

## MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS AND LEGAL SAFEGUARDS: EVALUATING THE IMPACT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION LEGISLATIONS

Sushant Bali<sup>1</sup>, Anu Mutneja<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Teaching Assistant, University School of Law,  
Desh Bhagat University Mandi Gobindgarh Punjab

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor, University School of Law,  
Desh Bhagat University Mandi Gobindgarh Punjab

Corresponding author: Sushant Bali, Teaching Assistant, University School of Law,  
Desh Bhagat University Mandi Gobindgarh Punjab, Email.Id: AP4.Law@ deshbhagatuniversity.in

### ABSTRACT

Mental health has emerged as one of the most pressing public health concerns worldwide. While biological and socio-economic determinants of mental health have been extensively studied, environmental degradation has increasingly been recognized as a significant contributor to psychological distress. Air pollution, water contamination, climate change, biodiversity loss, deforestation, and urban environmental degradation adversely affect not only physical health but also mental well-being. Environmental stressors contribute to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eco-anxiety, sleep disturbances, and reduced quality of life. Recognizing these interconnections, environmental protection legislations serve not only ecological objectives but also promote public health and psychological well-being by creating healthier and safer environments.

This paper examines the relationship between environmental protection legislations and mental health awareness from a legal and public health perspective. It adopts a doctrinal and analytical research methodology based on constitutional provisions, statutory laws, judicial decisions, international environmental instruments, and secondary empirical data. The study analyses major environmental legislations in India, including the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, and the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010. Landmark judicial decisions such as *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, and *Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar* are examined to understand the evolving jurisprudence linking environmental rights with the constitutional right to life.

The paper concludes that effective environmental legislation contributes significantly to mental health by reducing environmental risks, promoting sustainable development, and strengthening environmental justice. It recommends integrating mental health considerations into environmental policymaking, environmental impact assessments, and climate adaptation strategies.

**Keywords:** Mental Health, Environmental Protection, Environmental Law, Human Rights, Sustainable Development, Environmental Justice, Public Health, Legal Safeguards.

### INTRODUCTION

Mental health is an indispensable component of overall health and human development. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her abilities, can cope with normal stresses of life, work productively, and contribute to society. The WHO further emphasizes that mental health is shaped by social, economic, and environmental determinants, not merely by biological factors.

Rapid industrialization, urbanization, and climate change have intensified environmental degradation across the globe. Increasing levels of air and water pollution, excessive noise, shrinking green spaces, and extreme weather events have exposed millions of people to environmental hazards. These

hazards are now recognized as major contributors to psychological stress, depression, anxiety disorders, and trauma. Climate change has also given rise to emerging concepts such as eco-anxiety and climate grief, particularly among younger populations and communities directly affected by environmental disasters.

India faces significant environmental challenges arising from population growth, industrial expansion, and urbanization. Environmental degradation affects not only ecological sustainability but also human dignity and quality of life. Consequently, environmental protection has evolved into a constitutional obligation under Articles 21, 48A, and 51A(g) of the Constitution of India.

Although environmental legislation is primarily intended to

conserve natural resources and prevent pollution, it also contributes indirectly to the protection of mental health by ensuring healthier surroundings, reducing environmental stressors, and promoting environmental justice. This paper critically evaluates the effectiveness of environmental protection legislations in safeguarding mental health and highlights the need to integrate psychological well-being into environmental governance.

### RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are:

- To examine the relationship between environmental degradation and mental health.
- To analyse environmental protection legislations in India.
- To evaluate constitutional and judicial safeguards for environmental protection.
- To study landmark environmental cases affecting public health.
- To propose policy recommendations integrating environmental law with mental health promotion.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on doctrinal legal research and qualitative analysis. Secondary sources include:

- Constitutional provisions.
- Indian environmental statutes.
- Supreme Court and National Green Tribunal decisions.
- WHO publications.
- United Nations Environment Programme reports.
- IPCC reports.
- Government publications.
- Peer-reviewed journal articles.

The research also analyses selected case studies demonstrating the relationship between environmental protection and mental health outcomes.

### MENTAL HEALTH AND ENVIRONMENTAL DEGRADATION

Environmental degradation adversely influences psychological well-being through multiple pathways.

#### Air Pollution

Exposure to particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub>), nitrogen dioxide, and ozone has been associated with increased risks of depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment, and dementia.

#### Climate Change

Extreme weather events including floods, droughts, cyclones, and heat waves result in displacement, livelihood loss, trauma,

and chronic psychological stress. WHO has highlighted climate change as a major threat to mental health.

#### Noise Pollution

Long-term exposure to excessive environmental noise contributes to sleep disorders, hypertension, irritability, reduced concentration, and chronic stress.

#### Green Spaces

Evidence indicates that parks, forests, and urban green spaces reduce stress hormones, improve mood, encourage physical activity, and enhance social interaction. WHO reviews report an overall positive association between access to green and blue spaces and mental well-being.

### CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK IN INDIA

The Constitution of India establishes a robust legal foundation for environmental protection.

- **Article 21** guarantees the right to life and has been judicially interpreted to include the right to a clean and healthy environment.
- **Article 48A** directs the State to protect and improve the environment.
- **Article 51A(g)** imposes a fundamental duty upon citizens to protect forests, rivers, lakes, wildlife, and the natural environment.

Major environmental legislations include:

- Environment (Protection) Act, 1986
- Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981
- Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974
- National Green Tribunal Act, 2010
- Biological Diversity Act, 2002

These statutes collectively aim to reduce pollution and improve environmental quality, thereby contributing to healthier living conditions that support mental well-being.

### LANDMARK JUDICIAL DECISIONS

#### M.C. Mehta v. Union of India

The Supreme Court issued directions to control industrial pollution and improve environmental quality. The Court recognized environmental protection as an essential component of the right to life.

#### Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India

The Court introduced the Precautionary Principle and Polluter Pays Principle into Indian environmental jurisprudence, emphasizing sustainable development.

#### Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar

The Supreme Court held that the right to pollution-free water and air forms part of Article 21.

These judgments have strengthened environmental governance and indirectly promoted healthier living environments that support psychological well-being.

### **MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION**

Effective environmental legislation contributes to mental health in several ways:

- Reduction in pollution-related stress.
- Improved access to clean air and safe drinking water.
- Increased availability of parks and recreational spaces.
- Reduced anxiety associated with environmental disasters.
- Enhanced trust in governance and environmental justice.
- Improved community resilience during climate emergencies.

Research also demonstrates that exposure to green environments improves emotional regulation, reduces depression, and enhances life satisfaction.

### **CHALLENGES**

Despite a comprehensive legal framework, several challenges remain:

- Weak implementation of environmental laws.
- Delayed enforcement actions.
- Lack of coordination among regulatory authorities.
- Limited public awareness.
- Insufficient integration of mental health considerations into environmental policy.
- Climate-induced displacement and disaster-related trauma.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Incorporate mental health assessments into Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedures.
2. Strengthen pollution monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.
3. Expand urban green infrastructure.
4. Integrate environmental health into public mental health policies.
5. Increase public awareness regarding environmental determinants of mental health.
6. Encourage interdisciplinary collaboration among legal scholars, psychologists, environmental scientists, and public health professionals.

### **CONCLUSION**

Environmental protection is no longer merely an ecological concern but a fundamental public health and human rights issue. Scientific evidence increasingly demonstrates that environmental degradation significantly affects mental health through pollution, climate change, biodiversity loss, and declining access to healthy natural environments. Environmental protection legislations, constitutional safeguards, and judicial activism therefore play a crucial role in promoting both ecological sustainability and psychological well-being.

India possesses a strong constitutional and statutory framework for environmental protection. However, effective implementation, stronger institutional capacity, and explicit recognition of mental health within environmental governance remain necessary. Integrating environmental protection with mental health policy will strengthen sustainable development, improve public health outcomes, and advance the constitutional promise of a life with dignity.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Berry, H. L., Bowen, K., & Kjellstrom, T. (2010). Climate change and mental health. *International Journal of Public Health*, 55(2), 123-132.
2. Government of India. Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
3. Government of India. Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981.
4. Government of India. Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974.
5. Government of India. National Green Tribunal Act, 2010.
6. M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, AIR 1988 SC 1037.
7. Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India, (1996) 5 SCC 647.
8. Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar, AIR 1991 SC 420.
9. World Health Organization. World Mental Health Report: Transforming Mental Health for All.
10. World Health Organization. Mental Health and Climate Change: Policy Brief.
11. World Health Organization. Green and Blue Spaces and Mental Health.
12. United Nations Environment Programme. Global Environment Outlook.
13. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Sixth Assessment Report.