

Determinants of individual environmental values in India: a socio-economic and cultural perspective

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Abstract

Purpose – The present study seeks to explore the preference for environmental protection over economic growth among Indian citizens. Further, the study will also seek to unfold the various factors affecting individual-level environmentalism in the Indian context.

Design/methodology/approach – The study is based on secondary data on 1134 individuals obtained from the World Values Survey (7th Wave) for India pertaining to the year 2023. A binary logit model was employed to explore the different factors influencing the environmental concerns of Indian individuals.

Findings – The outcome of the study revealed that 56.29% of the sample respondents preferred environmental protection over economic growth. Sense of equality, Government monitoring, collectivism, humane orientation, social activism, importance of god, life satisfaction, education and gender were found to influence the concern for the environment amongst the individuals.

Originality/value – The study makes an original attempt to explore the preference and determinants of environmental protection over economic growth in the context of the emerging economy of India for the first time.

Keywords Environment, Economic growth, Social activism, Equality, Collectivism, Education

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Climate change is acknowledged as the most pressing problem in the world today. Economic growth-driven policies have been able to improve the per capita income and ease of life of people on the one hand (Jităreanu *et al.*, 2022). On the other hand, dark realities like stark income inequality and climate change are the order of this fractured world (Čábelková *et al.*, 2023). Frequent occurrences of natural calamities have become imminent threats to humanity (Guan *et al.*, 2019). Although the damage already caused to nature cannot be undone, institutional and individual-level efforts are warranted to save the earth from further deterioration. The issue of climate change has received recognition with the launch of the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in 1972. However, the global acceptance of the problem of climate change was intensified with the publication of the Brundtland Commission Report titled “*Our Common Future*” in 1987. Even after the publication of this and other important historical reports, economies, especially the currently developed ones, preferred economic growth over environmental protection.

The effect of the self-defeating approach of preferring economic growth over ecological balance was tried to be mitigated through the adoption of different Millennium Development Goals followed by the adoption of various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 by the global community to arrest the problem of global warming.

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Successful adoption of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement (2016) requires concerted efforts at the policy as well as grassroots level. Of course, the major responsibility lies with the industrial sector to reduce its carbon footprint. However, the massive task of combating climate change also has to be fought at the household and individual levels too (Čábelková *et al.*, 2023). Unless and until the individuals at the micro-level become conscious of the ill effects of climate change, the problem will continue to be addressed cosmetically (Jitäreanu *et al.*, 2022).

The problem of the tricky relationship between the environment and economic growth can be better understood through the Environmental Kuznet Curve (EKC) hypothesis, which puts forward that environmental degradation takes place with economic growth at the initial phase. However, once economic growth reaches a certain level, emissions decline, leading to an inverted U-shaped association. Perman (2003) argue that in developed economies, there is a trend of shifting towards the knowledge-based industries once the countries achieve maximum economic growth, which positively promotes environmental protection. Therefore, it is obvious that environmental issues will be of concern to the economies which have attained the maximum level of economic growth. Moreover, at this stage, environmental awareness gets built up amongst the citizens, followed by the enactment of environmental laws and regulations in those countries. In a post-industrialized state, an economy will be characterized by environmental values which will improve the quality of life of the citizens (Parboteeah *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, it is expected that in countries which are still developing or underdeveloped, ensuring economic growth will be the primary priority and people in those countries will be less likely to exhibit a positive environmental attitude. The views that in a developed and industrialized economy, every citizen will have positive environmental concerns and the people in the developing countries have no concern for the environment have been questioned by many (Duroy, 2005). It has been observed that there are people in the developed countries who are not at all concerned about environmental values, whereas there are many people in the underdeveloped and developing economies who are very much concerned about the environment (Dunlap and Mertig, 1995). It implies that environmental consciousness has more to do with individual characteristics of the individuals and as already mentioned, people must have environmental values. Therefore, identification of the different individual characteristics, psychological factors, personality, value system, attitude and belief are extremely important as knowledge of these factors will be helpful for enabling policymakers to design appropriate nudges to create and sustain environmental values among individuals. In this context, the present study makes an effort to explore the various demographic, cultural, social, economic and psychological factors affecting the concern of individuals in India for the environment.

Review of literature

The emergence of environmentalism can be dated back to at least 5000 years ago. The adverse effects of air and water pollution on human life were also recorded in the literature during the Roman Empire and in Indian scriptures such as the Vedas, Puranas, etc. On the other hand, the rise and growth of environmentalism in the Western countries emerged during the 1960s and 1970s (Duroy, 2005). The core idea of environmentalism centres on anthropocentrism, eco-centrism and eco-efficiency. The first social movement in upholding the spirit of environmentalism in India took place in 1973 through the “Chipko” movement in the Gopeshwar village in Uttarakhand, India. Unlike the Western world, environmentalism in India is closely linked with social justice, rights and equity (Misra, 2007).

The adverse effect of population growth on food supply has been well elaborated in the Malthusian population theory. In the Western world, the emergence of environmentalism can be dated back to 1962 with the publication of the book “Silent Spring” (Carson, 1962). Later on, the “Limits to Growth” theory as propagated by Meadows (1972) argued that exponential growth in population and industrial activities would be followed by exponential growth in

pollution, whereas the stock of natural non-renewable resources and food supply is constant, which will ultimately result in total collapse. They have also argued that even if the stock of natural resources is increased, the rapid increase in pollution will bring about a collapse in the form of catastrophes as predicted by Malthus. Given these findings, the United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm was held in 1972, which created the UNEP to address environmental problems through global participation. Even after the publication of these documents and the continued efforts of the multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, countries across the globe continued to prefer and follow the growth-oriented approach without caring about the adverse effects on the environment. Later on, the importance of the protection of the environment along with economic growth got major recognition with the publication of the report “Our Common Future” by the Brundtland Commission in 1987. Therefore, striking a balance between economic growth and environmental protection is required. However, bringing such balance to attain sustainable growth requires environmental consciousness among individuals and society at the micro level. The level of economic development is considered to be one of the important determinants of environmental consciousness among individuals in society. Therefore, following this argument, it is expected that environmental consciousness is supposed to be poor among developing economies.

In the extant literature, efforts have been made by different scholars across the globe to explore the factors that promote individual-level environmentalism ([Čábelková et al., 2023](#)). The preliminary studies ([Yang et al., 2017](#); [Walia et al., 2020](#)) relating to this domain focused on the financial capabilities, economic incentives, household characteristics, socio-economic and demographic factors. The focus of the research shifted from the socio-economic and demographic factors to attitudinal and human value factors with the works of [Wang et al. \(2019a, b\)](#). Later on, [Nekmahmud et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that environmental awareness, attitude, sense of self-efficacy, social influence, emotion, etc. play an important role in defining environmentalism among individuals. [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) carried out a study to examine individual preferences for economic growth or care for the environment in post-Soviet countries and suggested that preferences for civil rights, rights for democracy, gender equality, income inequality and the low role of the army in politics significantly determine environmentalism for individuals. Other important variables that exert significant implications towards individual environmentalism, which have emerged in the existing literature, include government regulations ([Al-Mulali et al., 2022](#)), freedom ([Anwar et al., 2022](#)) and religious belief ([Eom et al., 2021](#)), etc. In addition, [Duroy \(2005\)](#) argued that environmental consciousness can emerge from five important sources. These are threats to survival, culture, economic condition, biophilia [1] and education. Furthermore, the existing literature indicates that environmental consciousness is not merely an economic or ecological phenomenon but also a behavioural, cultural and institutional construct. Similarly, the Value-Belief-Norm (VBN) framework as proposed by [Stern et al. \(1999\)](#) argues that environmental attitudes and behaviours emerge from value systems, ecological beliefs and moral obligations towards society and nature.

The existing literature also suggests that individual environmental values and consciousness can influence consumers’ willingness to adopt environmentally responsible products and behaviours, thereby creating implications for firms and marketers. [Sharma et al. \(2023\)](#), through a systematic review of 151 empirical studies, identified a range of individual, social and contextual factors influencing green purchase intention and green purchase behaviour and highlighted their strategic relevance for marketers. Similarly, [Onel \(2024\)](#) demonstrated that values, beliefs and norms are important in shaping different forms of sustainable consumer behaviour. [Risitano et al. \(2023\)](#) further showed that green consumption values can influence consumer–brand relationships and behavioural intentions. Recent evidence also indicates that environmental consciousness is an important factor in shaping green purchase intentions among Indian consumers ([Choudhury et al., 2024](#)), while [Kautish et al. \(2024\)](#) demonstrated the relevance of environmental values and nature connectedness for

sustainable consumption in the Indian context. [Yadav et al. \(2024\)](#) further illustrated the growing importance of sustainable marketing in developing environmentally conscious consumers.

Thus, given this research gap, especially in the context of emerging economies, the present study attempts to explore environmental consciousness among Indians within a multidimensional socio-economic, cultural, behavioural and institutional framework. The study also attempts to identify the major determinants influencing environmental preference and sustainability orientation among individuals.

Theoretical framework

The present study is grounded in multiple theoretical perspectives that explain environmental consciousness and preference towards environmental protection from socio-economic, cultural, behavioural and institutional standpoints. Environmental preference is a multidimensional phenomenon and cannot be explained solely through economic variables. Accordingly, the study draws upon post-materialist perspectives, value-based environmental theories, behavioural orientation and socio-cultural approaches to explain the determinants of environmental consciousness. One of the major theoretical foundations of this study is the Post-materialist Theory. According to this perspective, individuals tend to prioritize environmental quality, sustainability, equality and quality of life once their basic economic and material needs are relatively satisfied. Thus, variables such as income, education and life satisfaction may influence environmental preferences by shaping awareness and long-term societal orientation. Similarly, the broader EKC argument suggests that environmental concern may rise with economic development, awareness and structural transformation after a certain stage of economic progress. Although the present study does not directly test the EKC hypothesis, the framework provides support for the inclusion of socio-economic variables such as education, income and occupational status. The study also draws upon the VBN Theory proposed by [Stern \(2000\)](#) and related environmental sociology literature. VBN theory argues that environmental attitudes and behaviour emerge from personal values, ecological beliefs and moral norms regarding social and environmental responsibility. This perspective provides theoretical grounding for variables such as collectivism, humane orientation, equality, religiosity and social activism. Individuals possessing stronger social and ethical orientations may exhibit greater preference towards environmental protection because they perceive environmental sustainability as a collective and moral responsibility. Furthermore, socio-cultural and social capital perspectives suggest that cultural orientation and social norms significantly shape collective welfare preferences. Collectivist societies and socially cooperative individuals are often more inclined towards protecting common goods, including the environment. Therefore, variables related to collectivism, humane orientation and equality are expected to positively influence environmental consciousness. Behavioural and quality-of-life perspectives additionally indicate that individuals with greater life satisfaction, civic engagement and social participation may exhibit stronger environmental awareness and sustainability orientation. The existing empirical literature also supports the multidimensional nature of environmental consciousness. [Dury \(2005\)](#), for example, identifies economic condition, education, culture, biophilia and survival concerns as important determinants of environmental consciousness. Prior studies further highlight the roles of demographic characteristics, institutional confidence, social values and behavioural orientation in shaping environmental preferences. Accordingly, the explanatory variables included in the study are classified into four broad dimensions: (1) socio-demographic and economic factors, (2) cultural and value-based factors, (3) institutional and governance-related factors and (4) behavioural and psychological factors.

Objectives of the study

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

- (1) To unfold the environmental consciousness among Indian citizens.
- (2) To explore the different factors affecting such environmental consciousness.

Data and methodology

The present study is primarily analytical and based on secondary data from the World Values Survey (7th Wave) for India in 2023. A total number of 1692 individuals were surveyed in the 7th wave of the survey. Due to the nonavailability of data on some variables with respect to different respondents, the final analysis was conducted on 1134 sample respondents.

Environmental consciousness was determined based on a question that evaluates the preference of the respondent between economic growth and environmental protection. Individuals who preferred environmental protection over economic growth were identified as environmentally conscious individuals. To unearth the socio-demographic and economic factors, cultural and value-based factors, institutional and governance-related factors and behavioural and psychological factors affecting the environmental consciousness of an individual, a binary logit model was adopted as the dependent variable is binary in nature (i.e. either preferring economic growth or environmental protection).

The question on environmentalism is as follows:

“Here are two statements people sometimes make when discussing the environment and economic growth. Which of them comes closer to your own point of view? (Read out both statements and code only one answer):

- (1) Protecting the environment should be given priority even if it causes slower economic growth and some loss of jobs.
- (2) Economic growth and creating jobs should be the top priority, even if the environment suffers to some extent.”

Since the answer to the said question in the survey was found to be binary in nature, a binary logit model was employed in the study to determine the factors affecting “environmental consciousness”.

The explanatory variables included in the study may broadly be classified into four dimensions within the proposed theoretical framework, namely socio-demographic and economic factors (sex, age, marital status, income equality vs. individual incentive), cultural and value-based factors (importance of God, national pride, freedom vs. control, competition, life satisfaction, gender equality, freedom vs. equality, hard work vs. luck), institutional and governance-related factors (state vs. private ownership, government vs. individual responsibility, confidence in parliament, democracy, government monitoring, democratic political system) and behavioural or civic participation factors (political activism and social activism). Such classification provides a clearer theoretical basis for the inclusion of variables and highlights the multidimensional nature of environmental consciousness. The detailed descriptions of these variables are presented in [Table 1](#).

The empirical model used in this study is as follows:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \log \left(\frac{1 - P(\text{Economic Growth} = 1)}{P(\text{Economic Growth} = 1)} \right) \\
&= \lambda_0 + \lambda_1 (\text{Equality of Income vs. Incentive for Individual Effort}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_2 (\text{Private vs. State Ownership of Business}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_3 (\text{Government's vs. Individual's Responsibility}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_4 (\text{Freedom vs. Control}) + \lambda_5 (\text{Democratic Political System Important}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_6 (\text{Democracy}) + \lambda_7 (\text{The Government has the Right to Collect Information}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_8 (\text{Freedom and Equality – Which is More Important}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_9 (\text{Women have the Same Rights as Men}) + \lambda_{10} (\text{Political Activism}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_{11} (\text{Social Activism}) + \lambda_{12} (\text{Hard Work vs. Luck}) + \lambda_{13} (\text{Competition is Good}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_{14} (\text{Importance of God}) + \lambda_{15} (\text{National Pride}) + \lambda_{16} (\text{Confidence in Parliament}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_{17} (\text{Life Satisfaction}) + \lambda_{18} (\text{Income Middle}) + \lambda_{19} (\text{Income High}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_{20} (\text{Education Moderate}) + \lambda_{21} (\text{Education High}) + \lambda_{22} (\text{Sex}) + \lambda_{23} (\text{Age}) \\
&\quad + \lambda_{24} (\text{Married})
\end{aligned}$$

Where λ_0 is the constant and λ_i s are the coefficients associated with the independent variables (explained in [Table 1](#)).

Findings and analysis

As far as environmental consciousness is concerned, it can be noticed ([Table 2](#)) that around 55.56% of the sample respondents were found to be environmentally conscious who have preferred ecological protection over economic growth, whereas the rest of the respondents, i.e. 504 (44.44%) had preferred economic growth over ecological balance, which is alarming.

This is probably due to their ignorance about the ill effects of environmental degradation, i.e. lack of awareness. The other reason could be that they are not bothered or concerned at all about the environment due to the complex interplay of various socioeconomic, demographic, cultural, political and governance factors, which need a nuanced understanding. As far as the demographic factors are concerned, of the total respondents, 60.67% were male and 59.52% were married. Age-wise classification suggests that 46.56% of the respondents belong to less than 30 years, whereas 46.03% of the respondents were noticed to be about 31–60 years, respectively. It can be seen from the data that 24.69% and 47.18% of the respondents fell under low - and medium-education cohorts, respectively. 28.13% of the sample respondents were observed to have high educational attainment. The majority (51.85%) of the participants were found to belong to the middle-income category. It was observed that the majority (67.81%) of the sample respondents accepted that they enjoy freedom and control, whereas nearly 55.82% of the individuals believed that individual effort rather than equality of income should be encouraged. The analysis of the data reveals that 66.67% of the respondents were satisfied with their lives. Regarding the preference for private or state ownership of the business, it was observed that nearly 39.59% of the respondents opined in favour of private ownership, whereas 60.41% argued in favour of state ownership (implying that these people prefer the increasing role of the Government for societal welfare). Approximately 50% of the respondents believed that the government should assume more responsibility to take care of its citizens, whereas the remaining 50% believed that it is the responsibility of the individuals to provide for themselves. 56.61% of the respondents consider competition to be good. As far as the trust in luck is concerned, there is a visible leniency towards luck over hard work in the long run. 61.73% of the sample respondents accepted that luck plays a notable role than hard work

Table 1. List of variables with description

Variables (Abbreviations)	Description/Measurement
Environmental Consciousness (Env_Cons)	“Protecting the environment vs economic growth”, where 0 indicates the individual prefers economic growth over protecting the environment and 1 indicates environmental consciousness
Life satisfaction (L_Sat)	All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days? Please use a scale where 1 means you are “completely dissatisfied” and 10 means you are “completely satisfied” to indicate your satisfaction with your life as a whole?
Equality of Income Vs. Incentive for Individual effort (Eq_Inc_Incv)	Incomes should be made more equal vs there should be greater incentives for individual effort. Measured on a 10-point Likert scale where 1 means “1 = ”Incomes should be made more equal” and 10 means “10 = ”There should be greater incentives for individual effort”
Private vs state ownership of business (Pvt Vs.St)	Private vs state ownership of business. Measured on a 10-point Likert scale, where 1 means “1 ”Private ownership of business should be increased” and 10 means “Government ownership of business should be increased”
Government’s vs individual’s responsibility (ResG_I)	Government’s vs individual’s responsibility: Measured on a 10-point Likert scale where 1 means “The government should take more responsibility to ensure that everyone is provided for” and 10 means “People should take more responsibility to provide for themselves”
Confidence in Parliament (Con_Parl)	Confidence: The Parliament; Measured in a 4 point Measured in a 10 point Likert scale where 1 means “1 = ”Incomes should be made more equal” and 10 means “10 = ”There should be greater incentives for individual effort” Likert scale where 1 means “a great deal” and 4 means “not at all”
Freedom Vs. Control Fr_Con	How much freedom of choice and control; measured on a 10-point Likert scale where 1 means “none at all” and 10 means “a great deal”
Hard Work vs. Luck (HardW_L)	Measured on a 10-point scale where 1 means “In the long run, hard work usually brings a better life” and 10 means “Hard work doesn’t necessarily bring success – it’s more of a matter of luck and connections”
Competition is good	Competition good or harmful: Measured on a 10-point scale where 1 means “competition is good” and 10 implies “competition is harmful”
Importance of God (Imp_God)	On a 10-point scale where 1 means “Not at all important” and 10 means “very important”
National Pride (Nat_Pri)	How proud are you to be an Indian – very proud, quite proud, not very proud or not at all proud? (Code one answer) Very proud (1) –I am not proud of my nationality (5)
Sex of the Respondent (Sex)	Respondent’s sex: Male (1) and Female (2)
Age of the respondent (Age)	Age of the respondent based on year of birth
Marital Status (Married)	Marital status of the respondents: Married (1) and others (0)
Democratic Political System Important (Demo_Imp)	Having a democratic political system: Measured on a 4-point Likert Scale: Very Good (1) –Very Bad (4)
Democracy (Democ)	“How democratically is this country being governed today?” to be answered in a 10 point Likert scale where 1 means: “Not at all democratic” and 10 indicates: “Completely Democratic”
Education: Low (Edu_Low)	Highest educational attainment: Low:1, Others:0 (Base)
Education: Middle (Edu_Mid)	Highest educational attainment: Middle:1, Others:0
Education: High (Edu_High)	Highest educational attainment: Higher:1, Others:0
Income: Low (Inc_Low)	Income level: Low:1, Others:0 (Base)
Income: Mid (Inc_Mid)	Income level: Moderate:1, Others:0

(continued)

Table 1. Continued

Variables (Abbreviations)	Description/Measurement
Income: High (Inc_High) The government has the right to collect information (Govt_Inf)	Income level: High:1, Others:0 Government has the right to collect information about anyone living in without their knowledge, measured on a 4-point Likert scale where 1 means “1 = ”Definitely should have the right” and 4 means “Definitely should not have the right”
Democracy: Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor	Democracy: Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor, measured in a 10-point Likert scale where 1 signified “it is against democracy” and 10 implies “essential for democracy”
Freedom and Equality – Which is more important (Fr vs.Eq) Women have the same rights as men (Wom_Eq)	Freedom and Equality – Which more important: “1 = Freedom” and “2 = Equality” Democracy: Women have the same rights as men, measured in terms of “0 = ”It is against democracy (spontaneous)” and “10 = An essential characteristic of democracy”
Political Activism (Pol_Act)	Political action: Signing a petition, measured on a 3-point Likert scale where 1 means “1 = have done” and 3 means “would never do”
Social Activism (Soc_Act)	Social activism: Encouraging others to vote, measured on a 3-point Likert scale where 1 means “1 = have done” and 3 means “would never do”
Source(s): Author’s own	

in the long run. The analysis of the data reveals that 58.29% of the respondents preferred freedom over equality. Nearly 60% of the respondents argued that the Government should not collect information about its citizens and that the privacy of its citizens should be protected. Nearly 70% of the respondents believe that it is democratic to tax the rich by the Government 84.39% of the respondents accepted that a democratic political system exists in the country. Political and social activism was observed among the majority of the respondents in the sample.

The critical interplay of different cultural, social, economic, demographic, political and governance factors in determining environmental consciousness is presented in [Table 3](#). It is expected that as the level of education increases, people become aware of the negative consequences of environmental degradation and therefore develop a positive attitude towards the environment. The outcome of the study reveals that the coefficient associated with a couple of the education-related variables was found to be positive, which is in tune with the observations made by [Parboteeah et al. \(2012\)](#), [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#), [Yang et al. \(2017\)](#), [Walia et al. \(2020\)](#), [Wang et al. \(2019a\)](#). The coefficient of higher education was found to be statistically significant, implying the positive effect of education on environmental consciousness. Moreover, at the higher education level, various types of environment-related issues are included in the curriculum, which eventually enhance environmental consciousness among individuals. This result supports the post-materialist argument that educated individuals prefer to put more importance on their quality of life and environmental and sustainability-related concerns.

The coefficient associated with “Sex” was observed to be positive and statistically significant, implying that female respondents were more inclined towards favouring environmental protection over economic growth, which is in line with the findings of the study carried out by [Hampel et al. \(1996a, b\)](#) and [Parboteeah et al. \(2012\)](#). The environmental concern of women can be explained in terms of the socialization process and social norms of women, which naturally make them compassionate, cooperative, nurturing and caregiving ([Zhou et al., 2020](#); [Nekmahmud et al., 2022](#); [Al-Mulali et al., 2022](#)). Moreover, women tend to exhibit greater environmentalism because of their closer association with household chores,

Table 2. Demographics and socio-economic conditions of the respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Freedom and Control	1	43	3.79	3.79	Life satisfaction	1	32	2.82	2.82
	2	40	3.53	7.32		2	26	2.29	5.11
	3	46	4.06	11.38		3	41	3.62	8.73
	4	56	4.94	16.31		4	50	4.41	13.14
	5	89	7.85	24.16		5	104	9.17	22.31
	6	91	8.02	32.19		6	125	11.02	33.33
	7	161	14.2	46.38		7	180	15.87	49.21
	8	163	14.37	60.76		8	208	18.34	67.55
	9	131	11.55	72.31		9	115	10.14	77.69
	10	314	27.69	100		10	253	22.31	100
Equality of Income Vs. Incentive for Individual effort	1	106	9.35	9.35	Private vs state ownership of business	1	124	10.93	10.93
	2	35	3.09	12.43		2	53	4.67	15.61
	3	48	4.23	16.67		3	57	5.03	20.63
	4	47	4.14	20.81		4	79	6.97	27.6
	5	68	6	26.81		5	136	11.99	39.59
	6	88	7.76	34.57		6	106	9.35	48.94
	7	109	9.61	44.18		7	103	9.08	58.02
	8	160	14.11	58.29		8	151	13.32	71.34
	9	128	11.29	69.58		9	73	6.44	77.78
	10	345	30.42	100		10	252	22.22	100
Government's vs individual's responsibility	1	243	21.43	21.43	Competition is good	1	229	20.19	20.19
	2	56	4.94	26.37		2	90	7.94	28.13
	3	65	5.73	32.1		3	86	7.58	35.71
	4	63	5.56	37.65		4	82	7.23	42.95
	5	147	12.96	50.62		5	155	13.67	56.61
	6	105	9.26	59.88		6	116	10.23	66.84
	7	80	7.05	66.93		7	90	7.94	74.78
	8	148	13.05	79.98		8	110	9.7	84.48
	9	71	6.26	86.24		9	64	5.64	90.12
	10	156	13.76	100		10	112	9.88	100

(continued)

Table 2. Continued

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent	Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Hard Work vs. Luck	1	391	34.48	34.48	National Pride	1	823	72.57	72.57
	2	89	7.85	42.33		2	265	23.37	95.94
	3	71	6.26	48.59		3	41	3.62	99.56
	4	61	5.38	53.97		4	4	0.35	99.91
	5	88	7.76	61.73	Gov_Mon	1	215	18.96	18.96
	6	90	7.94	69.66		2	254	22.4	41.36
	7	80	7.05	76.72		3	212	18.69	60.05
	8	123	10.85	87.57		4	453	39.95	100
	9	63	5.56	93.12	Sex	Male	688	60.67	60.67
	10	78	6.88	100		Female	446	39.33	100
Age	1	49	4.32	4.32	Education	Low	280	24.69	24.69
	2	43	3.79	8.11		Moderate	535	47.18	71.87
	≤30 yrs	528	46.56	46.56		High	319	28.13	100
	31–60	522	46.03	92.59	The government can collect information	1	215	18.96	18.96
	>60 Yrs	84	7.41	100		2	254	22.4	41.36
Income	Low	256	22.57	22.57		3	212	18.69	60.05
	Middle	588	51.85	74.42		4	453	39.95	100
	High	290	25.57	100	Freedom and Equality Democracy	1	661	58.29	58.29
						2	473	41.71	100
Governments tax the rich and subsidize the poor	1	139	12.26	12.26		1	699	61.64	61.64
	2	30	2.65	14.9		2	258	22.75	84.39
	3	31	2.73	17.64		3	129	11.38	95.77
	4	49	4.32	21.96		4	48	4.23	100
	5	64	5.64	27.6	Social Activism	1	326	28.75	28.75
	6	90	7.94	35.54		2	364	32.1	60.85
	7	117	10.32	45.86		3	444	39.15	100
	8	144	12.7	58.55	Political Activism	1	252	22.22	22.22
	9	141	12.43	70.99		2	350	30.86	53.09
	10	329	29.01	100		3	532	46.91	100
Environmental Consciousness	Pro-environment	630	55.56	55.56					
	Pro-growth	504	44.44	100					

Source(s): Author's own

Table 3. Determinants of environmental values

Variables	Co-efficient	Z-Value	p-value
Equality of Income Vs. Incentive for Individual effort	0.0923606	3.70	0.000
Private vs state ownership of business	0.0447925	1.91	0.056
Government's vs individual's responsibility	0.0224921	0.95	0.343
Freedom Vs. Control	-0.0384721	-1.28	0.201
Democratic Political System Important	0.0112942	0.30	0.765
Democracy	-0.1042816	-1.22	0.221
The government has the right to collect information	0.1404285	2.33	0.020
Freedom and Equality – Which is more important (collectivism)	0.3638472	2.72	0.007
Women have the same rights as men (Humane orientation)	0.0599835	2.10	0.036
Political Activism	-0.0159129	-0.23	0.815
Social Activism	-0.2513034	-3.34	0.001
Hard Work vs. Luck (uncertainty avoidance)	-0.0360889	-1.51	0.131
Competition is good (assertive)	0.0242624	1.01	0.312
Importance of God	0.0582515	1.88	0.060
National Pride	0.0066147	0.05	0.958
Confidence in Parliament	0.0491508	0.76	0.445
Life Satisfaction	0.1451133	4.44	0.000
Income Middle	-0.2562877	-1.48	0.138
Income High	-0.3258488	-1.56	0.118
Education Moderate	0.2363215	1.34	0.179
Education High	0.3300399	1.67	0.094
Sex	0.3355437	2.43	0.015
Age	0.0048265	0.88	0.377
Married	-0.0886864	-0.55	0.583
Constant	-3.434851	-5.35	0.000
Log likelihood	-702.13952	LR χ^2	153.75
Pseudo R2	0.0987	N	1,134

Source(s): Author's own

i.e. health, food, water, and family well-being. Thus, environmental problems are not being perceived by them as an ecological one but rather a threat to the family or community. Conversely, [Niu et al. \(2024\)](#) found that Chinese men are more environmentally concerned than their female counterparts.

The effect of religiosity was observed to be positive on preferring environmental protection over economic growth. Different religions assign greater values for protecting the environment. Hinduism is the dominant religion in India. In Hinduism, nature is often considered synonymous with God. For example, different trees (such as *Banyan* tree) are worshipped in the form of a deity. Therefore, in the Hindu religion, protection of the environment is inherently associated with their religious beliefs and sentiments. Not only in the Hindu religion but also in Islam and Christian religions, the environment is considered sacred and upholding its protection is always argued for. Religiosity is also deeply interconnected with social, moral and ethical responsibility towards common resources, environment and future generations ([Čábelková et al., 2023](#)). Individuals with stronger religiosity generally perceive environmental sensitivity as their moral, social and ethical responsibility rather than any policy issue ([Davis, 2000](#); [Al-Mulali et al., 2022](#); [Čábelková et al., 2023](#)).

Sample respondents who were satisfied with their lives were more prone to preferential ecological balance rather than economic growth. People who are satisfied or happy in their life feel contained, which gives them the liberty to think about the adverse consequences of environmental degradation and climate change. Several research studies suggest that good environmental quality leads to life satisfaction ([Silva et al., 2012](#); [Nekmahmud et al., 2022](#)).

Thus, it can be said alternatively that individuals who are satisfied in their lives will prefer to have a good environment. In fact, [Jitäreanu et al. \(2022\)](#), [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) and [Eom et al. \(2021\)](#) considered environmental values, ecological behaviour and satisfaction in life in an integrated manner as a concept of sustainability.

The effect of social activism was found to be positive on the preference for environmental protection over economic growth. Individuals with social activism are generally found to be more concerned with the environment, which prompts them to prefer ecological balance over economic growth ([Anwar et al., 2022](#); [Eom et al., 2021](#)). Socially active individuals tend to be more concerned about public welfare and sustainability issues.

The findings of the study revealed that individuals who believe in gender equality are more likely to support environmental protection over economic growth. Women are generally found to be more environmentally conscious than men, and therefore, people having liberal beliefs of gender equality were found to be more environmentally sensitive. Gender equality and environmental consciousness have been examined by many scholars. For example, [Norgaard and York \(2005\)](#) found that nations with women's diversity in parliament are more likely to introduce environmental protection laws. [Niu et al. \(2024\)](#), [Nekmahmud et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) also argue that a high level of gender equality awareness amongst the citizens leads to greater ecological concerns. The outcome of the study also revealed that individuals who believe that women have the same rights as men were found to be environmentally conscious. Individuals advocating for gender equality generally exhibit a progressive, inclusive, welfare- and sustainability-related value system, which indirectly promotes environmentalism. Such behaviour is the manifestation of the spirit of a humane-oriented society. People in society with humane orientations are characterized by values, cooperation and support for others and they are more concerned with the protection of the environment. People in this kind of society consider other people important, irrespective of their demographic and socio-economic attributes. [Parboteeah et al. \(2012\)](#) and [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) also found that individuals with humane orientation were environmentally conscious. Humane-oriented individuals perceive environmental protection as a collective social responsibility for the well-being of present and future generations. Such a value system promotes greater concern for ecological balance and sustainability ([Čábelková et al., 2023](#)).

There are two schools of thought in the debate on individual freedom and environmental concerns. Some scholars argue in favour of individual freedom, which is a basic human right ([Čábelková et al., 2023](#)). In contrast, some other scholars argue for the protection of the environment even at the cost of individual freedom. The outcome of the study reveals that the sign associated with the concerned variable was observed to be positive and statistically significant, signifying that individuals who favour equality prefer environmental protection even at the cost of the economic growth of the country. Preference towards equality may reflect concerns for collective welfare, social justice and intergenerational responsibility, which is again closely related to environmental sustainability ([Yang et al., 2017](#)). This can be linked to the idea of collectivism, in which it is believed that the actions of the people should be aimed toward the good of all ([Parboteeah et al., 2012](#); [Čábelková et al., 2023](#); [Yang et al., 2017](#)). Similarly, it can be said that collectivist and equality-oriented individuals prefer environmental sustainability and social welfare as compared to material success ([Yang et al., 2017](#)).

Similarly, individuals who believe equality of income is more important than the rewards for individual incentives were also observed to prefer environmental protection over the economic growth of the country, similar to the behavioural preference of the assertive and performance-oriented individuals. Performance orientation signifies the preference of the individual to value excellence in performance, innovation, achievement of results and individual effort. Therefore, in societies characterized by performance orientation, individuals will be more concerned about achieving a goal even at the cost of the environment. People in assertive societies (people who are capable of expressing their intentions clearly to others explicitly) are also observed to be similar to the people from a society with a performance orientation. [House et al. \(2004\)](#) and [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) observed that the people who are

both performance-oriented and assertive tend to value performance and achievement and favour competition. [Duroy \(2005\)](#) also noted that the prevalence of income inequality is not in tune with pro-environmentalism. In economies with income inequality, Governments will be more concerned with channelling funds to reduce income inequality rather than with environment protection and awareness. Individuals supporting income equality are more sensitive to social imbalance and collective well-being, which can naturally extend towards concerns for environmental sustainability [Duroy \(2005\)](#). On the contrary, societies emphasizing competition, achievement and individual performance may prioritize economic growth and productivity over ecological preservation. Therefore, it is obvious that people who believe that income equality is more important rightly prefer environmental protection to economic growth ([Nekmahmud et al., 2022](#)).

Generally, it is argued that environmental consciousness increases when the government has more control over its citizens. For example, [Čábelková et al. \(2023\)](#) argued that government monitoring measures allow the Government to track whether citizens are adhering to the pro-environmental measures or not and concluded that government monitoring prompts people to be pro-environmental. However, the outcome of this study suggests that monitoring by the Government doesn't at all instil any sort of pro-environmental attitude among the Indians. Individuals who believe that state ownership is more important than private ownership of business were observed to prefer environmental protection to the economic growth of a country. One of the arguments would be that if the Government runs businesses, the State will have more funds to finance environmental protection and awareness ([Eom et al., 2021](#)). The findings of the study clearly suggest that environmentalism is driven primarily by internal values and moral responsibilities rather than regulatory pressure ([Čábelková et al., 2023](#)). However, the outcome of the study also suggests that preference for state ownership and monitoring reflects greater public trust in the Government's ability to allocate resources judiciously and regulate economic activities without adversely affecting the environment. Therefore, it is quite natural for the citizens to prefer state ownership of businesses for environmental protection.

Conclusion

Considering the pressing problem of continuous environmental degradation and global warming, it is important to explore how different demographic, socioeconomic and cultural factors affect individual preferences toward environmental protection. In this backdrop, the study has made an effort to examine the different factors affecting the preference for environmental protection in the emerging economy context. The outcome of the study suggested that 43.71% of the individuals preferred economic growth. As far as the various determinants are concerned, equality of income, state ownership of business, Government monitoring, collectivism, humane orientation, social activism, importance of god, life satisfaction, education and gender were observed to determine the preference of the individuals towards environmental protection over economic growth. The study outcome revealed that the sense of environmental concern was found to be poorer amongst Indian males, requiring targeted policy interventions through creating more awareness amongst them. On the other hand, improvement in the general level of education brings numerous positive behavioural changes. Enhancement of educational attainment by synthesizing the sustainability and environmental ethics education into the curricula amongst the people at large is crucial to ensure environmentally responsible behaviour in the long run.

Generalizability of the findings

The findings of the study should primarily be interpreted in the context of India, given the socio-economic, cultural and institutional specificity of the country. Although the World Values Survey provides a broad and diverse sample of Indian respondents, the observed

relationships between environmental preference and its socio-economic, demographic and cultural determinants may differ across countries with different levels of economic development, institutional structures and cultural values. Nevertheless, the findings may have relevance for other emerging economies facing similar challenges of balancing economic growth and environmental protection.

Policy implications

Important cues that can be drawn from the findings of the study are that if the ethical value system (i.e. sense of cooperation, valuing others, non-discrimination, religiosity, equality and social activism) can be inculcated amongst the people from early childhood days at home, academic institutions and society, their concern to protect the environment will enhance as a natural consequence. Thus, policies promoting community participation, civic engagement, social cooperation and inclusive development may indirectly strengthen environmental concern among individuals. Public campaigns, community-based environmental programmes and socially participative sustainability initiatives may therefore be effective in bolstering collective environmental responsibility.

Moreover, the outcome of the study highlighted the positive role of government monitoring and the strong institutional vigilance that can strengthen environmental concerns amongst the people in society. Therefore, strong environmental governance implementation is the need of the hour to ensure greater public participation in sustainability-related initiatives.

Managerial implications

The findings also have implications for managers and business organizations. The observed association between environmental preference and education, social activism, collectivism, humane orientation and equality suggests that environmental consciousness is embedded in broader social and ethical values. Managers can therefore consider these dimensions while designing sustainability-oriented products, services and marketing strategies. Firms may strengthen green marketing and sustainability communication by highlighting not only the environmental benefits of their products but also their wider social and ethical contributions. The findings also suggest scope for organizations to integrate environmental awareness into employee training, organizational culture and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Community-oriented environmental programmes, employee participation in sustainability activities and stakeholder engagement may help firms align their sustainability initiatives with the values and expectations of socially conscious consumers and communities. Overall, the findings suggest that firms can move beyond a compliance-oriented approach to environmental responsibility and incorporate environmental consciousness into product development, marketing, employee engagement and stakeholder management.

Limitations and future research

The study is not free from limitations. First, it is based on cross-sectional data from the World Values Survey Wave 7 and therefore, the observed relationships should not be interpreted as causal. Second, environmental preference is measured using respondents' stated preference for environmental protection over economic growth, which may not necessarily translate into actual pro-environmental behaviour. Future studies may therefore incorporate behavioural measures such as green consumption, recycling, energy conservation and participation in environmental activities. Third, the analysis is restricted to the variables available in the World Values Survey; consequently, potentially relevant factors such as environmental knowledge, exposure to environmental risks, environmental education and actual environmental practices could not be incorporated. Finally, the study is confined to India, limiting direct cross-country generalization. Future research may employ primary or longitudinal data and undertake cross-

country comparative studies to examine the robustness of the findings across different socio-economic, cultural and institutional contexts.

Note

1. Biophilia hypothesis posits that people in society have an inherent biological and psychological urge to survive in harmony with the environment.

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