental ethics focused on questioning human-centred (anthropocentric) approaches to nature. According to Attfield (1983) nature has inherent worth and shouldn't be preserved solely for the benefit of humans. His contributions established the groundwork for ethical reasoning that acknowledges moral duties to non-human organisms. Arluke and Sanders (1996) also investigated human-animal interactions and emphasised how ethical behaviour toward animals and the natural world is influenced by cultural attitudes.

As environmental issues became more widespread, academics started to make a clear connection between ethics and education. Karata° emphasized that preventing environmental issues at the local level requires environmental ethics education. He contends that moral principles must direct both individual and group behavior because knowledge alone is insufficient. Additionally, Taneja and Gupta emphasized that in order to raise students' understanding of environmental issues, formal education should incorporate environmental ethics.

The development of environmental ethics education has been greatly influenced by international organizations like UNESCO and UNEP. Environmental education should foster values, attitudes, and ethical responsibility for the environment, according to the Tbilisi Declaration (1977). The relevance of education in fostering ethical decision-making and sustainable development was further emphasized by UNESCO's climate change education efforts.

Sustainability and education for sustainable development (ESD) are the main topics of recent research. According to Baker, Grundy, and Junmookda, teaching environmental ethics enables students to make the connection between moral thinking and practical environmental activities. They highlighted value-based education, community involvement, and experience learning as useful instruments for ethical growth.

Environmental ethics in India have strong institutional, cultural, and constitutional foundations, as many scholars have highlighted. Academic literature has written a great deal on how to incorporate environmental ideas into policy, such as the National Education Policy 2020, eco-club initiatives, and the Supreme Court's directives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study investigates the development

and function of environmental ethics in education using a qualitative and descriptive research technique. The conceptual aspect of the research is founded on a methodical examination of the body of knowledge about environmental ethics, including literature, regulations, court rulings, and educational systems.

NATURE OF THE STUDY

This Paper is analytical and interpretative rather than empirical. It places more emphasis on comprehending concepts, moral precepts, and policy advancements than on quantifying numerical data. The study aims to clarify how educational policies and practices, especially in the Indian setting, reflect the evolution of environmental ethics within educational systems.

SOURCE OF DATA

The research only makes use of secondary sources for data, including

1. Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly works on ethics and environmental education
2. Environmental and educational policy texts at the national and international level
3. UNESCO and UNEP publications and reports
4. Government publications from India such as the National Education Policy
5. Supreme Court decisions and constitutional articles pertaining to environmental protection

CONCEPT OF ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS

Environmental ethics is a branch of philosophy that examines moral relationships between human beings and the natural world.

Environmental ethics raises several important questions:

- Is the Earth meant only for human use?
- Do humans have moral duties toward the natural world?
- Are we justified in using all of the planet's resources for ourselves?
- Should we act as responsible caretakers of the Earth?
- Do other species possess an inherent right to exist?
- Can natural entities like trees claim legal protection?
- How do different religions view the relationship between humans and the rest of life?

These questions help shape the field of environmental ethics and encourage people to reflect on their responsibilities toward nature.

ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS PROMOTES VALUE SUCH AS :

- Respect for nature
- Responsibility toward the environment
- Intergenerational justice
- Ecological balance
- Compassion for non-human life
- Sustainable living practices

Knowledge '!' Awareness '!' Attitude '!' Behaviour '!' Sustainable Action '!' Conservation

These values encourage humans to protect nature for both present and future generations. environmental decisions and thinking about the effects of their actions on nature. The aims of teaching environmental ethics can differ across countries because educational systems, cultures, and social values influence how the subject is designed and taught.

This section explains the main goals of environmental ethics education at all levels—from early childhood to higher education—and even outside the classroom.

Environmental Education (EE) and Environmental Ethics Education (EEE) have evolved significantly in India due to the country's deep ecological traditions, constitutional commitments, national policies, judicial interventions, and educational reforms. India's history, culture, and legal frameworks strongly support the idea that humans must live in harmony with nature. Over the years, these values have influenced curriculum development, policy decisions, and nationwide programmes aimed at promoting environmental awareness and ethical responsibility among students and citizens. This case study summarizes the major developments in EE and EEE in India, focusing on society and culture, policy directions, the role of the Supreme Court, curriculum initiatives, and institutional support.

1. SOCIETY, CULTURE AND LAW

Indian society has long maintained a close and respectful relationship with the environment. Ancient Indian literature, sacred texts, and the teachings of sages highlight the belief that all forms of life—plants, animals, rivers, forests, and humans—are deeply interconnected. These texts emphasize humility, respect for nature, and the obligation to protect the environment for future generations. Traditional Indian culture views nature not as a resource to be exploited, but as a living system that supports life.

The Indian Constitution reflects this cultural heritage by explicitly requiring both the State and citizens to safeguard the environment. Article 48-A directs the State to protect and improve the natural environment, forests, and wildlife. Article 51A(g) makes it a fundamental duty of every citizen to protect and enhance the environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, and living creatures. These constitutional principles create a clear legal foundation for environmental ethics and ensure that environmental protection remains an integral responsibility for all citizens.

2. NATIONAL POLICY ON EDUCATION AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

Environmental education has been a priority in India's curriculum development efforts since the early 20th century. One of the earliest initiatives was Mahatma Gandhi's Basic Education scheme (1937), which aimed to connect education with productive work, community life, and the local environment. This approach encouraged students to learn about their surroundings and become responsible members of society.

The Education Commission (1964–66) further strengthened these ideas by recommending that primary school science should help children understand basic

concepts about the physical and biological environment. These recommendations laid the foundation for including environmental content in school curricula.

A major milestone came with the National Policy on Education (NPE), 1986, which identified "Protection of the Environment" as an essential national value. The policy stated that environmental awareness must be developed at every stage of education and among all sections of society. It called for the integration of environmental themes into teaching at schools and colleges, ensuring that students develop scientific thinking, national identity, and environmental responsibility.

To support the policy, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) prepared detailed curriculum guidelines and model syllabi for Classes I–X. Later curriculum frameworks released in 1988 and 2000 continued to emphasize environmental education. These frameworks encouraged activity-based learning, field experiences, and multidisciplinary approaches to help students understand environmental issues more deeply.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in India places a strong emphasis on environmental ethics, awareness, and sustainability by integrating these concepts throughout the education system, from school to higher education.

The policy aims to cultivate a sense of environmental responsibility and create citizens who are aware of local and global environmental challenges, such as climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss

PROVISION FOR ENVIRONMENT ETHICS

Curriculum Integration and Holistic Learning: The NEP 2020 promotes the integration of environmental education into the curriculum at all levels, moving beyond treating it as an isolated subject.

Holistic Development: The policy's fundamental principle is to develop "good human beings" with a scientific temper, compassion, and sound ethical moorings and values, which explicitly includes respect and care for the environment.

Multidisciplinary Approach: Environmental concepts are to be infused across all subjects (Science, Social Science, Language, etc.), promoting a multidisciplinary understanding of environmental issues. For example, topics like water conservation are linked to history, geography, and science.

Experiential Learning: The policy champions experiential, inquiry-driven, and discovery-oriented pedagogy. This includes hands-on activities, projects, and fieldwork related to local environmental issues like waste management and conservation.

Activity-based learning—like nature walks, eco-clubs, waste-management projects, and community participation to help students practice environmental responsibility in real life. It also encourages traditional Indian ecological wisdom, such as the idea of living in harmony with nature, and integrates it with modern scientific knowledge.

3. ROLE OF SUPREME COURT IN STRENGTHENING ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

One of the most significant turning points for EE in India came through judicial intervention. In 1991,

environmental activist and lawyer Shri M.C. Mehta filed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court, asking for nationwide action to improve environmental awareness. He requested three key directives:

- Cinema halls should display environmental awareness slides.
- Radio and television should broadcast environmental information.
- Environmental education should become compulsory in schools and colleges.
- The Supreme Court acknowledged the importance of these requests and recognised that environmental protection was essential for human survival. The Court observed that laws could only be effective when citizens understood and accepted them. Therefore, spreading environmental awareness was crucial.

4. HABITAT AND LEARNING: NEW APPROACHES TO EDUCATIONAL EDUCATION

As part of its curricular reforms, NCERT set up National Focus Groups in 2004 to review key thematic areas in education. The Focus Group on Habitat and Learning was responsible for developing guidelines related to environmental education.

The group proposed a new philosophy of education combining science, democracy, and environmental care. Its key recommendations were:

- Shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered education.
- Promote critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Encourage local-level learning with a global understanding.
- Use multidisciplinary approaches, linking science, social science, and language learning.
- Use multiple sources of knowledge, including community members, rather than relying only on textbooks.
- Ensure participatory learning and involve students in real-life activities.
- Promote lifelong learning and continuous environmental awareness.
- Emphasize equity, gender sensitivity, and cultural diversity.
- Focus on empowering learners instead of imposing ideas on them.
- Encourage innovative teaching and outdoor learning experiences.

This approach reflects a shift toward experiential and ethical learning, helping develop environmentally responsible and reflective students.

5. INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

India has created strong institutional mechanisms to support EE across the country. At the central level, both the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF) and the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD) have taken active roles.

Key Initiatives

- 1) Centres of Excellence in Environmental Education

Centre for Environment Education (CEE), Ahmedabad

- 2) CPR Environmental Education Centre, Chennai

These centres create teaching materials, conduct research, and train teachers.

- 3) National Environmental Awareness Campaign (NEAC) MoEF organises awareness activities, teacher training programmes, and community events through NGOs and schools.

- 4) Environmental Orientation to School Education Scheme Supported by MHRD, this programme helps states and NGOs integrate environmental themes into school education.

- 5) Teacher Training Colleges

Many teacher education institutions now include environmental education components in B.Ed curriculum.

ENVIRONMENT EDUCATION IN SCHOOL SYSTEM (EESS) PROJECT

One of the major initiatives was the EESS project, launched by MoEF to evaluate and strengthen EE in India.

- Phase I :analyzed the extent to which environmental concepts were integrated into existing school curricula.
- Phase II implemented pilot programmes in eight states, focusing on including environmental themes in Science, Social Studies, and Languages for Classes VI–VIII. It also promoted co-curricular and hands-on activities.
- Phase III expanded the project to eight additional states. Activities included revising textbooks, training teachers, and designing hands-on environmental activities.

A major achievement of this project was the “greening of textbooks.” Environmental concepts were added, modified, or redesigned in textbooks to ensure that students understood ecological relationships, sustainability issues, and ethical responsibilities. States involved included Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Goa, Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Uttarakhand, and others added in later phases.

NATIONAL GREEN CORPS (ECO-CLUB PROGRAMME)

The National Green Corps (NGC), also known as the Eco-Club Programme, is an important environmental education initiative launched by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Government of India. Its main goal is to involve school students in environmental conservation by helping them learn about nature through direct action and hands-on activities.

Key Features:

Eco-Clubs in Schools: Under NGC, schools across India form Eco-Clubs where students, known as “Green Volunteers,” participate in activities that promote environmental awareness.

Learning by Doing: Instead of only reading from textbooks, students take part in practical activities such as:

- Tree plantation
- waste management and recycling

- water conservation
- biodiversity surveys
- clean-up drives
- awareness rallies on pollution and climate issues

Teacher as Eco-Club In-Charge: Each club has a trained teacher who guides students in planning and conducting environmental programmes.

Developing Environmental Ethics: The programme helps students build values such as responsibility toward nature, respect for living beings, resource conservation, and sustainable living habits.

Community Participation: Eco-Clubs often involve parents, local bodies, forest departments, NGOs, and community leaders to spread environmental awareness beyond the school campus.

Nationwide Reach: Millions of students from thousands of schools across all states and union territories participate in the NGC programme, making it one of India's largest environmental education initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The development of Environmental Education (EE) and Environmental Ethics Education (EEE) in India demonstrates the country's long-standing commitment to ecological values, sustainable development, and responsible citizenship. Rooted in cultural traditions and reinforced by strong constitutional mandates, India has built a comprehensive framework that integrates environmental awareness into national education systems.

The Supreme Court's interventions made EE mandatory throughout the country, ensuring that environmental issues are no longer treated as optional knowledge. NCERT's curriculum reforms, national consultations, and textbook greening initiatives have further strengthened the teaching and learning of environmental concepts.

Government ministries, centers of excellence, teacher training institutes, and NGOs have collectively contributed to building a nationwide system that fosters environmental awareness, ethical thinking, and active participation in conservation efforts.

Overall, India's experience shows that environmental education must be culturally rooted, legally supported, and institutionally strengthened to create environmentally conscious generations capable of safeguarding the planet.

Environmental ethics in education are essential for building a sustainable and responsible society. By integrating moral principles, hands-on learning, and awareness programs, educational institutions can develop environmentally conscious citizens who value nature and act ethically. As ecological challenges continue to rise, strengthening environmental ethics in education is not only necessary but urgent for the well-being of both present and future generations.

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