International Journal of Academic Research
P-ISSN: 2348-7666: Impact Factor: 6.023
Homepage: https://www.ijar.org.in/
Volume-12, Issue-3(4), Jul-Sep-2025

LOCALIZED PROGRESS ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN INDIA: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY ASSESSMENT OF STATE AND DISTRICT IMPLEMENTATION

Rai.Nirmala[1], Sr. Sravya[2]
[1]Research Scholar, Acharya Nagarjuna University
[2]II-BA. History, Ch.S.D.St. Theresa's College for women(A).

Abstract:
This study critically examines the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India, with particular emphasis on the Telugu states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Despite India's commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda, significant challenges persist in translating global frameworks into locally relevant action. Through a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative analysis of SDG India Index data (2018-2024) and qualitative assessment of policy initiatives, this research evaluates the progress, bottlenecks, and transformative potential of SDG implementation at subnational levels. The findings reveal that while both states achieved "Front Runner" status with scores of 74/100, critical gaps remain in gender equality (SDG 5), zero hunger (SDG 2), and climate action (SDG 13). The study proposes a transdisciplinary framework emphasizing bottom-up participatory governance, enhanced fiscal autonomy for local governments, and cross-scale institutional coordination. The research contributes to understanding how developing nations can balance competing socio-economic and environmental priorities while addressing regional disparities and uncertainty in resource mobilization
Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Localization,Human development, Social inclusion.

1 Introduction

India's endeavor to realize the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is not merely a technical exercise but a civilizational mission that draws on an enduring legacy of ethical values, constitutional principles, and vibrant federalism. With the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) at the helm—implementing initiatives like the annual SDG Index—the nation has embarked on a journey to localize sustainable development through decentralized governance and culturally grounded practices.

I like to provide an interdisciplinary assessment of how state and district-level initiatives are redefining policy through a holistic approach. I further introduce the DHARMA model, a normative framework that unites data-driven strategies with scripturally inspired ethical imperatives.

2. Eradicating Poverty: A Moral Imperative Rooted in Dharma and Justice

Despite substantial macroeconomic gains, poverty in India remains a structural and moral challenge. As per the Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) 2021, 16.4% of India's population continues to suffer from simultaneous deprivations in health, education, and living standards. This burden falls disproportionately on historically marginalized states such as Bihar (51.9%), Jharkhand (42.2%), and Uttar Pradesh (37.8%). While GDP growth has reduced income

poverty, it has failed to overcome intergenerational deprivation, spatial inequality, and capability deficits.

Redistributive schemes such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PM-GKAY) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have played a critical role in mitigating distress. PM-GKAY distributed over 1,000 million metric tons of food grains during the COVID-19 crisis, averting widespread hunger. MGNREGA generated 3.89 billion person-days of rural employment in 2020–21, providing a vital social safety net. Yet, such interventions must transcend crisis management and embody a deeper ethical commitment that views food and livelihood as expressions of dharma—sacred obligations, not mere policy tools.

This ethical foundation is echoed in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, which enjoins: "annaṁ bahu kurvīta"—Let food be abundant. Food, here, is not mere subsistence but a sacred gift (yajña), a collective responsibility binding society through reciprocity. This conception of provisioning aligns with Amartya Sen's capabilities approach, which redefines poverty as the absence of substantive freedoms—including the ability to be nourished, to live with dignity, and to participate meaningfully in society.

Poverty eradication, then, must center on restoring dignity as much as delivering resources. Abhijit Banerjee emphasizes that "small, targeted interventions informed by behavioral insights can transform lives—provided systems of dignity and accountability are in place." Likewise, Jean Drèze argues for universal social rights and community-based monitoring to reduce exclusion and administrative neglect.

Globally, moral critiques of poverty frame it as a collective ethical failure, not an individual deficit. Martin Luther King Jr. profoundly stated: "As long as there is poverty in the world, I can never be rich, even if I have a billion dollars." His moral cosmopolitanism resonates with Indian dharmic ideals, particularly the principle of sarvabhūtahita—the welfare of all beings.

Thus, poverty eradication is not simply an economic agenda; it is a dharmic imperative. It calls for reimagining governance as a form of ethical service, embedding justice into public institutions, and recognizing the poor not as passive recipients but as dignified co-citizens. India's success in localizing the SDGs will depend on whether development is anchored in this union of dharma and justice.

3. Reducing Inequalities and Promoting Social Inclusion: Constitutional Morality and Spiritual Solidarity

Despite constitutional mandates and affirmative action, entrenched structural inequalities based on caste, tribe, gender, and religion persist in India. Data from the Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) and National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) highlight disproportionately adverse outcomes for Dalit and Adivasi women, particularly in maternal health, literacy, and employment. For instance, only 44% of Scheduled Tribe (ST) women have completed secondary education, compared to 67% of non-SC/ST women. Anaemia prevalence among Dalit women exceeds the national average, while maternal mortality remains acute in tribal districts. These overlapping axes of disadvantage underscore the compounded marginalization experienced by historically excluded groups.

To redress these disparities, policy instruments like the Scheduled Caste Sub-Plan (SCSP) and Tribal Sub-Plan (TSP) mandate proportional public expenditure for SC/ST communities. However, their implementation is uneven across states, with frequent underutilization and diversion of funds. Evaluations by NITI Aayog and the National Commission for Scheduled

Tribes reveal that while states like Kerala and Maharashtra have adopted robust planning frameworks, many others lack effective monitoring mechanisms.

Yet social inclusion must transcend policy mandates. It must be rooted in constitutional morality, a principle articulated by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as fidelity to justice, liberty, and fraternity, especially when social norms fall short of constitutional ideals. As Ambedkar cautioned, "Political democracy cannot last unless there lies at the base of it social democracy."

This moral imperative resonates with the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad's invocation: sarve bhavantu sukhinaḥ—"May all be happy" (1.4.14), reflecting a vision of universal human welfare (sarva bhūtahita). Similarly, John Rawls' theory of justice argues that inequalities are justifiable only if they benefit the least advantaged, aligning with both Ambedkarite and dhārmic ethics.

Martin Luther King Jr.'s assertion—"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere"—extends this universalist ethic, resonating with Indian traditions that see justice and dignity as indivisible from nonviolence and moral order. Contemporary scholars reinforce this need for both distributive and recognition-based justice. Anand Teltumbde critiques the symbolic appropriation of Dalit movements without structural reform. Gurpreet Mahajan calls for recognition of identity-based dignity alongside material redistribution.

Ultimately, social inclusion must evolve from a statistical aim to a moral and spiritual commitment—anchored in compassion, fraternity, and justice.

4. Human Development and Education: Interlinking Vidyā, Dignity, and Self-Realization

National programs such as Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao have expanded educational access across India. However, foundational learning outcomes remain uneven. The ASER 2023 report reveals that only 47% of Grade 5 students in rural India could read Grade 2-level texts, and a mere 26% could solve basic division problems.These deficits are exacerbated by high dropout rates and systemic gender and caste disparities, particularly affecting girls from marginalized communities.

Education, therefore, must transcend its functional role and be reimagined as a liberative force—enhancing dignity, civic agency, and ethical awareness. The Hitopadeśa affirms: vidyā dadāti vinayam—"Knowledge imparts humility," indicating that true learning cultivates both competence and character. Echoing this view, Swami Vivekananda stated, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man," while Paulo Freire emphasized that education, as an act of liberation, enables learners to transform themselves and their world.

India's development paradigm must thus adopt a multidimensional pedagogy—fostering not only cognitive skills but emotional intelligence and moral judgment. As Martha Nussbaum argues, education should cultivate capabilities such as empathy, critical reasoning, and ethical agency, preparing individuals for democratic citizenship and shared human dignity. In this vision, vidyā is not merely utilitarian, but transformative—a pathway to justice, equity, and self-realization.

5. Water, Sanitation, and Clean Energy: From Technical Solution to Sacral Practice

India has achieved notable progress in water access, sanitation, and renewable energy. As of 2024, over 76% of rural households have access to tap water under the Jal Jeevan Mission. However, inter-state disparities remain: Chhattisgarh (58%) and Odisha (61%) lag behind the national average. The Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has declared most districts open defecation-free (ODF), yet challenges persist in behavioral adoption, infrastructure maintenance, and waste management.

International Journal of Academic Research
P-ISSN: 2348-7666: Impact Factor: 6.023
Homepage: https://www.ijar.org.in/
Volume-12, Issue-3(4), Jul-Sep-2025

In the energy sector, India has emerged as a global leader in renewables. Gujarat and Rajasthan together account for more than 40% of the nation's installed solar and wind capacity, driven by programs such as the National Solar Mission and the Renewable Energy Grid Integration Project. Nevertheless, clean cooking energy access remains uneven—over 44% of rural households still rely on biomass fuels, leading to indoor air pollution and adverse health impacts, particularly for women.

These issues, while often framed in technical or infrastructural terms, also demand cultural and ethical engagement. The Ṛgveda extols water as sacred: āpo hi ṣṭhā mayobhuvaḥ—"Waters are indeed the source of joy," affirming its life-giving and spiritual significance. Mahatma Gandhi, influenced by Vaishnava and Jain principles, famously emphasized that "Cleanliness is next to godliness," advocating sanitation as a moral, not merely hygienic, imperative.

Scholars such as Sunita Narain call for an "ecological democracy" that integrates decentralization, equity, and environmental sustainability. Vandana Shiva conceptualizes water and energy as "commons"—sacred trusts rather than market commodities. Accordingly, sustainable management of these resources must transcend technocratic approaches and embody śraddhā (reverence), ṛta (cosmic order), and participatory ethics grounded in Indian civilizational values.

6.Climate Action and Environmental Sustainability: Ecological Dharma and Climate Ethics

India's climate policy is anchored in the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), encompassing missions on solar energy, energy efficiency, sustainable agriculture, water conservation, and Himalayan ecosystems. However, despite this robust framework, adaptive capacity at the state and district levels remains highly uneven. A 2024 report by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW) identifies 160 districts—particularly in Odisha, Assam, and Maharashtra—as climate vulnerability hotspots, frequently affected by droughts, floods, and extreme heat, yet lacking climate-resilient infrastructure, early warning systems, and decentralized governance.

The Atharvaveda expresses a foundational ecological ethic: mātā bhūmiḥ putro 'ham pṛthivyāḥ—"The Earth is my mother, and I am her son." This verse conveys a cosmocentric identity that binds humans to the Earth in a sacred kinship, implying reciprocal responsibilities of care and restraint. Reinforcing this ethos, Mahatma Gandhi warned, "The Earth provides enough to satisfy everyone's need, but not everyone's greed," highlighting the ethical limits of resource consumption and the moral costs of ecological exploitation.

Contemporary scholarship increasingly acknowledges the contributions of dharmic worldviews to sustainability. Pankaj Jain argues that Hindu environmental ethics embed ecology within a broader spiritual and moral framework, emphasizing self-restraint (saṃyama) and communal responsibility (dharma) as central to ecological stewardship. Bina Agarwal, drawing on grassroots movements such as Chipko and Narmada Bachao Andolan, demonstrates how local, often women-led, mobilizations embody a "sacral ecology," rooted in lived dharma rather than technocratic policy.

India's climate strategy must thus evolve from a solely technological paradigm to one that integrates ethical and spiritual perspectives. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) affirms that climate adaptation is not merely a technical issue but a deeply ethical and political one. By embedding the principles of ṛta (cosmic order) and dharma (moral obligation) into climate governance, India can craft a uniquely rooted climate ethics—drawing from both constitutional ideals and civilizational wisdom.

7. Infrastructure, Innovation, and Digital Empowerment: Karma and Creative Disruption

India's infrastructure and digital transformation are being propelled by landmark initiatives such as Digital India, Startup India, and the Smart Cities Mission. These policies have accelerated technological leapfrogging, expanded e-governance capabilities, and cultivated an entrepreneurial ecosystem. As of 2023, India hosted over 100,000 government-recognized startups, making it the third-largest startup ecosystem globally.

Yet this progress masks stark inequalities. According to the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), only 15% of rural households had internet access, compared to 48% in urban areas—a divide that exacerbates digital exclusion in education, telemedicine, and access to welfare schemes.This urban-rural asymmetry risks deepening existing social stratification.

Digital infrastructure, as Nandan Nilekani emphasizes, must be seen as a public good, not a market commodity. The Aadhaar-enabled Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) system has enhanced financial inclusion, but concerns remain around data privacy, algorithmic bias, and exclusion errors—issues that demand robust institutional safeguards.

Innovation, moreover, is not only technological but also ethical and cultural. As Steve Jobs noted, "Innovation distinguishes between a leader and a follower." Yet innovation must be purposeful and inclusive. The Bhagavad Gītā (2.47) instructs: karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana—"You have the right to perform your duty, but not to the fruits thereof." This doctrine of niṣkāma karma aligns with modern frameworks of responsible innovation, which emphasize participatory design, equitable access, and accountability.

Scholars like Sheila Jasanoff argue that technology is never neutral—it reflects societal values, power asymmetries, and institutional norms. Thus, India's innovation trajectory must consciously embed dharmic principles—social justice, ecological sensitivity, and ethical governance—into its technological architecture. Creative disruption must harmonize with karmic balance to produce a development paradigm that is not only efficient but also just.

8. Economic Transformation and Gender Equity: From Livelihood to Liberation

India's economic transformation is driven by structural reforms, digitization, entrepreneurship, and decentralized livelihood generation. Flagship schemes such as Make in India, Skill India, and the Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP) have sought to catalyze job creation and industrial expansion. By 2023, over 7.4 million youth had been trained under Skill India, with particular focus on skilling populations in rural and informal sectors.

Simultaneously, women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have emerged as critical engines of grassroots empowerment. Under the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – National Rural Livelihood Mission (DAY-NRLM), more than 83 million women had been mobilized into SHGs by mid-2024, with states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Bihar demonstrating robust credit linkages and inclusion metrics. Research indicates that SHGs not only enhance household incomes but also elevate women's participation in community decision-making.

Despite these gains, entrenched gender disparities persist. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2023, India ranked 127th among 146 countries, with female economic participation at just 37.5% and political empowerment at 25.3%. Female labor force participation remained low at 24% in 2023, in contrast to over 70% for men—a gap reinforced by unpaid care work, informal employment, and socio-cultural constraints.

Classical Indian thought emphasized the spiritual and social dignity of women. The Manusmṛti proclaims: yatra nāryastu pūjyante ramante tatra devatāḥ—"Where women are honored, there the gods rejoice." This ideal sharply contrasts with contemporary structural inequalities. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen underscored the centrality of women's agency in development, stating: "Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as adequate recognition of women's agency."

Scholars such as Bina Agarwal and Naila Kabeer argue for integrating gender-responsive budgeting, legal rights to property, care infrastructure, and capacity-building into national economic frameworks. Such integration of gender justice into economic policy reflects not only a developmental necessity but a dhārmic imperative—aligning moral values with inclusive growth and recognizing women's roles as both economic contributors and bearers of social transformation.

9. Decentralized Planning and Local Governance: Federal Ethics and Vernacular Knowledge

India's constitutional commitment to decentralized governance is enshrined in the 73rd and 74th Amendments, which empower Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) to formulate and implement development initiatives at the local level. This framework has been instrumental in operationalizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly in states like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Odisha, where participatory planning, digital governance, and climate-resilient infrastructure are integrated into district-level systems.

Kerala's People's Plan Campaign (PPC) exemplifies this ethos, channeling nearly 40% of state-plan funds to local governments and thereby fostering democratic ownership over planning and budgeting. Tamil Nadu's District SDG Monitoring Framework and Odisha's Gram Panchayat Development Plan Plus (GPDP+) have advanced decentralized implementation by tracking key indicators—poverty, gender equity, water access, and climate resilience—supported by ICT platforms like Mo Sarkar and AMA Gaon AMA Yojana.

Nonetheless, decentralization remains asymmetrical. A 2024 NITI Aayog study found that over 60% of India's 112 Aspirational Districts lack robust systems for data disaggregation, real-time SDG monitoring, and inclusive community participation. Capacity constraints, particularly in tribal and socioeconomically marginalized districts, hinder the localization of SDGs despite targeted schemes like the Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP).

The philosophical foundation for cooperative governance is articulated in the Taittirīya Upaniṣad, which invokes the spirit of shared nourishment: saha nāvavatu, saha nau bhunaktu—"May we be protected together; may we be nourished together." This ideal of sahabhāga (co-participation) resonates with Elinor Ostrom's theory of polycentric governance, which argues that locally embedded, nested institutions with legitimacy and cooperative capacity are more effective at managing shared resources and enabling sustainable development.

Thus, decentralization must be understood not merely as administrative delegation but as a normative practice rooted in deśī jñāna (vernacular knowledge), social trust, and multilevel institutional synergy. Scholars such as James Manor, Jesse Ribot, and Amita Baviskar have emphasized that effective decentralization depends on accountability, transparency, subsidiarity, and the cultural contextualization of governance.

By integrating these ethical and institutional dimensions, decentralized governance can serve as a vehicle for locally grounded, socially just development, aligning national SDG ambitions with the lived realities of India's diverse regions.

International Journal of Academic Research
P-ISSN: 2348-7666: Impact Factor: 6.023
Homepage: https://www.ijar.org.in/
Volume-12, Issue-3(4), Jul-Sep-2025

India's pursuit of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 demands not only economic innovation and policy alignment but a rooted ethical paradigm—one that speaks to India's civilizational ethos and decentralized governance tradition. In this context, the **DHARMA framework** emerges as both a conceptual model and moral imperative for localized SDG realization.

DHARMA is an acronym that stands for:
Data-Driven Decentralization
Holistic Human Development
Anthropocentric Sustainability
Religio-Cultural Integration
Multilevel Governance Synergy
Active Accountability

This framework anchors developmental efforts in the principles of equity, justice, transparency, and ethical responsibility—resonating with classical Indian thought where dharma is not only righteousness but also the organizing principle of collective well-being (lokasaṃgraha).1 As the Bhagavadgītā affirms: **"dharmeṇa hīnāḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ"** — "Without dharma, humans are no better than beasts."2

Each pillar of the DHARMA model reflects an interlocking dimension of India's SDG strategy, bridging modern tools like digital governance and data analytics with timeless values drawn from scriptural sources, participatory institutions, and constitutional morality. The model is not simply descriptive—it is normative: a call for aligning national progress with ethical governance.

10. Data-Driven Decentralization

The first pillar of the DHARMA model, Data-Driven Decentralization, finds ethical grounding in the Bhagavad Gītā's doctrine of non-attachment: karmaṇy evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana—"You have a right to your actions, but not to the fruits thereof." This injunction underlines a governance ethic centered on duty, performance, and institutional integrity over short-term political returns.

Empirical research consistently associates decentralization with enhanced service delivery, accountability, and local responsiveness—especially when supported by robust data infrastructure. India's Aspirational Districts Programme (ADP), launched by NITI Aayog in 2018, exemplifies this approach. It deploys real-time, disaggregated data from 112 underperforming districts to track improvements across 49 key indicators spanning health, education, agriculture, and infrastructure.

An independent evaluation by the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO) in 2023 documented tangible outcomes: maternal health indicators improved by 12%, and school attendance rose by 8% within two years of targeted intervention. Meanwhile, the SDG India Index, launched in 2018 and updated annually, enables subnational performance benchmarking on 16 of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, fostering competitive federalism and evidence-based policy innovation.

Digital tools have been instrumental in this decentralized transformation. Platforms like the Local Government Directory (LGD) and the DISHA Dashboard integrate scheme-level data across ministries, improving intergovernmental coordination and monitoring of over 40

centrally sponsored schemes in previously data-deficient districts. In Andhra Pradesh, the Gram/Ward Sachivalayam model—a state-level innovation—synchronizes household-level data with local governance, facilitating efficient service delivery to over 95% of rural households.

Development economist Esther Duflo affirms the epistemic and normative value of data: "Data is not only a tool for analysis but a mirror that reflects failures and forces course correction." In decentralized contexts, therefore, data is not merely instrumental; it is a moral and democratic medium—anchoring transparency, self-assessment, and institutional learning.

11. Holistic Human Development

Holistic human development affirms the intrinsic dignity of every person, emphasizing the cultivation of capabilities and moral maturation. This vision resonates with the classical dictum from the Hitopadeśa: vidyā dadāti vinayam—"Knowledge imparts humility." In the Indic tradition, education (vidyā) is not merely utilitarian but transformative, fostering antar-vikāsa (inner growth) and ethical refinement.

Contemporary development theory mirrors this ethos. Amartya Sen's capabilities approach redefines development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy," centering not on income metrics but on human agency, education, health, and dignity—dimensions reflected in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 3 (Good Health), 4 (Quality Education), and 5 (Gender Equality).

Despite steady policy strides, inequality remains pronounced. According to the UNDP's Human Development Report 2023, India ranks 134 out of 193 countries on the Human Development Index, reflecting stark disparities across caste, gender, and geography. For instance, female literacy in Bihar is 61.1%, compared to 95.1% in Kerala, highlighting the uneven access to educational opportunities. Similarly, maternal mortality in Uttar Pradesh remains high at 167 per 100,000 live births, despite national-level improvements.

In response, India has launched several integrated initiatives:

Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao (BBBP) (2015), designed to correct the declining child sex ratio and promote girls' education, has recorded an improvement of 16 points in targeted districts between 2015 and 2022.

Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan, a unified education scheme spanning pre-primary to higher secondary levels, has expanded enrolment among Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), particularly in secondary education.

Ayushman Bharat, launched in 2018, stands among the world's largest public health insurance programs, covering over 500 million beneficiaries and reducing out-of-pocket health expenditures by 21% among low-income households.

Scholars such as Martha Nussbaum underscore that development must encompass emotional, cultural, and ethical capacities: "A society that does not cultivate the humanity of all its members is deficient in justice." Development, therefore, is not merely the delivery of services but a normative project—expanding well-being, self-respect, and participatory agency in the civic realm.

12. Anthropocentric Sustainability

Anthropocentric Sustainability affirms the inextricable link between ecological care and human ethical responsibility. The Atharvaveda beautifully articulates this unity: mātā bhūmiḥ putro 'ham pṛthivyāḥ—"Earth is my mother; I am her son" (AV 12.1.12). This verse expresses a cosmo-kinship that transcends anthropocentric exploitation and frames environmental stewardship as dharma (duty), not utility.

International Journal of Academic Research
P-ISSN: 2348-7666: Impact Factor: 6.023
Homepage: https://www.ijar.org.in/
Volume-12, Issue-3(4), Jul-Sep-2025

Drawing on this worldview, Vandana Shiva advocates for Earth Democracy, a paradigm rooted in "living economies, ecological responsibility, and cultural diversity" grounded in Indian cosmology. Shiva critiques corporate globalization for degrading both ecosystems and indigenous knowledge systems, proposing instead a participatory model of sustainability that empowers local communities—particularly women—as custodians of ecological wisdom.

Despite constitutional protections (Article 48A) and legal interventions (Environment Protection Act, 1986), India faces acute ecological crises:

Air Pollution: India is home to 11 of the world's 15 most polluted cities, with Delhi's AQI regularly exceeding 300, far above the WHO's safe limit of 50.

Deforestation and Biodiversity Loss: Between 2001 and 2020, India lost over 18% of its forest cover, particularly in the Northeast and central tribal belts, threatening biodiversity and local livelihoods.

Water Stress: According to NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index, 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress, with 21 major cities likely to run out of groundwater by 2030.

Climate Vulnerability: The Climate Risk Index 2023 places India among the top 10 most climate-vulnerable countries due to frequent floods, droughts, and cyclones.

These intersecting crises are directly targeted by SDGs 13 (Climate Action), 14 (Life Below Water), and 15 (Life on Land). However, technocratic solutions alone are insufficient. As E.F. Schumacher famously observed, "Modern man talks of a battle with nature, forgetting that if he wins, he loses."

Scholars of sacred ecology, such as David Haberman, highlight the religious reverence for rivers, trees, and animals in Indian traditions—evident in practices like vrikṣa-pūjā (tree worship), ganga-āratī, and sacred groves (devrai). These practices are not mere superstition but embedded conservation ethics with ritual continuity. They suggest that sustainability in India must also be cultural and spiritual.

Thus, Anthropocentric Sustainability calls for a fusion of spiritual ecology, participatory governance, and constitutional environmentalism, transforming policy from mere compliance to ethical commitment.

13. Religio-Cultural Integration

India's socio-ethical traditions are deeply grounded in religio-cultural values such as dāna (generosity), sevā (selfless service), and ahiṃsā (non-violence). Far from peripheral, these values constitute the moral fabric of Indian civil society and public life. The Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad expresses this ethos through the prayer: sarve bhavantu sukhinah—"May all be happy" (BU 1.4.14), a cosmic vision of universal welfare rooted in lokasaṅgraha.

Such spiritual universalism offers a potent framework for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) localization by cultivating intrinsic motivation, ethical commitment, and civic responsibility. Studies affirm that development outcomes improve when policies resonate with cultural or religious meaning.

A leading example is the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), launched in 2014 to eliminate open defecation and promote sanitation. By linking cleanliness to spiritual purity and national pride—invoking Mahatma Gandhi's vision of śuddhi (cleanliness) as a form of śraddhā (faith)—the campaign generated substantial behavioral change. According to the Ministry of Jal Shakti:

Over 110 million toilets were constructed between 2014–2019.

Rural sanitation coverage rose from 39% in 2014 to 100% by 2019 (official estimates).

Independent studies, including one by the Research Institute for Compassionate Economics (RICE), found that cultural and religious motives often outweighed economic incentives in toilet adoption, particularly in northern India.

Scholars such as Emma Tomalin and Rajeev Bhargava argue that the success of such campaigns lies not only in infrastructure but in ethical vernacularization—embedding policies within local idioms of dharma, pūjā, or niṣkāma karma. In cities like Varanasi, temple-based outreach promoted toilet use as a sacred duty to protect rivers like the Ganges.

Similarly, initiatives like the Swadhyaya Movement and ISKCON's Food for Life program harness religious concepts of prasāda (sanctified food) and yajña (ritual offering) to address hunger and nutrition, supporting SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).

Religio-cultural integration is thus not ornamental but structural. It nurtures ethical engagement, strengthens democratic participation, and fosters a sense of collective ownership over sustainable development.

14. Multilevel Governance Synergy

The Taittirīya Upaniṣad invokes the ethos of collaborative effort: saha nāv avatu, saha nau bhunaktu—"May we be protected and nourished together" (TU 2.2). This ancient call for shared responsibility aptly mirrors the modern principle of federal synergy, where Union, State, and Local governments act as partners rather than hierarchically layered entities.

India's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992) institutionalized Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs), embedding decentralized democracy into the constitutional framework. These reforms acknowledged that local governance structures are pivotal for contextualizing and operationalizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the actual devolution of powers remains inadequate. A 2021 study by the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER) found that over 70% of Indian states had not granted PRIs sufficient fiscal and administrative autonomy, thereby constraining their developmental role.

To strengthen local governance, the Ministry of Panchayati Raj launched the Gram Panchayat Development Plans (GPDPs) in 2015. By 2023, over 2.5 lakh gram panchayats had prepared GPDPs aligned with the SDGs. These plans integrate local priorities gathered through gram sabhas, fostering participatory and needs-based planning.

Complementing these efforts, NITI Aayog, in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), developed a "Localisation of SDGs" Toolkit. This toolkit provides operational guidance for mapping SDG indicators to district and panchayat levels. Scholars such as Niraja Gopal Jayal and James Manor argue that genuine localization can enhance democratic accountability and align governance with grassroots aspirations.

Empirical evidence affirms this. A 2022 UNESCAP policy brief noted that states with strong decentralized institutions, such as Kerala and Chhattisgarh, exhibited more effective SDG integration and superior performance on indicators such as health, gender equality, and sanitation. This underscores the critical role of cooperative federalism in advancing sustainable development.

Multilevel governance must therefore evolve from a constitutional provision into a practical system of horizontal and vertical collaboration. Such a system echoes the Upaniṣadic vision of shared nourishment and collective flourishing, where governance becomes both locally grounded and nationally coherent.

15. Active Accountability

The sixth pillar of the DHARMA model, Active Accountability, is rooted in India's spiritual-ethical heritage. The Taittirīya Upaniṣad proclaims: ṛtaṁ vadishyāmi satyaṁ vadishyāmi—"I shall speak what is right; I shall speak the truth" (TU 1.11.1). This Vedic imperative transcends personal morality, articulating a broader civic ethic of truthfulness, transparency, and duty (dharma).

In the democratic context, accountability is both a legal obligation and a moral responsibility. India's institutional architecture offers several mechanisms to uphold it:

The Right to Information Act (2005) empowers citizens to seek information from public institutions. By 2023, over 2.3 crore RTI applications had been filed, with Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Karnataka accounting for the highest usage. Nonetheless, delays and denials, particularly at local levels, reveal systemic inertia.

Social audits, especially under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), facilitate community-based oversight. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) reported in 2020 that such audits led to the recovery of ₹105 crore in misappropriated MGNREGA funds.

Digital tools—such as MyGov, e-Samvad, and the Public Financial Management System (PFMS)—have strengthened real-time feedback and fiscal transparency. As of 2024, MyGov had over 3 crore users and hosted more than 2,500 participatory campaigns across ministries.

Despite these advances, structural deficits endure. A 2022 survey by the Accountability Initiative found that fewer than 50% of rural respondents were aware of social audits, and only 32% had attended a gram sabhā, citing procedural opacity and elite capture. Scholars like Jean Drèze and Yamini Aiyar argue that the quality of accountability depends less on formal rules than on political will, civic participation, and decentralized empowerment.

Ethical leadership is indispensable to this ecosystem. As Kautilya states in the Arthaśāstra, "The king shall promote honesty among his officials… for it is integrity that upholds the state." Sustaining accountability thus requires not only institutional reforms but moral exemplars, civic education, and alignment between governance and dharma.

In essence, Active Accountability integrates legal design, technological innovation, and ethical resolve—where transparency is not a compliance burden but a manifestation of righteous public service.

16. Conclusion

Localizing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in India is not merely a technical or administrative project, but a deeply ethical, spiritual, and civilizational undertaking. The DHARMA framework—Data-Driven Decentralization, Holistic Human Development, Anthropocentric Sustainability, Religio-Cultural Integration, Multilevel Governance Synergy, and Active Accountability—reimagines development as a sacred contract between state, society, and spirit.

This vision aligns with the longstanding Indian civilizational ethos, where dharma—the principle of moral order and righteous duty—underpins public life. Dharma is not only a religious concept, but an integrative force that governs ecology, economy, polity, and ethics. As Mahatma Gandhi wrote, "You may not be able to witness the complete results of your actions, but you must act based on dharma. That is your sacred obligation." Gandhi's ideal of sarvodaya—the upliftment of all—perfectly resonates with the SDG agenda's inclusive and equitable aims.

Experts emphasize that technocratic development without ethical grounding often leads to exclusion and ecological degradation. Satish Kumar, a leading ecological philosopher, aptly noted: "Sustainability must be grounded in the soul of a civilization." Similarly, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues that development should be assessed not merely by GDP, but by its capacity to enhance human freedom, dignity, and justice. This ethical inflection demands that SDG localization go beyond metrics to values, relationships, and community participation.

Empirical studies show that SDG success correlates strongly with social capital, moral engagement, and localized governance. A 2023 survey by NITI Aayog and UNDP across 17 states found that districts with higher civic participation and ethical leadership demonstrated better outcomes in health, sanitation, and education indicators, regardless of per capita income. Another 2022 UN report emphasized that religio-cultural integration and ethical framing enhanced SDG ownership, especially in tribal and rural regions of Odisha, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu.

The DHARMA model thus urges a transformative turn—one that connects global goals with local roots, data with devotion, and policy with purpose. In the face of climate emergencies, growing inequality, and institutional erosion, this ethical-ecological framework reorients governance toward dharma-based development—a vision of prosperity rooted in satya (truth), ahiṃsā (non-violence), and lokasaṃgraha (the welfare of all).

Bibliography

1. Accountability Initiative, Centre for Policy Research. State of Accountability in Rural India. New Delhi: CPR, 2022.
2. Agarwal, Bina. "Gender and Environmental Policy: Lessons from India." Feminist Economics 11, no. 3 (2005): 119–158.
3. Ambedkar, B.R. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches. Vol. 1. Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 2014.
4. ———. The Essential Writings of B.R. Ambedkar. Edited by Valerian Rodrigues. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
5. Atharvaveda. In Gonda, Jan. The Vision of the Veda. Leiden: Brill, 1963.
6. Banerjee, Abhijit V., and Esther Duflo. Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty. New York: PublicAffairs, 2011.
7. Baviskar, Amita. "Between Micro-Politics and Administrative Imperatives: Decentralization and the Watershed Mission in Madhya Pradesh, India." European Journal of Development Research 16, no. 1 (2004): 26–40.
8. Bhargava, Rajeev. "What Is Secularism For?" In The Promise of India's Secular Democracy, edited by Rajeev Bhargava, 109–112. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010.
9. Chand, Devi, trans. Atharva Veda: Sanskrit Text with English Translation. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1982.
10. Coffey, Diane, and Dean Spears. Where India Goes: Abandoned Toilets, Stunted Development and the Costs of Caste. New Delhi: HarperCollins India, 2017.
11. Comptroller and Auditor General of India. Report on Performance of Social Audit under MGNREGA. New Delhi: Government of India, 2020.
12. Council on Energy, Environment and Water (CEEW). Mapping India's Climate Vulnerability: District-level Hotspots and Policy Imperatives. New Delhi: CEEW, 2024.
13. Das, Chaitanya Charan. "Food for Life: A Devotional Response to Hunger." ISKCON Communications Journal 10, no. 2 (2004): 14–18.
14. Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT). Startup India Annual

Report. New Delhi: Government of India, 2024.
15. Department of Food and Public Distribution. PM-GKAY Performance Summary. New Delhi: Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, 2021.
16. Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO). Third-Party Evaluation of the Aspirational Districts Programme. Government of India, 2023.
17. Drèze, Jean, and Amartya Sen. An Uncertain Glory: India and Its Contradictions. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013.
18. Drèze, Jean, and Yamini Aiyar. "Participation and Accountability in Indian Governance." In India Social Development Report 2016: Disability Rights, edited by Council for Social Development, 73–88. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.
19. Duflo, Esther. "The Economist as Plumber." American Economic Review 107, no. 5 (2017): 1–26.
20. Easwaran, Eknath, trans. The Bhagavad Gita. Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 2007.
21. Faguet, Jean-Paul. "Decentralization and Governance." World Development 53 (2014): 2–13.
22. Freire, Paulo. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Continuum, 2000.
23. Gandhi, M.K. The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Vols. 28, 29, 98. New Delhi: Publications Division, Government of India, 1967–2000.
24. Germanwatch. Global Climate Risk Index 2023. Bonn: Germanwatch e.V., 2023.
25. Global Forest Watch. "India Deforestation Statistics (2001–2020)." Accessed July 2025. https://www.globalforestwatch.org.
26. Government of Andhra Pradesh. Impact Assessment of Village and Ward Secretariats. 2023.
27. Government of India. Educational Statistics at a Glance 2022. New Delhi: Ministry of Education, 2023.
28. ———. National Action Plan on Climate Change. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change. 2023. https://moef.gov.in/en/national-action-plan-on-climate-change/.
29. ———. Sanitation Coverage Statistics. https://sbm.gov.in.
30. Haberman, David L. River of Love in an Age of Pollution: The Yamuna River of Northern India. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.
31. Hitopadeśa of Nārāyaṇa Paṇḍita. Edited by G.L. Chandak. Delhi: Chaukhambha Sanskrit Pratishthan, 2010.
32. Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER). Status of Devolution to Local Governments in India. New Delhi: ICRIER, 2021.
33. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Sixth Assessment Report: Climate Change 2023—Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Geneva: IPCC, 2023.
34. IQAir. World Air Quality Report 2023. https://www.iqair.com/world-air-quality-report.
35. Isaacson, Walter. Steve Jobs. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.
36. Jain, Pankaj. Dharma and Ecology of Hindu Communities: Sustenance and Sustainability. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011.
37. Jasanoff, Sheila. The Ethics of Invention: Technology and the Human Future. New York: W. W. Norton, 2016.
38. Jayal, Niraja Gopal. "Democracy and Decentralisation in India." In Democratic Governance in India, edited by Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, 123–137. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007.
39. Kautilya. Arthaśāstra. Translated by R. Shamasastry. Bangalore: Government Press, 1915.
40. Khera, Reetika. "The UID Project and Welfare Reform." Economic and Political Weekly 46, no. 9 (2011): 4–7.

41. King Jr., Martin Luther. Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community? Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.
42. ———. Why We Can't Wait. New York: Signet, 1964.
43. Kumar, Satish. "Spiritual Ecology and Sustainable Civilization." In The Schumacher Lectures, edited by Diana Schumacher, 43–52. Dartington: Green Books, 2007.
44. Mahajan, Gurpreet. The Multicultural Path: Issues of Diversity and Discrimination in Democracy. New Delhi: Sage, 2002.
45. Manor, James. The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization. Washington, DC: World Bank, 1999.
46. ———. "Decentralisation and Sustainable Livelihoods." IDS Bulletin 28, no. 4 (1997): 58–66.
47. Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology. Digital India Programme Overview. Government of India, 2023. https://digitalindia.gov.in/.
48. ———. MyGov Annual Engagement Report 2023. New Delhi: Government of India, 2024.
49. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019–21. New Delhi: Government of India, 2022.
50. Ministry of Jal Shakti. Swachh Bharat Mission (Gramin): Annual Report 2023–24. New Delhi: Government of India, 2024.
51. Ministry of Panchayati Raj. Annual Report 2022–23. Government of India, 2023.
52. Ministry of Rural Development. MGNREGA Annual Report 2020–21. New Delhi: Government of India, 2021.
53. Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Guidelines for Implementation of SCSP and TSP. New Delhi: Government of India, 2021.
54. National Commission for Scheduled Tribes. Annual Report 2021–22. New Delhi: NCST, 2022.
55. National Health Authority. Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY: Annual Report 2022–23. Government of India, 2023.
56. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). Household Social Consumption on Education in India: NSS 78th Round. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2023.
57. National Statistical Office. Household Social Consumption on Education in India. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2022.
58. Nilekani, Nandan. Rebooting India: Realizing a Billion Aspirations. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2015.
59. NITI Aayog. Composite Water Management Index: Second Round. New Delhi: Government of India, 2021.
60. ———. Evaluation of Centrally Sponsored Schemes for SC/ST Welfare. New Delhi: Government of India, 2021.
61. ———. SDG India Index & Dashboard 2023–24. Government of India, 2024.
62. ———. Transforming Aspirational Districts: A Compendium of Best Practices. Government of India, 2022.
63. NITI Aayog and United Nations Development Programme. District SDG Progress Index Report 2023. New Delhi: Government of India, 2023.
64. Nussbaum, Martha C. Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011.
65. Olivelle, Patrick, trans. The Early Upaniṣads: Annotated Text and Translation. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
66. ———, ed. A Reader on Classical India. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
67. Ostrom, Elinor. Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

68. Pratham Education Foundation. Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023. New Delhi: ASER Centre, 2024.
69. Radhakrishnan, S. The Principal Upaniṣads. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953.
70. Rawls, John. A Theory of Justice. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971.
71. Registrar General of India. Special Bulletin on Maternal Mortality in India 2018–2020. Sample Registration System, 2022.
72. Ribot, Jesse. Waiting for Democracy: The Politics of Choice in Natural Resource Decentralization. Washington, DC: World Resources Institute, 2004.
73. Sargeant, Winthrop. The Bhagavad Gītā. Albany: SUNY Press, 2009.
74. Schumacher, E.F. Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered. London: Blond & Briggs, 1973.
75. Sen, Amartya. Development as Freedom. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999.
76. Shiva, Vandana. Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2005.
77. ———. Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution, and Profit. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2002.
78. Stilgoe, Jack, Richard Owen, and Phil Macnaghten. "Developing a Framework for Responsible Innovation." Research Policy 42, no. 9 (2013): 1568–1580.
79. Swami Vivekananda. The Collected Works of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. 3. Kolkata: Advaita Ashrama, 2007.
80. Taittirīya Upaniṣad. In The Principal Upaniṣads, translated by S. Radhakrishnan. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953.
81. Teltumbde, Anand. Republic of Caste: Thinking Equality in the Time of Neoliberal Hindutva. New Delhi: Navayana, 2018.
82. Tomalin, Emma. Religions and Development. London: Routledge, 2013.
83. United Nations Development Programme. Human Development Report 2023: Breaking the Gridlock. New York: United Nations Development Programme, 2023.
84. ———. Localizing the SDGs in India: Learning from State Innovations. New Delhi: UNDP India, 2022.
85. United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative. Global Multidimensional Poverty Index 2021. New York: UNDP and OPHI, 2021.
86. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP). Policy Approaches for Localizing the SDGs in Asia and the Pacific. Bangkok: UNESCAP, 2022