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Rethinking Development through Environmental Ethics and Responsible Living

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Abstract

Contemporary models of development have largely been driven by economic growth, industrial expansion, and consumerist aspirations, often neglecting ecological limits and moral responsibilities toward nature. This growth-centric paradigm has resulted in climate change, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, and rising environmental inequalities, particularly in developing countries like India. The present study argues that environmental degradation is not merely a technological or policy failure but fundamentally an ethical crisis rooted in unsustainable lifestyles and exploitative human–nature relationships. By integrating the principles of environmental ethics with the concept of responsible living, this paper re-examines development from a moral and sustainability perspective. Using secondary data from government reports, the Economic Survey, UNEP documents, and policy analyses, the study evaluates the environmental impacts of everyday consumption patterns and highlights the need for behavioural transformation alongside institutional reforms. The paper proposes a multi-level framework involving individuals, communities, and governments to promote sustainable practices. It concludes that ethical consciousness and lifestyle modification are indispensable for achieving long-term ecological balance and intergenerational justice.

Keywords: Environmental Ethics, Sustainable Development, Responsible Living, Lifestyle Change, Ecological Justice, India, Climate Responsibility

Introduction

Development in the modern world has largely been equated with rapid industrialization, urban expansion, technological advancement, and rising consumption levels. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has become the dominant indicator of national progress, often overshadowing ecological stability and social well-being. While this growth-oriented paradigm has improved material living standards for many, it has simultaneously intensified environmental degradation at an unprecedented scale. Climate change, air and water pollution, deforestation, biodiversity loss, and resource depletion have emerged not as isolated environmental problems but as systemic outcomes of the prevailing model of development.

Global scientific assessments indicate the seriousness of this crisis. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) warns that rising greenhouse gas emissions are increasing the frequency of extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, and heat waves. In India, these impacts are already visible in the form of declining groundwater levels, worsening urban air quality, and growing vulnerability of agrarian livelihoods. Reports such as the Economic Survey and NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index highlight that several regions face acute water stress and ecological imbalance. These realities demonstrate that economic growth achieved at the cost of environmental sustainability is ultimately self-defeating.

However, the environmental crisis cannot be explained only through technological or administrative failures. At its core, it reflects a deeper ethical problem. Contemporary lifestyles are increasingly characterized by excessive consumption, convenience-driven behaviour, and a disconnect between human needs and ecological limits. Natural resources are treated as commodities rather than shared ecological assets. This anthropocentric mindset legitimizes exploitation and ignores the moral responsibility of present generations toward future ones.

Thus, environmental degradation is not merely a policy issue but also a question of values, choices, and ethics.

In this context, environmental ethics offers a critical framework to reassess the relationship between humans and nature. It challenges the assumption that development must necessarily involve unlimited extraction and consumption. Instead, it advocates principles such as intergenerational justice, ecological responsibility, and sustainable use of resources. When combined with responsible living practices—such as mindful consumption, waste reduction, renewable energy use, and community participation—these ethical foundations can transform development into a more balanced and sustainable process.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to rethink development beyond economic indicators and incorporate moral and ecological considerations into everyday life and public policy. This paper seeks to examine how environmental ethics can guide sustainable lifestyles and how such behavioural transformations can contribute to long-term ecological stability. By analysing theoretical perspectives, policy initiatives, and practical examples from the Indian context, the study attempts to propose an integrated framework for responsible and sustainable development.

Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Foundations

Understanding sustainable development requires a clear ethical foundation. Environmental degradation is not only the result of weak policies or inadequate technology but also of value systems that promote excessive consumption and human dominance over nature. Hence, environmental issues must be examined through an ethical lens.

Environmental ethics studies the moral relationship between humans and the natural world. It challenges the view that nature exists solely for human use and argues that ecosystems, species, and future generations possess intrinsic value. From this perspective, environmental protection becomes a moral responsibility rather than a voluntary choice.

Three broad approaches explain this relationship. Anthropocentrism places humans at the center and treats nature as a resource, often encouraging exploitation. Biocentrism extends moral concern to all living beings and promotes conservation. Ecocentrism focuses on maintaining the balance and integrity of entire ecosystems. Together, these perspectives highlight the need to limit unchecked development.

In the Indian context, ethical principles such as restraint in consumption, harmony with nature, and collective responsibility support sustainable living. These values emphasize need-

based use of resources rather than accumulation driven by greed.

A sustainable lifestyle, therefore, refers to everyday practices that reduce ecological footprints through responsible consumption, energy efficiency, waste reduction, and mindful behaviour. When ethical awareness guides such practices, development becomes environmentally balanced and socially just. Thus, this study links environmental ethics with responsible living and treats lifestyle transformation as a necessary pathway toward sustainable development.

Literature Review

The relationship between development, environment, and ethics has been examined across disciplines including philosophy, economics, ecology, and public policy. Over time, scholars have increasingly recognized that environmental degradation cannot be addressed solely through technological innovation or regulatory mechanisms. Instead, the crisis reflects deeper structural and ethical issues embedded within modern patterns of growth and consumption. This section reviews major theoretical contributions and policy perspectives that inform the present study.

Early environmental thought emphasized conservation and resource management. However, a significant shift occurred when scholars began to question the moral foundations of human dominance over nature. Aldo Leopold's "land ethic" proposed that humans should view themselves not as conquerors of the land but as members of an ecological community. This perspective expanded the scope of moral responsibility to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, thereby challenging purely human-centered development approaches.

Similarly, deep ecology theorists argued that environmental problems arise from excessive anthropocentrism and materialism. They emphasized intrinsic value in all forms of life and called for reduced consumption and simpler living. These ideas highlighted that sustainability requires not only policy reform but also lifestyle transformation. The argument that "quality of life" should replace "quantity of consumption" gradually gained acceptance in sustainability debates.

From an economic perspective, several development thinkers questioned the assumption that higher income automatically ensures well-being. Human development approaches emphasized capabilities, equity, and social justice rather than mere economic expansion. This line of reasoning indirectly supports environmental sustainability by advocating balanced and need-based growth instead of unlimited accumulation. Studies linking poverty, inequality, and environmental vulnerability further demonstrated

that ecological degradation disproportionately affects marginalized communities.

Global institutional reports have also reinforced these concerns. The Brundtland Commission introduced the concept of sustainable development, defining it as development that meets present needs without compromising future generations. Subsequent assessments by organizations such as UNEP and IPCC provided scientific evidence that current production and consumption patterns exceed ecological limits. These reports consistently stress behavioural change, energy transition, and sustainable lifestyles as essential components of climate mitigation.

In the Indian context, environmental thinking has drawn both from modern policy initiatives and traditional knowledge systems. Government documents such as the Economic Survey, National Action Plan on Climate Change, and various sustainability missions highlight renewable energy adoption, waste management, and resource efficiency. At the same time, indigenous practices, community-based resource management, and Gandhian principles of minimal consumption reflect culturally embedded sustainability values. These approaches suggest that ethical restraint and collective responsibility have long been part of Indian socio-cultural life. Despite these contributions, a significant gap remains. Much of the existing literature focuses either on macro-level policy frameworks or abstract ethical theory, while the connection between everyday lifestyle choices and environmental outcomes receives comparatively less systematic attention. There is limited integration between moral philosophy and practical behavioural change. Consequently, sustainability strategies often remain fragmented, failing to translate ethical commitments into daily practices.

Therefore, the present study attempts to bridge this gap by linking environmental ethics with responsible living. It builds upon earlier theoretical and policy insights while emphasizing lifestyle transformation as a critical pathway for sustainable development.

Research Objectives, Research Questions and Methodology

The present study aims to examine the ethical foundations of environmental sustainability and to analyse how responsible lifestyle practices

can contribute to balanced development. Specifically, it seeks to understand the philosophical basis of environmental ethics, assess the ecological impact of consumption-oriented lifestyles, evaluate Indian environmental initiatives, and propose an integrated framework linking ethics with everyday behavioural change.

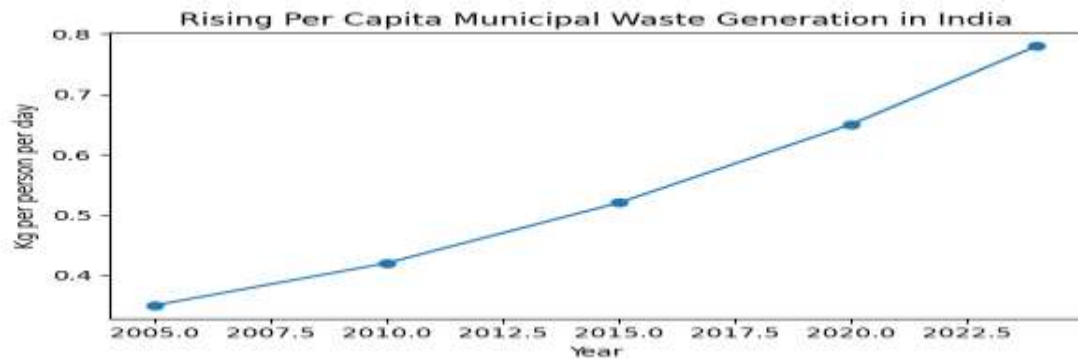
The study is guided by key research questions: whether environmental degradation is primarily an ethical crisis rather than a purely technological problem; how daily consumption patterns influence emissions, waste generation, and resource depletion; and whether policy interventions alone are sufficient without lifestyle transformation.

Methodologically, the research adopts an analytical and descriptive approach based entirely on secondary data. Information has been collected from authentic sources such as the Economic Survey of India, UNEP and IPCC reports, the National Action Plan on Climate Change, PIB releases, PRS Legislative Research, NCERT and standard environment textbooks, along with reputed newspapers. The study employs conceptual analysis, policy review, case study examination, and graphical trend interpretation to understand environmental challenges and sustainability practices.

The scope of the study is limited to ethical, behavioural, and policy dimensions of sustainability within the Indian context. Since no primary survey or statistical modelling is conducted, the findings remain interpretative in nature. Nevertheless, the study provides a systematic and reliable framework for understanding how environmental ethics and responsible living can support long-term sustainable development.

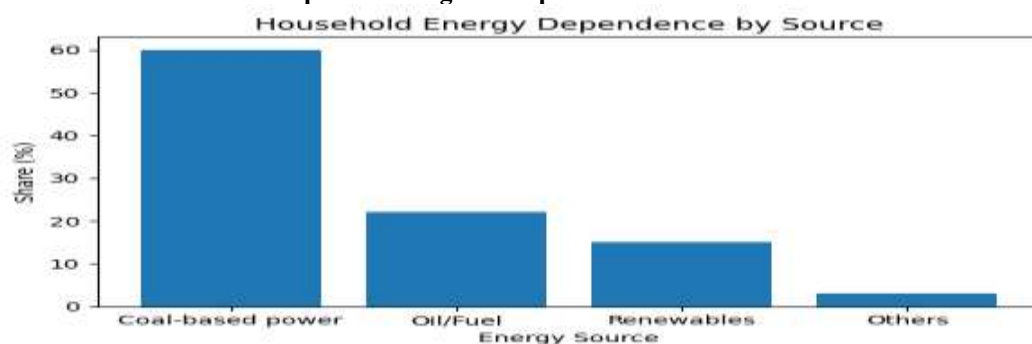
Problem Analysis: Environmental Challenges and Lifestyle Impacts

Rapid economic growth and urbanization have significantly increased environmental pressure in India. The expansion of consumption-oriented lifestyles—characterized by disposable products, excessive energy use, and dependence on fossil fuels—has accelerated waste generation and carbon emissions. These trends indicate that environmental degradation is not only an industrial or policy failure but also a behavioural problem rooted in everyday habits.



Municipal solid waste has risen steadily over the years due to packaged consumption, food waste, and single-use materials. This growing waste burden reflects changing lifestyles rather than mere population growth and poses serious threats to land, air, and water quality.

Graph 1 – Rising Per Capita Waste Generation



The upward trend clearly shows increasing resource use and unsustainable consumption behaviour. At the same time, energy consumption patterns remain heavily dependent on coal and fossil fuels. Despite renewable initiatives, household and transport sectors continue to rely on carbon-intensive sources, leading to higher emissions and climate risks.

Graph 2 – Energy Dependence by Source

The dominance of fossil fuels highlights the structural and behavioural barriers to sustainability. Overall, these patterns confirm that environmental problems stem from both systemic energy choices and individual lifestyle decisions. Therefore, sustainable development requires not only policy reforms but also ethical awareness and responsible living practice

Ethical Analysis and Sustainable Lifestyle Framework

Environmental problems are not only technological or policy failures but also ethical failures arising from excessive consumption and irresponsible human behaviour. When nature is treated merely as a resource, overuse, pollution, and waste become inevitable. Hence, sustainability requires moral responsibility along with economic planning.

Environmental ethics emphasizes intergenerational justice, restraint in resource use, and accountability for environmental damage. These principles demand that individuals and societies adopt responsible living practices.

A sustainable lifestyle can be promoted at multiple levels: individuals through reduced consumption and energy saving, households

through waste segregation and renewable energy use, communities through collective environmental action, and governments through supportive policies and green regulations.

Thus, ethical awareness combined with behavioural change forms the foundation of truly sustainable development.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that environmental degradation is fundamentally an ethical issue rooted in unsustainable lifestyles rather than merely a technological or policy failure. Long-term sustainability requires integrating moral responsibility with everyday behaviour and development planning.

Recommendations: promote environmental education, encourage responsible consumption, expand renewable energy use, strengthen waste management, and support green public policies to ensure balanced and sustainable development.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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