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Address for

correspondence: Dr.
Mukti Bapna, Asst.
Professor, Commerce,
Indrayani Mahavidyalaya
(Affiliated to SPPU, Pune)

A study of the Role of Human Resources in Advancing Environmental Justice and Sustainability in India

Dr. Mukti Bapna

Asst. Professor, Commerce, Indrayani Mahavidyalaya (Affiliated to SPPU, Pune)

Abstract

Environmental justice and sustainability are vital for equitable development in India, a country facing rapid industrialization and environmental challenges. Human resources play a crucial role in this journey by driving policy implementation, corporate responsibility, community empowerment, and education. Policymakers and government agencies rely on skilled human resources to draft and enforce regulations that promote environmental justice. Corporate entities, guided by human resource professionals, are integrating sustainability into their business strategies through green initiatives, ethical supply chains, and corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs. Additionally, community engagement is strengthened when trained professionals empower local populations with knowledge and resources to combat environmental injustices. Educational institutions further contribute by cultivating environmental awareness and producing future leaders dedicated to sustainable development.

Despite ongoing efforts, India faces major obstacles such as inadequate enforcement of environmental regulations, limited public awareness, and corporate reluctance to adopt sustainable practices. Strengthening policy implementation, enhancing corporate accountability, and promoting widespread education on sustainability is essential to improving the connection between human resources and environmental justice. This paper examines the relationship between human resources and environmental justice in India, identifies key challenges, and proposes strategies to reinforce this synergy for a more sustainable future.

Keywords: Employee engagement, Diversity, Equity, Human Resources, Microfinance

“Environmental justice is served when people can realize their highest potential”. - Bunyan Bryant

Introduction:

In today's rapidly changing world, sustainability has become imperative for organizations across industries. India's quest for economic growth has often conflicted with environmental justice and sustainability principles. As businesses strive to create a better future for the planet and society, three pillars of sustainability encompass the economic, environmental, and social aspects: profit, planet, and people. HR leaders have emerged as crucial partners in driving sustainability strategies within their organizations.

Human Resources (HR) departments are essential in advancing these goals by shaping corporate policies, aligning business practices with sustainable objectives, and promoting employee participation in sustainability efforts. This paper examines how human resources can contribute to advancing environmental justice and sustainability in India.

Problem Statement:

While organizations in India are increasingly recognizing the need for sustainability practices, there is a gap in the integration of environmental justice into HR practices.

Research Questions:

1. What are the challenges HR faces in promoting sustainability and environmental justice in India?
2. How can HR drive meaningful change through policy advocacy, education, and community involvement?

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Environmental Justice and Sustainability in India:

Environmental justice affirms the need for urban and rural ecological policies to clean up and rebuild our cities and rural areas in balance with nature, honouring the cultural integrity of all of our communities, and providing fair access for all to the full range of resources. It calls for the strict enforcement of principles of informed consent, and control on the health related experimental reproductive and medical procedures. It opposes the destructive operations of multinational corporation

Environmental justice in India seeks to address these disparities by ensuring that all people, regardless of their socio-economic status, have equal access to a clean and healthy environment. This includes advocating for the rights of marginalized groups in policymaking, promoting sustainable livelihoods, and ensuring that the benefits of environmental protection are shared equitably.

Sustainability in India focuses on meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This includes implementing sustainable practices in agriculture, water management, energy, and waste disposal. Increasingly, both public and private sectors are adopting sustainable business models and prioritizing social responsibility.

Literature Review

Hahn, Preuss, Pinkse, and Figge [73] emphasize that sustainability creates situations when organizations need to simultaneously address multiple desirable, but conflicting economic, environmental, and social outcomes at company, and societal levels. According to Guerci et al., the success of an organization depends on its capability to integrate the interests of different stakeholders, and given the fact that integration is realized through the human resource management function.

Evans & Kantrowitz (2002) found that significant relationships exist between the ethnic and class characteristics of a community and levels of exposure to environmental risk. Across a wide variety of environmental components, including proximity to hazardous waste sites, exposures to air and water pollution, high levels of ambient noise, residential crowding, quality of housing, quality of local schools, and the work environment, communities composed of people of lower SES and people of color were consistently exposed to higher levels of environmental risk.

Based on Teece's (1996) and Stephen King(2004) discussion, this study mainly focuses on the following three broad types of management practices: (1) Cooperation and coordination across business units or divisions at the firm as a whole; (2) Human resource management with regard to R&D personnel; and (3) Restructuring the organization of R&D.

Stephen King (2004) stated that the future of HRM will be built on innovation and creativity, in nutshell innovation and creativity approaches were needed towards quality of life, environmental improvements through the healthy, sustainable,

vibrant community theme. In summary it was said that money and support of employees can put HRM on the road to environmental Sustainability.

Malt Bolch (2008), in his research has said spreading the word about Sustainability initiatives may fall to more than one department but human resource plays an important role, it is important for human resource professionals to have conversations with employees and the community at large about the implications of advance techniques and innovative ideas.

Role of Human Resources in Advancing Environmental Justice and Sustainability:

1. HR and Sustainability Integration into Organizational Culture

- **Aligning HR with Sustainability Goals:** HR's involvement in shaping organizational culture around sustainability is essential. HR can facilitate the integration of sustainability principles into day-to-day operations, including recruitment, employee training, performance evaluation, and reward systems.
- **Case Study Example:** Companies like **Tata Group** and **Infosys** have integrated sustainability into their HR policies. Tata Group companies, including Tata Steel and Tata Motors, focus on hiring individuals who demonstrate leadership in sustainability. The company seeks out candidates with experience in environmental management, and sustainable practices, and those who align with Tata's core values of social responsibility. These hiring practices help ensure that Tata's workforce is aligned with its long-term sustainability objectives, bringing in individuals who can drive innovation in sustainable technologies and processes. Tata, for example, has committed to achieving net-zero carbon emissions by 2030, and HR is a central component of this journey.

2. Employee Engagement in Sustainability

- **Training and Awareness Programs:** HR can design programs to train employees on the importance of sustainability and environmental justice. This includes educating the workforce about energy conservation, waste management, and social equity.
- **Incentivizing Sustainable Practices:** HR departments can introduce incentive structures to reward employees for proposing and implementing green initiatives within the company.
- **Example: Infosys** has implemented an employee-driven sustainability initiative, encouraging employees to volunteer in local environmental and social justice projects. Tata Group provides comprehensive training on sustainability practices, including topics like energy conservation, waste reduction, and sustainable sourcing. TCS runs internal sustainability-focused workshops and courses for employees to develop skills in these areas.

Employees become sustainability champions within the company, enabling the Tata Group to innovate further in sustainable practices across industries.

3. Promoting Environmental Justice

- **Inclusive Practices in Hiring:** HR can play an instrumental role in ensuring that marginalized communities, such as indigenous groups and rural populations, are included in the workforce. This helps reduce environmental disparities faced by these communities.
- **Legal Compliance and Advocacy:** HR can work alongside legal teams to ensure that the organization complies with environmental justice laws and regulations. This includes understanding India's **Environment Protection Act of 1986** and ensuring the company adheres to waste disposal, pollution control, and land-use laws.
- **Example: Hindustan Unilever** has worked with local communities affected by pollution, investing in local healthcare, water purification, and community upliftment.

4. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)

- **Addressing Marginalized Communities:** HR can address the intersection of environmental justice and social justice by implementing DEI policies that ensure that all communities have a voice in decision-making, particularly those most affected by environmental degradation. A report by **Sustainable Development Goals India** found that marginalized communities (tribals, Dalits) are 60% more likely to live in areas with high industrial pollution. HR can help mitigate these disparities by ensuring equitable hiring, access to training, and inclusion in sustainability initiatives.

Tata Steel runs a variety of educational programs for marginalized communities, such as scholarships for students from underprivileged backgrounds, vocational training for youth, and digital literacy programs for rural women. Tata Motors, under its **"Tata Motors Employee Inclusion" program**, has created employment opportunities for marginalized groups, including people with disabilities and people from underrepresented communities. The program trains employees from disadvantaged backgrounds and hires them across various roles in its factories and offices.

The **Infosys Foundation** is involved in a variety of projects that help marginalized communities, especially in rural and tribal areas. One key initiative is the **Infosys Foundation's Rural Development Program**, which includes efforts to build schools, provide scholarships, and set up healthcare clinics.

The **Grameen Foundation** provides microloans and financial literacy training to rural women, particularly in the agriculture sector. The foundation's **"Microfinance Program"** supports women entrepreneurs, helping them access capital to start or expand businesses.

Challenges Faced By HR

While HR plays a crucial role in shaping an organization's sustainability culture and practices, integrating these values into the business model requires overcoming multiple obstacles.

1. Lack of Awareness and Understanding - One of the biggest hurdles is the general lack of awareness or understanding of sustainability and environmental justice concepts among employees, managers, and even leadership. In many organizations, sustainability is still considered a peripheral or "nice-to-have" objective rather than a core part of the business strategy. If employees and managers do not fully understand sustainability's importance, they may be reluctant to engage in related activities or support environmental justice initiatives. This makes it difficult for HR to create and maintain momentum for these causes.

2. Resistance to Change - Organizations, particularly those in traditional or resource-intensive industries, can face significant resistance when trying to implement sustainable practices. Employees and management may be resistant to adopting new behaviors, such as reducing waste, conserving energy, or shifting to more sustainable business practices. Resistance to change is often rooted in a lack of understanding of the long-term benefits, fear of disruptions to daily operations, or reluctance to adopt new technologies or practices.

3. Balancing Sustainability with Profitability - In many organizations, especially in profit-driven industries, there is often a perceived conflict between sustainability and profitability. Implementing sustainable practices (e.g., reducing waste, improving energy efficiency, sustainable sourcing) may incur initial costs, which some stakeholders view as a financial burden rather than a strategic investment. This challenge can hinder HR's ability to convince leadership to prioritize sustainability initiatives or invest in resources required to promote environmental justice, especially when cost-benefit analyses appear to favor traditional methods.

4. Integration into Organizational Culture - Embedding sustainability and environmental justice into an organization's culture is a complex and ongoing process. Many companies may have sustainability goals or policies on paper, but translating them into daily behaviors and organizational values is challenging.

Without proper integration into the company's values, sustainability can remain an afterthought or limited to isolated initiatives rather than becoming a core part of the business's operations and decision-making.

5. Sustainability Talent Shortage - Companies may struggle to find employees with the specialized skills and knowledge needed to drive sustainability and environmental justice. While sustainability is a growing field, there is often a shortage of professionals with expertise in areas like renewable energy, sustainable supply chains, or environmental policy.

This skills gap makes it difficult for HR to recruit, retain, and develop a workforce capable of

advancing sustainability goals. Moreover, companies may face challenges when trying to implement specific environmental justice projects that require a deep understanding of social, cultural, and environmental factors.

6. Engagement with Marginalized Communities and Environmental Justice - Advancing environmental justice requires not only improving sustainability practices but also ensuring that the benefits of these efforts reach marginalized communities disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. HR faces the challenge of creating initiatives that effectively engage these communities in a meaningful way.

Without an inclusive approach, sustainability efforts can inadvertently perpetuate inequalities, and marginalized communities may not experience the benefits of corporate sustainability initiatives.

7. Measuring and Reporting Impact - Another significant challenge for HR is measuring and tracking the impact of sustainability and environmental justice initiatives. Without clear metrics, it's difficult to evaluate the success of programs and demonstrate tangible results to leadership, stakeholders, or employees.

The lack of robust data on environmental performance, employee engagement, or social justice outcomes can make it difficult to justify ongoing investment in sustainability programs or to gauge their effectiveness.

8. Legal and Regulatory Barriers - While environmental regulations are increasingly common, there can be significant legal and regulatory barriers to advancing sustainability. These might include challenges related to waste disposal, carbon emission limits, labor laws affecting marginalized groups, or local laws that hinder sustainable business practices. HR must navigate these legal and regulatory hurdles when attempting to implement sustainability initiatives, especially in countries with complex, evolving environmental laws. Non-compliance or insufficient understanding of these laws can result in reputational damage or fines.

9. Leadership Commitment - The support of senior leadership is essential for driving sustainability and environmental justice initiatives. If top leadership is not fully committed or does not prioritize these areas, it becomes difficult for HR to push sustainability efforts effectively. Without strong leadership commitment, sustainability goals can lack direction and resources, making it difficult for HR to implement and scale initiatives across the organization.

Suggestions

1. Raise Awareness - HR needs to implement training programs to raise awareness about sustainability and its relevance to business success, employee well-being, and environmental justice. For example, providing employees with knowledge on climate change, sustainability goals, and the role of corporate responsibility in advancing environmental justice can help drive engagement.

2. Foster culture of Innovation - HR must foster a culture of innovation and change, emphasizing the long-term benefits of sustainability initiatives. This includes communicating the importance of sustainability for the company's future success, employee health, and environmental protection. HR should also incentivize early adopters of sustainability practices to serve as role models and encourage broader participation.

3. Framing Sustainability - HR can help by framing sustainability as a long-term investment that delivers returns through improved employee engagement, reduced costs (such as energy savings), and enhanced brand reputation. Demonstrating that sustainability aligns with corporate social responsibility (CSR) goals and the evolving preferences of consumers, investors, and regulatory bodies can encourage decision-makers to view it as a strategic advantage.

4. Aligning Organizational Values - HR should integrate sustainability into the company's core values, mission statement, and day-to-day operations. This could include incorporating sustainability into recruitment, performance reviews, and leadership development. By aligning organizational values with sustainability goals, HR can create a more robust commitment to environmental justice.

5. Training and Upskilling Program - HR can address this by investing in training and upskilling programs to develop existing employees' sustainability competencies. Partnerships with educational institutions or industry groups can also be leveraged to attract talent with the right expertise.

6. Addressing the Need of Marginalized Group - HR should ensure that sustainability strategies are inclusive by designing programs that address the needs of marginalized groups, such as those in low-income communities, rural areas, or indigenous populations. Partnering with NGOs and local organizations can also ensure that the voices and needs of these communities are considered and met through inclusive policies.

7. Define Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) - HR can collaborate with sustainability teams to define key performance indicators (KPIs) that track the environmental and social impacts of initiatives. These might include reductions in carbon emissions, waste reduction, diversity in environmental leadership, or the number of marginalized individuals reached by CSR programs. Using data-driven insights can help HR refine strategies, improve initiatives, and communicate successes more effectively.

8. Training Related to Law - HR teams can collaborate with legal and sustainability departments to ensure full compliance with national and international environmental laws. Providing regular training on relevant laws and best practices will help mitigate legal risks while supporting sustainable business operations.

9. Financial and Social Benefits - HR must actively engage with top leadership to ensure that sustainability is a priority at the highest levels of the organization. By providing data on the financial and social benefits of sustainability, HR can encourage

leaders to take ownership of these goals and ensure that resources are allocated accordingly.

Policy Recommendations

- HR departments should prioritize integrating sustainability training into employee development programs.
- HR should advocate for inclusive hiring policies that benefit marginalized communities.
- Greater collaboration between HR, legal teams, and external stakeholders (NGOs, government bodies) is necessary to ensure legal compliance and positive environmental outcomes.
- HR should seek government incentives or CSR grants to allocate resources toward sustainability projects.

By aligning organizational strategies with environmental and social goals, HR can catalyse positive change and contribute significantly to India's journey toward a sustainable and just future.

Conclusion

Advancing sustainability and environmental justice is a complex, long-term effort that requires collaboration across all organizational levels. HR's role is pivotal in creating a culture of sustainability, providing training, and fostering an inclusive approach. However, overcoming challenges such as resistance to change, the skills gap, balancing short-term profitability with long-term goals, and navigating legal barriers is essential for driving meaningful progress. By addressing these challenges, HR can help lead organizations toward achieving both their sustainability and environmental justice objectives.

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Conflicts of interest

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