

## **Mission LiFE: India's emphasis on individual responsibility as a model for sustainable climate action**

Rju Mohan A<sup>1</sup>, Munawwara Zubair<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1&2</sup> Research Scholars, Gulati Institute of Finance and Taxation, Thiruvananthapuram

### **Abstract**

*This research paper critically examines the shortcomings of prevailing climate change mitigation strategies, emphasizing their lack of alignment with natural systems, failure to address overconsumption and historical emission disparities, and the negative consequences of imposing Western practices on developing nations, as presented in Chapter 13 of Economic Survey 2023-24 titled "Climate Change and India: Why We Must Look at the Problem Through our Lens". As an alternative, it presents India's Mission LiFE, which focuses on individual responsibility, mindful consumption, and sustainable living. While acknowledging the potential of Mission LiFE, the paper also discusses the challenges it faces, such as balancing individual and regulatory action, managing urbanization and economic disparities, and navigating tensions between traditional and modern practices. The paper concludes by highlighting India's achievements in reducing emissions and contributing to global climate efforts, underscoring the need for comprehensive, equitable solutions that address the root causes of climate change.*

**Keywords:** *Climate Change, Climate Action, Climate Responsibility, Mission LiFE, Sustainability*

## 1. Introduction

India must address the challenge of climate change through its unique perspective, balancing economic growth with significant climate action. Solutions often aimed at mitigating climate issues, focus on modifying consumption patterns of market societies, but fail to recognize that, sustainable living is inherent in the Indian way of life. These principles form the backbone of Mission LiFE ("LiFE Style For Environment"), introduced by India at the 26th UN Climate Change Conference (COP 26) in Glasgow. It emphasizes on making eco-friendly choices and promoting individual responsibility without sacrificing quality of life.

The Economic Survey 2023-24 provides several reasons as to why the current approach to climate change is flawed. They are:

1. Little principled understandings of life: Man-made solutions and technologies alone are insufficient for environmental challenges; a holistic approach that aligns with natural systems is essential.
2. Ignores the interconnected nature of existence Current climate solutions ignore the associated potential environmental and social costs.
3. Insufficient for ordained purpose: It appears that achieving net zero carbon emissions is very unlikely, given the massive infrastructure overhaul and insufficient timeframe.
4. Earth has enough for needs but not for greed: The most advisable solution of transitioning from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources does not address the fundamental issues of overconsumption and the adoption of sustainable practices.
5. Global pursuit of energy-guzzling technologies: While developed nations heavily invest in energy-intensive AI ecosystems, developing countries face pressure to meet climate commitments they may not be ready for.
6. Pretends to be data-driven but is shy of per-person data: Energy consumption is a per-capita phenomena but current energy estimates focus on absolute metrics. India's historical emissions and per capita emissions are low despite its large population, accounting for only 4% of global cumulative greenhouse gas emissions from 1850 to 2019.

7. Historical blind spot and a surprising lack of guilt: Given the disparities in development and resource consumption; it is unjust to set a uniform zero-emission deadline for all nations.
8. Developed countries should acknowledge their historical environmental impact and transfer resources and technology to developing nations.
9. Inadequate climate financing: Developing countries need USD 6 trillion by 2030 to meet their NDC targets, but developed nations have fallen short on their funding promises. Climate finance is often given as loans.
10. Western nations propose making the New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) contributions voluntary and expect developing countries to contribute based on emission shares.

It also emphasizes that adopting western practices has negative environmental implications for the developing world by giving two major examples of meat production and housing.

*Meat production:*

- Meat production process and the destruction of the food-feed balance: Increased meat demand is supported by the modern mass-scale feed industry, posing a significant threat to global food security.
- This trend, prominent in developed countries, is now emerging in developing nations adopting Western animal husbandry methods.
- Unsustainable practices in the feed industry, degrade soil and water quality.
- Sustainable farming practices, like Integrated Farming Systems that recycle farm waste and use human-inedible feed, can mitigate global hunger and enhance food security.

*Housing:*

- As India modernizes, there is a shift from multi-generational joint families to nuclear families leading to higher demand for smaller, independent housing units.
- Nucleated living contributes to urban sprawl, leading to increased energy consumption, pollution, and traffic congestion.

- Studies show that smaller household sizes are linked to higher CO2 emissions and water usage.
- Traditional Indian homes, with features like central courtyards for natural ventilation and local materials, were more sustainable than modern concrete buildings.

## **2. Mission LiFE: A unique Indian answer to climate action**

In this juncture, the Economic Survey 2023-24 introduces the concept of Mission LiFE which aims to bring individual responsibility to the forefront of the global climate narrative. It also gave the following reasons as to why such an initiative is important from the Indian perspective of addressing climate-related challenges:

- Successful economic and industrial strategies require individuals, especially in developed nations, to adopt simple behavioral changes that contribute to climate and environmental mitigation efforts.
- India has a history of individual-led sustainable behaviors but are being overshadowed by capitalist trends.
- Voluntary change in consumer behavior will drive industry shifts towards more sustainable practices. Example: India's "Give It Up" LPG Subsidy Scheme.
- Individual behaviors and consumption choices are significantly shaped by surrounding norms, policies, incentives, and infrastructure.
- Governments, community leaders, and media play crucial roles in this process. Eg: Ujala Program Success
- The principle of LiFE advocates for enjoying the intrinsic value of experiences and possessions without overconsuming.
- It emphasizes mindful living, such as avoiding unnecessary waste, to ensure a sustainable future for future generations.

## **3. Limitations of adopting Mission LiFE:**

Although it is every novel and efficient way and a unique Indian way of addressing climate-related challenges, it suffers from the following limitations:

- Regulatory Measures vs. Individual Responsibility: Mission LiFE shifts some responsibility to individuals, promoting pro-planet choices at the personal level. This

approach can complement existing policies but requires widespread public participation and commitment. (India's Nationally Determined Contributions, 2015)

- **Urbanisation and Population Density:** Urban areas are often disconnected from nature, making the reintegration of nature-based solutions challenging. The high population density in cities exacerbates this issue, limiting space for green areas and sustainable practices. (World Economic Forum, 2020)
- **Looming Housing Problem:** Urbanization and nucleation are here to stay, whether we like it not. This is an area where limitations of traditional concepts need to be understood and modern practices need to be adopted to minimize the environmental footprint.
- **Economic Disparities:** For a significant portion of the population living in poverty, immediate survival needs often take precedence over environmental considerations. Implementing nature-based solutions may require investments that are not feasible for low-income communities. (Oxfam India, 2021)
- **Traditional vs. Modern Agriculture:** Traditional agricultural practices are often more sustainable, but modern, intensive farming methods driven by the need to increase productivity can lead to soil degradation, water scarcity, and loss of biodiversity. At the same time, transitioning back to more sustainable practices can be difficult due to economic pressures and food security concerns. (FAO, 2020)
- **Food-feed problem:** India is the fifth-largest meat exporter globally, with buffalo meat (carabeef) making up nearly 79% of its total animal product exports in 2022-2023. This segment generates significant revenue and employment. However, the question arises whether integrated agriculture, proposed as a sustainable alternative, can effectively support this sector, given its economic importance.
- **Political Will and Continuity:** The success of long-term environmental initiatives like Mission LiFE depends heavily on political will and continuity. Changes in government and policy priorities can disrupt the progress of environmental programs. Ensuring sustained commitment across political cycles is crucial for the success of nature-based solutions. (Centre for Policy Research, 2020)

#### **4. Conclusion**

The primary problem with this Chapter in the Economic Survey 2023-24 on 'looking at the climate change problem through our lens' is that it misplaces the emphasis on something of a

'general' solution for a 'particular' problem, where it should have been on something of a 'particular' solution for the 'particular' problem.

Climate change problems that we experience today are mainly anthropogenic, starting initially from the man-made land use changes, and then worsening with the industrial revolution that took off on the wings of fossil fuels. Scientific data have shown the steep and steady rise in CO<sub>2</sub> emission from the industrial revolution period onwards. To this extent, the anthropogenic climate change problem is a 'particular problem' requiring a 'particular solution' of mitigation, that is, reducing the use of fossil fuels. If emissions are due to fossil fuel use, then emission reduction solely depends on fossil fuel use reduction; that is the particular problem and its particular solution. And India has been successful in keeping her pledge, as reported in the beginning of the chapter itself, that is,

1. India successfully reduced the emission intensity vis-à-vis its GDP by 33% between 2005 and 2019, thus achieving the initial NDC target for 2030, 11 years ahead of scheduled time.
2. India also achieved 40% of electricity installed capacity through non-fossil fuel sources, nine years ahead of the target for 2030. Between 2017 and 2023, India has added around 100 GW of installed electricity capacity, of which around 80% is attributed to non-fossil fuel-based resources.
3. India's contribution to climate action is significant through its international efforts - International Solar Alliance (ISA), Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI), creation of LeadIT, Infrastructure for Resilient Island States (IRIS), and Big Cat Alliance.

In addition to these achievements, climate justice, defined in terms of historically cumulative emissions and per capita emissions, also favours India, with very small values of these climate justice standards. This itself is enough to counter the internationally orchestrated allegation of India being the third largest emitter.

Unfortunately, the Chapter fails to highlight these valid 'particular' aspects in their required degrees and dimensions. In its enthusiasm to uphold and market the Indian traditional dharmas (ways of living), the Chapter invents a new way of looking at the (particular) climate change problem through 'our lens' of the (general) traditional dharmas, now named as Mission Life. The Mission focuses on 7 themes, such as Saving Energy and Water, Reducing

Single Use Plastic and E-waste, Adopting Sustainable Food Systems, Reducing Waste and adopting Healthy Lifestyles. The interesting twist in the new way of looking is that the traditional way of life which the entire community had practised in totum is now interpreted as the individual responsibility. The Chapter declares that "Individual action is the core of Climate Responsibility". However, the Indian traditional dharma was rooted in the entire community, and the individuals perform lived accordingly: yadha rajah, thadhah prajah. In this light, the Chapter is a surprising example of a neo-classical twisting of the Indian traditional dharma in line with the World Bank's economic philosophy of individualism: absolving the state (community) of its innate duties and thrusting them on the individuals.

The crux of our argument is: reducing climate change problem requires reducing the use of fossil fuels, and this has more to do with the state: once the state resolves to reduce the fossil fuel use, it is done!

## References

Centre for Policy Research. (2020). Political Economy of Climate Policy in India. Retrieved from CPR

Economic Survey 2023-24, Ministry of Finance, Government of India.

FAO. (2020). India at a Glance. Retrieved from FAO.

India's Nationally Determined Contributions. (2015). Retrieved from UNFCCC.

Ministry of Human Resource Development. (2020). Environmental Education in India. Retrieved from MHRD

NITI Aayog. (2019). Composite Water Management Index. Retrieved from NITI Aayog

Oxfam India. (2021). India Inequality Report. Retrieved from Oxfam India

UNESCO. (2017). Cultural Diversity and Sustainable Development. Retrieved from UNESCO

World Economic Forum. (2020). Urbanization in India. Retrieved from WEF

<https://idronline.org/article/climate-emergency/how-does-budget-2024-address-climate-change/>

<https://thewire.in/environment/budget-2024-25-addresses-some-climate-concerns-but-misses-many-others>

<https://energy.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/renewable/union-budget-2024-25-introduces-climate-finance-taxonomy-to-drive-sustainable-growth/112278923>