



Advancing Environmental Consciousness: Integrating Ecocritical Discourse into India's National Education Policy 2020 For Sustainable Development

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Abstract

Humanity is undergoing fast-paced changes in every field during the 21st century. The environmental crisis is a major change that has deeply affected the environment. Experts across disciplines are actively studying environmental issues from diverse perspectives. India also has spent four years crafting the National Education Policy (NEP-2020), a forward-thinking educational framework. This policy draws on India's ancient and enduring knowledge and thought to shape [subject]. India has publicly reaffirmed its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) of providing inclusive, equitable, high-quality education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030. To achieve this, India is restructuring its entire education system to encourage and support learning. The NEP-2020 aims to prepare students from diverse academic backgrounds and make them aware of India's commitment to sustainable development and environmental protection. With India's pledge to meet the SDGs, coupled with the recent devastating pandemic and growing ecological damage, the ecocritical discussions and dialogues play a vital role in addressing the challenges of achieving sustainable development goals while protecting the environment.

Keywords: National education policy 2020, Sustainable development goals, Ecology, Environment, Ecocritical discourse.

Introduction:

“Education is a human right with immense power to transform. On its foundation rest the cornerstones of freedom, democracy, and sustainable human development” - Kofi Annan.

Education is a fundamental tool that imparts comprehensive knowledge to individuals, enabling them to acquire the necessary competencies, attitudes, and values required for the purpose of shaping a sustainable future. It is critical for fulfilling one's full potential for creating an equal and just society and encouraging national progress. The question now is, 'Can education save the environment'? According to UNESCO, education is critical in helping people understand and address the impacts of environmental crisis, as well as encouraging the changes in attitudes and behavior required to help and address the causes of deterioration of environment, adopt more sustainable lifestyles, and develop skills that support various modules of economies. This statement of UNESCO is supported in the

book *Climate Change and the Role of Education* (2019) which discusses how education is not only linked to literacy but should also aim to change individuals' attitudes and behaviours. UNESCO consider education has a crucial role in facilitating decision-making processes, enhancing individuals' abilities to adapt to and mitigate challenges, and empowering them to embrace more sustainable ways of living. A recent study conducted by academicians from Stanford University and the National Autonomous University of Mexico states that the ongoing 'sixth mass extinction primarily caused by anthropogenic activities threatens to cause an assault on the foundations of human civilization, and it won't be surprising to call the 21st century an environmental distress syndrome century. The relationship between humanity and its natural biological surroundings has experienced a decline in quality since the emergence of capitalist and neoliberal economic systems. From the bleaching of the coral reefs to the desiccating of rainforests and savannahs, nature has been vandalized a hundred times more than the average over the past thousands of years. The worldwide environmental hazard has created new threats and worries for the planet's safety in the modern period. Despite the scientific evidence being available to support environment catastrophe, the behaviour contributing to the environmental damage has not been altered or changed significantly. "Education is one critical aspect of promoting sustainable development and improving the capacity of the people to address environmental and development issues. Education about the environment is critical for achieving ecological and ethical awareness, values and attitudes, skills and behaviour consistent with sustainable development, and effective public participation in decision-making" (Miller, 2004). Regardless of greater coverage of environmental issues in periodicals, news, television, and social media, the governmental and private sectors are slow in responding to environmental challenges. Numerous environmental issues confronting society demands immediate debate and resolution, and it is only possible if there are widespread community assistance and public awareness.

The UN's top official has warned invariably that the environmental concerns are at a "tipping point" in the environmental crisis and require a combined effort of all nations to put aside their national interests and fight for the common goal. To deal with these problems, the UN has come up with and adopted several multilateral environmental agreements for protecting the environment and sustainable policies, which many countries have ratified" (Sarwar, 2008). "The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and other UN initiatives dealing with environment and development issues have all played important roles in providing credible and up-to-date scientific information on the global environment outlook and related issues and sustainability. the countries, particularly the least developed countries" (Sarwar, 2008).

In recent times, the United Nations has introduced sets of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a component of the 2030 Agenda, which aims to mobilize worldwide endeavours and establish a long-lasting objective for sustainable outcomes. The focus on the declining state of the environment was brought to the forefront during the United Nations Conference on Environment, which took place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. SDG Goal (4) is specifically aimed at guaranteeing inclusive and equal access to high-quality education as well as fostering possibilities for lifelong learning among all individuals. It is believed that

quality education plays a crucial role in enhancing individuals' well-being and fostering sustainable development. The importance of acquiring a high standard of education has been extensively discussed within the framework of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was endorsed by United Nations members in 2015 which serves as a comprehensive framework directed at fostering prosperity and peace for humanity and environment, with a focus on present and future generations.

The study of environment conservation in India is not new; it has existed since the beginning of time, long before the formation of the United Nations and environmental legislation policies. All religions and cultures in India addressed environmental problems while embodying traditions and societal ideas, with a strong warning on the implications of ecological deterioration and the requirement of environmental conservation for human survival. Indian culture sees nature as a pervasive force. The Vedas, Puranas, and Upanishads, as well as the fabled epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, are among the earliest Hindu texts that have firmly established the case for environmental preservation, religious rituals, and warnings against over-exploiting natural resources. "The Prithvisukta of the Atharva Veda makes numerous allusions to the sacred relationship between man and earth. The tradition of worshipping the environment and conserving nature is still alive and followed in indigenous communities across India, although it has been gradually declining as a result of mass modernization and technological advancement" (Munish, 2007). After the independence Indian government formed the Education Commission's Report (Kothari Commission, 1964–1966) to set the framework for informal environmental education. In 1986, the government unveiled its National Education Policy (NEP), which placed a strong emphasis on the value of emphasizing environmental issues at all levels of education. It said 'there is a fundamental need to create an understanding of the environment, in schools and universities, the knowledge of environmental education must begin with children/ students and grow to every sphere of society'.

Despite many amendments, there are a lot of loopholes in the syllabi of environment education, as of now, only a small number of textbook chapters are devoted to teaching environment studies. Environmental education at school and university levels faces several challenges that hinder its effectiveness. Environment studies chapters are included in foundational subjects, which restricts the range of conversation on environmental issues. It is either additional, a substitution, or of less importance even the time allotment for the subject is very inconsiderable as it is taught once or twice a week. Resistance to change, either from institutions prioritizing traditional subjects or from communities sceptical of environmental science, can further complicate implementation. It's hardly seen institutions allotting time for environmental education as a subject like mathematics, English, or science "Even the textbooks that are prescribed does not address the contextual issues of specific regions, lack of resources on state-specific environmental issues and challenges and poor curriculum make teaching and learning complex" (Muralidhar, 2022). "The narrow focus on environment education in pre-service teacher training, makes educators unfamiliar with its pedagogy and fundamentals therefore, even the teachers/professors find it difficult to include environmental education in their lessons." (Muralidhar, 2022). Limited funding and resources also pose a barrier, restricting access to updated materials, field trips, or practical activities like recycling programs or campus

gardens. Additionally, there's often a disconnect between theoretical lessons and real-world application, leaving students unclear about how to translate knowledge into action. The environment-friendly activities plantation drives or cleanliness activities happen once or twice a year by students either on World Environment Day or as a part of the NSS activity. These days, there are no actual opportunity for learners to interact with the environmental and therefore to learn about the issues. The rapid evolution of environmental issues requires constant curriculum updates, which many institutions struggle to keep pace with due to bureaucratic inertia or lack of expertise.

To raise environmental awareness in academic discourse, a variety of engaging activities and initiatives can be implemented, such as organizing tree-planting drives on campus to promote greenery, setting up recycling programs with clearly labelled bins to encourage waste segregation, and hosting eco-friendly workshops where students create crafts from recycled materials. Schools/ University can also integrate environmental education into the curriculum through projects like studying local ecosystems or calculating carbon footprints, while guest speakers or documentaries on climate change can spark meaningful discussions. Competitions like poster-making, essay writing, or debates on environmental issues can inspire creativity and critical thinking, and establishing eco-clubs can empower students to lead sustainability initiatives, such as clean-up drives or energy-saving campaigns. Additionally, celebrating events like Earth Day with activities like upcycling fairs or nature walks fosters a deeper connection to the environment, while small changes like switching to energy-efficient lighting or promoting plastic-free lunches can reinforce sustainable habits among students and staff. Very few colleges and universities offer Environmental Education as an honours subject especially in state level. Even as a career or profession environmentalism is considered to be the same, i.e., of less value or not much of importance. The Experts in environmental science are not even hired as professors at research universities or as members of committees that oversee environmental impact assessments, or pollution control boards. The esteemed Indian Forest Service exams don't include environment science in the legitimate list of optional subjects for the exam. Government policies on environmental education have often fallen short of fostering meaningful change, prioritizing superficial measures over transformative solutions, a phenomenon critics describe as "shallow environmentalism." Instead of promoting deep-rooted systemic changes like integrating comprehensive environmental curricula across all educational levels or funding teacher training to address complex issues such as climate change and resource depletion, many policies focus on token gestures – such as one-off campaigns, symbolic tree-planting events, or outdated recycling initiatives – that appear trendy but lack substance. These efforts, driven by political optics or short-term public appeal, fail to challenge the root causes of environmental degradation, such as overconsumption or reliance on unsustainable industries. Moreover, inadequate funding, lack of enforcement, and resistance from stakeholders prioritizing economic growth over ecological health further weaken these policies, leaving environmental education fragmented and ineffective. This superficial approach not only undermines the urgency of the environmental crisis but also misses opportunities to empower students with the knowledge and skills needed for radical, long-term sustainability solutions. This scenario of educational provisions in itself proves that there is a lot of awareness needed to be brought not only in learners but also in the policies of government to understand the importance of the environment and its education.

Recently education policy makers in India have spent four years in drafting the National Education Policy, a progressive educational framework to bring significant changes to education sector. According to NEP-2020, the great tradition of ancient and eternal Indian knowledge and thinking has been a guiding light" in its development. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes the significance of including environmental education into the curriculum as well as increasing environmental awareness and sensitivity toward conservation and sustainable development. It also presents a road map for reclaiming, re-articulating, and restructuring the Bhartiya self in order to become a worldwide leader (Vishwaguru) in an environment where equity, equality, and fraternity are embraced" (Muralidhar, 2023). "NEP 2020 encourages the curricular integration of essential subjects, their skills, and capacities concerted curricular and pedagogical initiatives, including the introduction of contemporary subjects, such as Artificial Intelligence, Design Thinking, Holistic Health, Organic Living, Environmental Education, Global Citizenship Education (GCED) at relevant stages which will be undertaken to develop these various important skills in students at all levels.' The policy envisions environmental education becoming an integral part of school curricula. To do so, it recommends the inclusion of the appropriate integration of environmental awareness and sensitivity toward its conservation and sustainable development in all programs. To achieve a more holistic and multidisciplinary education, the policy suggests that a flexible and innovative curriculum of all HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] shall include credit-based courses" (Muralidhar, 2023). "Nep 2020 gives due importance to sustainable development goals which are concerned with environmental benefit and also emphasize the spread of indigenous knowledge which is also very beneficial for the betterment of environmental challenges" (Kumari, 1934). However, it is not worth acknowledging radical changes as there have been numerous amendments made to the National Education Policy (NEP) since 2020 in regard to the curricula pertaining to environmental education. The Indian educational system prioritizes theoretical knowledge above addressing real-time environmental concerns. It has been five years since the establishment of the NEP, although only a limited number of states and institutions have successfully integrated the environmental education curricula. This can be attributed to challenges related to accessibility, the quality of teaching, research, and innovation. In recent times, the state of Karnataka has made the decision to terminate the National Education Strategy (NEP) and instead proceed with the implementation of a state-specific education strategy. Therefore, it is said that 'education is not a silver bullet but it must be supported with global political leadership'. Political instability is the reason for India lagging behind in environmental research and development. "It's much needed that the current education needs to upgrade the level of environmental education in the syllabi to counter the challenges of the environment. According to research we are in need of a form of environmental education which would prompt solutions, both in terms of dealing with the physical manifestations of pollution, climate change, global warming, and so on and in terms of the social structures which underlie environmental problems" (Fassbinder 10).

"While humans engage and interact with their surroundings in different ways, literary fiction (books/novels/ movies) serves as a significant avenue for environmental socialization by presenting readers with exemplars of both positive and negative interactions with their environment. This study primarily examines the convergence of literary fiction, environmentalism,

eco-pedagogy, and ecocritical discourses. The usage of ecocritical theory in curricula will not only improve student's attitudes towards the environment but can also help society deal with environmental issues and create awareness and the zeal for action" (Orr, 1994).

Ecocriticism is the study of literary and cultural theory that examines the relationship between literature, culture, and the natural environment, focusing on how texts represent and engage with ecological issues. It explores how narratives, themes, and imagery in literature reflect human attitudes toward nature, environmental crises, and sustainability, often critiquing anthropocentrism and advocating for ecological awareness. Ecocriticism analyses work ranging from classic nature writing to modern texts, questioning how they shape or challenge perceptions of the environment, climate change, and humanity's role in ecological systems. It also intersects with other disciplines, like postcolonialism and feminism, to address environmental justice and the impact of human activities on marginalized communities and ecosystems. By highlighting the interconnectedness of humans and nature, ecocriticism seeks to inspire more sustainable and ethical relationships with the environment through cultural and literary lenses. Having its origin in the United States in the late 20th century it is primarily a regional version of an environmentally oriented approach, it has since spread throughout literature departments and developed into a new field of the humanities not only in the United States and Europe but worldwide. "It is not an independent field, but an aggregation of numerous studies such as art, science, and education in relation to the environment" (Orr, 1994). "Ecocriticism seeks to revive "pastoral and romantic attitudes towards the natural world, but informed by modern science and responding to alarm about the fragility of biological environments increasingly devastated by human technologies" (Westling 5). It focuses on the portrayal of nature and the interaction between humans and the natural world through texts, which can be either fictional or nonfictional, hybrid texts, or other cultural expressions like artwork, documentaries, or movies. "Ecocriticism decentres humanity's importance to every object of environment. In ecology, man's tragic flaw is his anthropocentric as opposed to biocentric vision, and his compulsion to conquer, harmonise, domesticate, violate, and exploit every natural thing. Anthropocentrism assumes the primacy of humans, who either sentimentalise or dominate the environment. On the other hand, biocentric decentres humanities importance explores the complex interrelationships between the human and the nonhuman" (Mishra, 2016). The way to teach ecological and planetary consciousness is called eco-pedagogy, Palmer in 1998 laid the foundation of eco-pedagogy in UNESCO Biosphere Conference, in Paris, "eco-pedagogy is a call for the development of curriculum materials relating to studying the environment for all levels of education, the promotion of technical training, and the stimulation of global awareness of environmental problems" (Fassbinder 5). "Eco-pedagogy combines "the philosophies of teaching of the critical pedagogy movement...with the urgency of an environmental education dedicated to the current environmental crisis" (Fassbinder 2). "It questions the backgrounding and the invisibility of the environment in all its manifestations and underscores the need for a confluence of environmental theory and practice" (Fassbinder 3).

The ecocritical theory embarked with Rachel Carson's popular book '*Silent Spring*' (1962), which criticized the usage of pesticides in agriculture. Her book *A Fable for Tomorrow* describes a future in which blight eliminates all the life in Anytown, USA the

book highlighted the rhetorical power of fiction and futuristic depictions of the environment to shape public understanding. The publication of this fundamental study exposing the adverse effects of pesticides in United States resulted in prohibition/ban on pesticide Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT) and helped to establish the American Environmental Protection Agency. The scientific expertise and critical analysis of Rachel Carson served as catalysts for the emergence of novel perspectives on ecological futures rooted in the principles of sustainability. The publication of *Silent Spring* played a pivotal role in stimulating the development of a modern environmental movement, which shown notable alignment with movements opposing warfare and nuclear proliferation.

“Ecocritical ideas can be most effectively observed in the literary works of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who established Viswa Varati at Shantiniketan, a serene location distanced from the bustling urban environment. The works of Rabindranath Tagore, including "Rakta Karabi" and "Muktadhara," exemplify ecocritical literature since they serve as poignant condemnations of human transgressions against the natural world” (Mishra, 2016).

Amitav Gosh *the Hungry Tide*, is regarded as the first work in Indian English fiction that boldly tackled ecological issues for the first time in India and attempted to conserve the ecosystem. He highlighted the relationship between people, animals, plants, and the physical environment; in doing so, he depicted both the tragedy and the duplicity that were present in the Sundarbans' conservation efforts. Ghosh showed the conflict between human beings within the same communities and their ties to the natural world in his novel *The Hungry Tide*. The Sundarbans' chafing between land and sea causes a constant rasping of plant and animal life. Man's continuous infringement on the Sundarbans' ecosystems only serves to rationalize the turmoil and strain between the natural components. Anita Desai's novel, *Fire on the Mountains*, serves as a noteworthy illustration of an ecocritical book that addresses the issue of animal killing, population growth, and the moral decline of humanity. These factors collectively provide a significant threat to the environment, symbolized by the recurring forest fires. Bandana Shiva, an Indian environmental activist and ecocritic, critiques the practice of bio-piracy by the Western countries in her work *Stolen Harvest*. Shiva highlights the exploitation of poor nations by the appropriation of their biological resources under the guise of patenting. She demonstrates that colonization persists in the present rather than being confined to the past. As per her perspective, industrial agriculture has not yielded a greater quantity of food; rather, it has resulted in the depletion of many food sources, she has introduced a neocolonial perspective into the field of ecocriticism. Some of her significant contributions to the field of ecocriticism includes works such as *Tomorrow's Biodiversity*, *Ecofeminism*, *Biopiracy*, *Making Peace with the Earth*, *Violence of the Green Revolution*, *Water Wars*, *Soil Not Oil* and similar publications.

Bestseller fictions like 'The Overstory' by Richard Powers, published in 2018, exemplifies the genre of bestselling fiction. This literary work skillfully weaves together the narratives of nine distinct characters, whose profound connections to trees serve as a unifying force, compelling them to collaborate in order to preserve a forest threatened by destruction. The novel *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver depicts the response of a rural community to the sudden influx of monarch butterflies, as well as the arrival of scientists who aim to investigate this phenomenon. On the other hand, *Hummingbird*

Salamander, an eco-thriller authored by Jeff VanderMeer, presents a gripping narrative set in the near future, exploring themes of species extinction and ecoterrorism. Frank Herbert's novel *Dune* is a prophetic narrative that explores the implications of climate change, as it takes place in a desert setting and highlights the ingenuity of characters who employ water-conserving technologies for survival. The short film 'Pumzi' by Wanuri Kahiu holds considerable importance as it portrays the emergence of a revitalized Africa in the aftermath of extensive environmental devastation. This work serves as a testament to the significance of fresh perspectives in tackling such pressing concerns. Another notable example that addresses the uneven global effects of climate change is Paolo Bacigalupi. His young adult trilogy, 'Ship Breaker', 'The Drowned Cities' and 'Tool of War' is set in a world affected by sea level rise and predicts the emergence of authoritarian governments as well as growing economic uncertainty. A short tale that appeared in the environmental magazine High Country News first inspired Bacigalupi's 2015 novel 'The Water Knife'. The book examines the upcoming water conflicts that will arise when California, Arizona, and Nevada vie for control of the Colorado Basin's decreasing resources. The main focus of the essay is a critique of the legal tactics used by privileged groups to preserve their water rights, while sympathetically presenting the moral conundrums experienced by excluded groups. It ends on a hopeful note by emphasizing the potential for improvement through the broad adoption of ecologically friendly technologies, made possible by the Chinese government, which serves a supporting role in the story.

Films like Christopher Nolan's *Interstellar*, Jeff Orlowski's *Chasing Ice*, James Cameron's *Avatar*, and Ronald Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* have the potential to foster acceptance of the need for change among both youngsters and adults. The science fiction film *The Day After Tomorrow* portrays a scenario where New York is engulfed by an ice storm due to climate change and has exerted a noteworthy influence on the perceptions of climate change risks, conceptual frameworks, behavioural intentions, policy priorities, and even voting inclinations among its audience. Science fiction/films have a significant impact on the way youngsters react to environmental disasters. Animated films such as 'Ice Age: The Meltdown' directed by Carlos Saldanha and the documentary "Before the Flood" featuring Leonardo DiCaprio are examples of cinematic works that aim to raise children's awareness about environmental issues. Research has indicated that this kind of fiction (including novels, films, and documentaries) has a beneficial influence on readers. Children who watch such type of movies or read such fiction has "expressed that such films and books contribute to their apprehension regarding the potential ecological challenges in the future. "One of the important tasks of ecocriticism is raising awareness from an early age. According to Lankford, the tie between children and the environment emerged primarily because of John Locke's belief in the existence of a true nature in the child. He implies that nature is at once definable and real while it also mirrors the pure and simple nature of child" (Lankford, 2010). Ecocritical fiction serves as a source of motivation for the reader, encouraging them to engage in introspection, critical thinking, and subsequent action it also possesses the potential to incite a transformative shift in the reader's mindset, as well as compel governmental authorities to promptly address the prevailing circumstances. Such literary fiction-based approach has the potential to mobilize the readers to take appropriate actions to strengthen their bond with nature by identifying and contesting the ecocidal attitudes and forces" (Mubarak &Khan, 2017).

The addition of ecocritical discourse (to be simplified for junior classes) in both school and higher education curricula could perhaps be the most compelling rationale. This is due to the fact that ecocriticism studies, particularly within the realm of environmentally friendly texts movies that foster a heightened feeling of self-awareness, understanding, and motivation within individuals to take urgent action for the environment. Ecocriticism encompasses more than a mere act of reading books or watching films; it develops a comprehensive understanding of the profound effects that can have on promoting dramatic transformations. It is a scholarly approach that examines the symbolic significance ascribed to the natural world and the resulting mental frameworks that emerge from these interpretations which can be achieved through the analysis of literary works and cultural texts from an environmental standpoint. "In recent years, the field of ecocriticism and eco-pedagogy has expanded its focus beyond romantic period poems, wild narrative stories, and nature literature. It has increasingly turned its attention to various dimensions of the cultural field, including scientific literature, film, television, art, architecture" (Garrard, 2004). Thus, ecocritical studies from an interdisciplinary point of view has the power to brainstorm possible solutions for rectifying the recent environment situations as said change starts with education and inclusion of ecocritical discourse can definitely alter and save from environment crisis at the present.

Conclusion

The study examines different competencies and asserts that incorporating ecocriticism as a framework for analysing and discussing literary texts, alongside the pedagogical strategy of literature circle discussions, can effectively enhance the acquisition of sustainability competencies and encourage the cultivation of eco-centric viewpoints. The central focus of ecocritical discourse pertains to the representation and examination of the interaction between humanity and the natural world. The development of the ecological self is shaped by a range of elements, such as the interconnectivity and diversity perceived within the environment, the ecological cycle, the integrity of distinct species, the perception of holism in natural life, and the functioning of the food chain. The aforementioned factors exert a substantial influence on our comprehension and affiliation with the natural surroundings. The notion of integrity in the natural world, as explored in the discipline of ecocriticism, is closely linked to the promotion of human consciousness regarding their role within the broader ecological framework. This connection plays a significant role in the development and progression of the ecological self. Based on the preceding discourse, it is posited that the utilization of ecocriticism has promise in cultivating an augmented comprehension of nature and its import within the student population. Moreover, it is argued that the adoption of such measures has the potential to foster the cultivation of a comprehensive understanding of one's identity that is intricately intertwined with the environment. The successful implementation of ecocritical efforts in the United States has led to observable outcomes, suggesting that students have experienced an increased level of consciousness regarding the incorporation of non-human species into the natural world as objects worthy of contemplation. Therefore, the incorporation of the ecocritical discourse in the educational curricula in all levels from primary to higher education in India can foster the cultivation of ecological consciousness, comprehension, and concern for the environment.

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