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ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND PILS IN INDIA

T. JEBA VASANTH¹

I. ABSTRACT

In India's ecological defines landscape, Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has become a game-changing legal tool that has radically changed the way environmental justice is sought and attained. PIL has enabled individuals, groups, and environmental activists to directly petition the court on behalf of public issues since the 1980s, eschewing the conventional legal standing criteria that hitherto impeded environmental campaigning. Through historic cases like Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India, T.N. Goda Varman Thirumulpad v. Union of India, and M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Ganga Pollution Case), the Indian judiciary especially the Supreme Court and High Courts has used PIL to broaden environmental jurisprudence. These rulings interpreted Article 21 of the Constitution to include the basic right to a clean and healthy environment, and they developed important environmental doctrines such as the Polluter Pays Principle, Precautionary Principle, and Public Trust Doctrine. Courts may now issue comprehensive directives for pollution control, forest conservation, and sustainable development because to PIL's facilitation of judicial activism in environmental protection. The system, which frequently fills in where the legislative and executive institutions have failed, has proven crucial in resolving issues such as industrial pollution, deforestation, mining infractions, and wildlife preservation. But there are issues with environmental PIL, including as a lack of enforcement, the possibility of abuse, and the need to strike a balance between ecological preservation and growth. Notwithstanding these drawbacks, PIL continues to be a vital component of environmental governance in India, offering easily accessible justice for rights to the environment and encouraging responsibility from government officials and polluting corporations.

II. KEYWORDS

Environmental Justice, Sustainable Development, Judicial Activism, Polluter Pays Principle, Public Interest Litigation

¹ BA.LLB(HONS) Student, Email: jebavasanth4@gmail.com

III. INTRODUCTION

Environmental protection has become one of the most important public concerns in India. Rapid industrial growth, urban expansion, and the increased use of natural resources have placed heavy pressure on the environment. Many communities' face pollution, loss of forests, unsafe water, and shrinking wildlife habitats. In this situation public activism and legal action have grown together. People began to seek stronger ways to defend their environment, especially when state authorities did not respond in time. Public Interest Litigation became one of the most effective tools in this process.

PIL changed the traditional idea of who could approach the court. Earlier only those who were directly harmed could file a case. The Supreme Court relaxed this rule and allowed citizens, social groups, and activists to file petitions on behalf of those who lacked the means to do so. This simple shift opened a new door for environmental protection. Courts soon began to hear cases about polluted rivers, unsafe industries, illegal mining, and loss of forests. In many cases the Court expanded the meaning of Article 21 and held that the right to life includes the right to a clean and healthy environment.²

Through PIL the judiciary also shaped important environmental principles. These include the Precautionary Principle, the Polluter Pays Principle, and the Public Trust Doctrine.³ These principles guided state agencies and helped create a stronger environmental framework. The courts often issued monitoring directions, set deadlines for pollution control, and reminded the government of its duty to protect natural resources.⁴

Even with these strengths PIL faces challenges such as weak enforcement and concerns about misuse. PIL continues to be a powerful mechanism for environmental justice. It supports public activism and gives citizens a meaningful path to protect the environment for future generations.

² M. C. Mehta v. Union of India, (1988) 1 S.C.C. 471.

³ Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India, (1996) 5 S.C.C. 647.

⁴ T. N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India, (1997) 2 S.C.C. 267.

A. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The present research paper aims to examine the evolving role of Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in strengthening environmental protection and environmental activism in India. In particular, the study seeks to achieve the following specific and measurable objectives:

1. To analyse the evolution and development of Public Interest Litigation in India with reference to its emergence as a judicial mechanism for environmental protection.
2. To examine the constitutional foundations of environmental protection in India, especially the interpretation of Article 21, Article 48A, and Article 51A(g) by the judiciary through PILs.
3. To evaluate the role of the Indian judiciary in advancing environmental activism by developing environmental principles such as the Polluter Pays Principle, Precautionary Principle, and Public Trust Doctrine.
4. To assess the impact of landmark environmental PIL cases on environmental governance, pollution control, forest conservation, wildlife protection, and sustainable development.
5. To identify the challenges, limitations, and criticisms associated with environmental PILs and suggest measures to enhance their effectiveness and prevent misuse.

B. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research is guided by the following research questions:

1. How has Public Interest Litigation contributed to the development of environmental jurisprudence in India?
2. In what manner has the Indian judiciary expanded the scope of the right to life under Article 21 to include environmental protection through PIL?
3. What role have landmark PIL cases played in promoting environmental activism and accountability of state authorities?

4. What are the major challenges and criticisms faced by environmental PILs in India, and how can they be addressed?

C. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The study is based on the following hypotheses, which are examined through doctrinal and case law analysis:

1. Public Interest Litigation has significantly strengthened environmental protection in India by enabling judicial intervention in cases of administrative and executive failure.
2. Judicial interpretation of Article 21 has transformed environmental protection into a fundamental right, thereby providing a constitutional basis for environmental activism.
3. Landmark environmental PILs have played a decisive role in shaping environmental governance, policy formulation, and enforcement of environmental laws in India.
4. Despite its positive impact, environmental PIL faces challenges such as enforcement gaps and misuse, which may undermine its effectiveness unless appropriate safeguards are implemented.

D. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study adopts a doctrinal research methodology, focusing on the analysis of legal principles, judicial decisions, statutory provisions, and constitutional interpretations relating to environmental protection and Public Interest Litigation in India.

Primary sources include the Constitution of India, landmark judgments of the Supreme Court and High Courts, and key environmental legislations such as the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986; Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974; and Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981. Judicial pronouncements in cases such as *M.C. Mehta v. Union of India*, *Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India*, and *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India* form the core of the analysis.

Secondary sources include textbooks, research articles, journals, reports of environmental committees, and scholarly commentaries on environmental law and PIL. The study also employs a case-law based analytical approach to evaluate the impact of PIL on environmental governance.

The research is analytical and descriptive in nature and aims to critically evaluate judicial trends, challenges, and prospects of environmental PIL in India. No empirical or field-based data has been used.

IV. EVOLUTION OF PUBLIC INTEREST LITIGATION IN INDIA

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) in India emerged as a powerful tool to protect the rights of the public, especially marginalized communities, when traditional legal avenues proved inaccessible. Before the 1980s only individuals with direct legal standing could approach the courts. Many social and environmental problems were left unaddressed because the affected communities lacked resources or knowledge to seek justice. The concept of PIL transformed this system by allowing any person or group to file petitions on behalf of the public.⁵

The Supreme Court played a central role in shaping PIL. In landmark cases the Court emphasized that access to justice should not be limited by strict technical rules. The judiciary recognized its responsibility to protect citizens' fundamental rights and public welfare, particularly in matters concerning the environment, health, and social justice.⁶ Courts began accepting letters, telegrams, or even newspaper reports as valid petitions if they raised issues of public importance. This approach enabled the courts to address widespread problems and ensure governmental accountability.

Environmental protection became a significant focus of PIL. Activists used this mechanism to challenge industrial pollution, illegal mining, deforestation, and other ecological harms. The judiciary expanded constitutional interpretations to include environmental rights within the ambit of fundamental rights, particularly Article 21.

⁵ S.P. Gupta v. Union of India, (1982) 2 S.C.C. 149

⁶ Hussainara Khatoon v. State of Bihar, (1979) 3 S.C.C. 306.

Through PIL, the courts introduced principles like the Polluter Pays Principle, Precautionary Principle, and Public Trust Doctrine.⁷

PIL evolved from a novel judicial innovation into a widely recognized mechanism for social change. It empowered citizens and civil society organizations to participate actively in governance. Despite challenges such as misuse and delayed implementation, PIL continues to be a vital instrument for promoting justice, accountability, and environmental protection in India.

V. CONSTITUTIONAL BASIS OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

The Indian Constitution provides a strong foundation for environmental protection through both fundamental rights and directive principles. The Supreme Court has viewed the right to a clean and healthy environment as part of Article 21, which protects the right to life.⁸ This expansive reading ensures that citizens are entitled not only to survival but also to a safe ecological space essential for a dignified life. The judiciary has consistently relied on Article 21 to address issues of pollution, deforestation, and industrial hazards, linking environmental protection directly to human rights.

Directive Principles of State Policy also emphasize ecological conservation. The State is required by Article 48A to preserve and enhance the environment, as well as to protect forests and wildlife. This principle guides governmental policy and provides a legal standard against which the executive's environmental action is measured.⁹ Similarly, Article 51A (g) imposes a duty on citizens to protect the environment, promoting a culture of shared responsibility for ecological preservation. Together, these constitutional provisions create a framework that binds both the State and individuals to environmental accountability.

The courts have combined these provisions to develop key environmental doctrines. The Precautionary Principle, the Polluter Pays Principle, and the Public Trust Doctrine

⁷ Vellore Citizens Welfare Forum v. Union of India, (1996) 5 S.C.C. 647.

⁸ Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar, (1991) 1 S.C.C. 598.

⁹ The Constitution of India, Arts. 48A, 51A (g).

emerged from judicial interpretation aimed at balancing development with ecological sustainability. This approach allows courts to issue directives ensuring pollution control, forest conservation, and wildlife protection while holding both government agencies and private entities accountable for environmental harm.

The constitutional framework in India thus integrates human rights, state responsibility, and citizen duties to protect the environment. By linking environmental protection with the right to life and directing the state and society to maintain ecological balance, the Constitution serves as a strong legal foundation for environmental activism and Public Interest Litigation.

VI. ROLE OF JUDICIARY IN ADVANCING ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

The judiciary in India has played a pivotal role in advancing environmental activism, often acting as a bridge between citizens and the state to enforce ecological protection. Through proactive judicial intervention, courts have interpreted constitutional provisions broadly, developed environmental principles, and held government authorities and private actors accountable for ecological harm.

One key way the judiciary has promoted environmental activism is through the use of Public Interest Litigation (PIL). Courts have accepted petitions from individuals, non-governmental organizations, and citizen groups seeking environmental protection. This has allowed ordinary citizens to participate in environmental governance and hold the state accountable for inaction.¹⁰

The courts have also been instrumental in developing principles such as the Polluter Pays Principle, the Precautionary Principle, and the Public Trust Doctrine. These doctrines have provided a framework for enforcing environmental responsibility and ensuring that economic development does not come at the expense of ecological sustainability.¹¹ Judicial monitoring mechanisms, such as the appointment of

¹⁰ S.P. Gupta v. Union of India, (1981) 3 S.C.R. 848.

¹¹ Indian Council for Enviro-Legal Action v. Union of India, (1996) 3 S.C.C. 212.

committees to oversee pollution control measures or forest conservation efforts, have ensured that court directives are implemented effectively.

In cases like *State of Himachal Pradesh v. Ganesh Wood Products*, the judiciary intervened to prevent illegal logging and maintain ecological balance.¹² Similarly, in *Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India*, the courts balanced development needs with environmental and human rights considerations, illustrating the judiciary's role in fostering sustainable development.

Through these interventions, the judiciary has not only protected natural resources but also encouraged public participation in environmental activism. Its decisions have inspired activists, shaped policy, and reinforced the idea that environmental protection is both a constitutional and social responsibility.

VII. AREAS WHERE PIL INFLUENCED ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has played a transformative role in protecting India's environment across multiple areas. By enabling citizens and activists to approach the courts, PIL has addressed issues ranging from industrial pollution to wildlife conservation, often stepping in where government action was insufficient.

Forest conservation has also benefited from PIL. Courts have intervened in matters of illegal logging, deforestation, and encroachment, often issuing continuous mandamus to ensure compliance. For example, *T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad v. Union of India* set guidelines to protect forests and monitor state agencies' activities.

Mining and land degradation have similarly been addressed through PIL. The judiciary has imposed restrictions on environmentally harmful mining practices, ensuring sustainable land use and protecting local communities.¹³

PIL has also advanced wildlife protection. Courts have stepped in to prevent poaching, protect endangered species, and conserve natural habitats. In cases

¹² *State of Himachal Pradesh v. Ganesh Wood Products*, (1995) 3 S.C.C. 451.

¹³ *Rural Litigation and Entitlement Kendra v. State of Uttar Pradesh*, (1985) 2 S.C.C. 431.

concerning national parks and sanctuaries, the judiciary has actively guided enforcement of wildlife laws.

Urban environmental issues, such as river pollution, solid waste management, and air quality, have been addressed through PIL. Citizens' petitions have compelled municipal authorities to act and implement eco-friendly solutions.¹⁴

PIL has created a legal framework for environmental accountability. It empowers ordinary citizens to challenge harmful activities, encourages sustainable development, and ensures that both government and private actors uphold environmental responsibilities.

VIII. CHALLENGES AND CRITICISM OF ENVIRONMENTAL PIL

Public Interest Litigation (PIL) has been instrumental in advancing environmental protection in India, yet it faces several challenges and criticisms. One major concern is enforcement of court orders. While courts frequently issue directives for pollution control, forest conservation, or industrial regulation, delays in implementation often reduce their effectiveness. Government agencies may lack resources, political will, or technical capacity to comply fully, leading to gaps between judicial orders and actual environmental improvement.¹⁵

Another criticism is the possibility of misuse. PILs, while intended for public welfare, can sometimes be filed for personal, political, or commercial interests. Frivolous petitions consume judicial time and may distract courts from addressing genuine environmental crises.¹⁶

A third challenge is judicial overreach. Courts, through PIL, occasionally issue directions that encroach on legislative or executive functions. While this activism has often protected the environment, it raises concerns about maintaining the proper balance of power among branches of government.¹⁷

¹⁴ M.C. Mehta v. Union of India (Ganga Pollution Case), (1988) 1 S.C.C. 471.

¹⁵ M.C. Mehta v. Kamal Nath, (1997) 1 S.C.C. 388.

¹⁶ People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India, (2004) 12 S.C.C. 1.

¹⁷ State of Himachal Pradesh v. Ganesh Wood Products, (1995) 3 S.C.C. 451.

Balancing environmental protection with development remains complex. Economic growth, industrial projects, and infrastructure development can conflict with ecological preservation. PILs sometimes impose restrictions that affect livelihoods or delay development, highlighting the need for sustainable solutions that consider both ecological and socio-economic factors.¹⁸

Despite these challenges, environmental PIL continues to be a powerful instrument for justice. It promotes accountability, raises awareness, and ensures that environmental rights are recognized as part of citizens' fundamental rights. Reform measures, such as stricter scrutiny for frivolous petitions and better coordination between courts and executive agencies, can enhance the effectiveness of environmental PIL while addressing its criticisms.

IX. SUGGESTION

Public Interest Litigation has greatly contributed to environmental protection in India, but certain reforms can enhance its effectiveness and ensure long-term sustainability. One key suggestion is strengthening enforcement mechanisms. Courts often issue directions to control pollution, conserve forests, or regulate industries, but gaps in implementation limit impact. Better coordination between judicial authorities, government agencies, and local bodies can ensure timely compliance.

Another important recommendation is scrutiny of petitions. To reduce frivolous or malicious PILs, courts should adopt stricter preliminary evaluation procedures. This will ensure that only genuine matters of public interest are addressed, saving judicial time and resources while maintaining focus on pressing environmental issues. Capacity building and technical support for courts and agencies is also essential. Environmental matters often involve complex scientific and technical data. Providing judges, administrative authorities, and lawyers with adequate expertise can improve decision-making and monitoring of compliance with environmental standards.

Promoting public awareness and participation is another key measure. Citizens, NGOs, and local communities should be encouraged to participate in environmental

¹⁸ Narmada Bachao Andolan v. Union of India, (2000) 10 S.C.C. 664.

governance. Educational campaigns and easier access to environmental information can empower stakeholders to identify issues and contribute effectively to solutions.

The judiciary should continue to balance environmental protection with development needs. Sustainable development strategies should be emphasized in PIL decisions to ensure that economic progress does not come at the cost of ecological degradation. By adopting a pragmatic and collaborative approach, PIL can achieve meaningful and lasting environmental outcomes. Implementing these measures will enhance the credibility, efficiency, and impact of environmental PIL in India, ensuring that it remains a robust mechanism for ecological protection and public welfare.

X. CONCLUSION

Public Interest Litigation has emerged as one of the most powerful tools for advancing environmental protection in India. Over the past few decades, PIL has enabled citizens, social organizations, and activists to bring pressing ecological issues before the judiciary, ensuring that environmental rights are treated as fundamental rights under the Constitution. By relaxing traditional legal standing requirements, the judiciary has empowered ordinary citizens to participate directly in environmental governance, bridging gaps left by legislative or executive inaction.

Through PIL, the Indian judiciary has not only addressed immediate ecological concerns but also shaped enduring legal principles. Doctrines such as the Polluter Pays Principle, Precautionary Principle, and Public Trust Doctrine have guided both government agencies and private entities toward greater accountability. Landmark judgments on river pollution, forest conservation, industrial emissions, and wildlife protection have set precedents that continue to influence policy, law making, and public awareness. These interventions reflect a proactive judicial role that balances development with ecological sustainability.

Despite its success, environmental PIL faces challenges, including enforcement gaps, risk of frivolous petitions, and occasional tensions between judicial activism and other branches of government. To strengthen its impact, reforms such as improved implementation mechanisms, technical capacity building, and increased public awareness are essential. Encouraging collaboration between courts, government

agencies, and civil society can enhance the effectiveness of PIL and ensure that environmental protection is both practical and sustainable.

PIL has become an indispensable instrument for environmental justice in India. It fosters citizen engagement, reinforces the constitutional right to a clean and healthy environment, and holds both state and non-state actors accountable for ecological harm. By continuing to evolve and adapt to emerging challenges, PIL can remain a vital mechanism for promoting sustainable development, protecting natural resources, and securing a healthier environment for present and future generations.

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