NR48 / ESG and the Evolution of Environmental Governance in India

Topic : Research

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GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

General Objectives

The primary objective of this panel is to advance an integrated understanding of how Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) frameworks are transforming the architecture of environmental governance and corporate accountability in India. At a time when statutory environmental regulations are perceived to be weakening—through procedural relaxations, expedited clearances, and diminished consultative processes—the simultaneous rise of corporate ESG practices creates a complex and evolving governance landscape. Businesses are increasingly confronted with mandatory disclosure norms, heightened sustainability reporting requirements, proliferating ESG ratings, net-zero commitments, and sustainable finance instruments. Yet the actual efficacy, distributional consequences, and political economy of these tools remain under-examined in the Indian context.

The panel therefore seeks to (i) bring together scholarship that examines the institutional, regulatory, and market forces influencing corporate ESG practices; (ii) foreground the interactions between public regulation, private standards, investor expectations and civil society scrutiny; and (iii) interrogate how these hybrid mechanisms affect environmental justice, transparency, and accountability. By inviting conceptual, empirical, and theoretical analyses, the panel aims to build a collective space for scholars to critically engage with the ongoing reconfiguration of environmental governance in India—highlighting not only trends, but also their underlying tensions, contradictions, and implications.

More specifically, the panel intends to foster dialogue between public policy scholars concerned with regulatory design and enforcement, and management scholars studying corporate responses to ESG requirements. It seeks to illuminate how firm-level ESG strategies intersect with broader political-economic processes, including investor activism, regulatory shifts, technological transitions, and community mobilisation. Ultimately, the panel's objective is to deepen understanding of whether emerging ESG mechanisms meaningfully enhance corporate accountability or primarily serve symbolic, reputational, and market-driven purposes.

Research Questions

The panel is structured around a set of core research questions that open up multiple lines of inquiry across disciplines and methodological approaches:

1. How are evolving ESG frameworks reshaping the nature of environmental governance in India?

This includes examining how ESG norms—whether through mandatory BRSR reporting, sectoral ecolabels, or global disclosure standards—intersect with, complement, or potentially substitute statutory environmental regulations. Papers may explore whether ESG tools fill governance gaps or create new forms of fragmented, market-driven oversight.

2. To what extent do corporate ESG practices lead to substantive improvements in environmental performance and accountability?

A central focus is assessing the efficacy of ESG disclosures, ratings, and voluntary commitments. Are firms engaging in meaningful behavioural change, or are they primarily responding through symbolic compliance, selective reporting, or narrative management? How do investors, regulators, and rating agencies shape the credibility and enforcement of ESG claims?

3. What new power dynamics and institutional arrangements are emerging as ESG mechanisms gain prominence?

The rise of ESG has introduced new actors—rating agencies, sustainability consultants, investors, proxy advisors—into the governance arena. This raises questions about expertise, authority, conflicts of interest, and the shifting balance between state-led regulation and private governance regimes. How do these

dynamics influence corporate behaviour and policy outcomes?

4. How do ESG-driven governance processes align with or challenge environmental justice concerns?

India's environmental conflicts are deeply social, involving issues of land rights, health impacts, displacement, and access to natural resources. The panel invites inquiry into whether ESG mechanisms recognise community perspectives or remain largely insulated within corporate and investor networks. Does ESG language create new opportunities for justice-based advocacy, or does it obscure grassroots concerns through technocratic framing?

5. How do sector-specific, regional, or comparative contexts shape the functioning and implications of ESG frameworks?

ESG adoption varies widely across industries—energy, manufacturing, agriculture, mining, finance—and across regions with different regulatory capacities and socio-political conditions. Comparative work, both within India and internationally, can help reveal structural patterns, institutional divergences, and context-specific challenges.

Scientific Relevance

This panel holds significant scientific relevance for several reasons.

1. ESG is transforming governance, yet scholarly analysis lags behind practice.

While ESG has become a dominant discourse in corporate and investment circles, academic research—especially in the Indian context—remains fragmented. Public policy scholarship has traditionally focused on state regulation, while management research often concentrates on firm-level strategy or investor behaviour. This panel creates a needed interdisciplinary bridge, offering a platform to examine ESG not merely as a corporate trend but as a governance transformation with regulatory, political, and societal implications.

2. The Indian context presents unique institutional and political-economic dynamics.

India is simultaneously witnessing regulatory dilution and the rapid expansion of ESG requirements—a paradox that challenges existing theories of governance. Unlike many Western contexts where ESG tends to supplement already robust environmental regulation, in India it may be filling regulatory vacuums, reshaping state–market relations, or generating hybrid governance models. Understanding these dynamics contributes to global debates on environmental regulation, private governance, and sustainability transitions.

3. The panel foregrounds environmental justice within ESG debates.

Much global ESG discourse remains dominated by investor materiality and corporate risk perspectives. However, questions of distributional equity, community rights, and environmental justice are fundamental to India's environmental challenges. By explicitly inviting work that interrogates the justice dimensions of ESG, the panel advances a more socially grounded, critical scholarship that resists the technocratic narrowing of governance debates.

4. It contributes to theoretical development around hybrid governance and accountability.

The proliferation of ESG instruments—ratings, disclosures, voluntary targets—raises fundamental theoretical questions: What counts as accountability in hybrid governance systems? How does authority shift when private actors play regulatory roles? What forms of legitimacy underpin ESG tools? This panel encourages papers that deepen conceptual frameworks around regulation-by-disclosure, private authority, institutional isomorphism, greenwashing, and the political economy of sustainability.

5. It encourages methodological pluralism in studying emerging governance mechanisms.

The panel welcomes case studies, ethnographies, comparative analyses, quantitative assessments, policy analyses, and conceptual explorations. ESG governance evolves in dispersed and opaque ways; therefore, capturing its complexity requires varied methods. Bringing together diverse approaches allows for cross-pollination and richer understanding of empirical realities.

6. The outcomes of this panel have policy and practice significance.

Beyond advancing academic debates, the panel can inform regulatory design, investor decision-making, corporate strategy, and civil society advocacy. Insights generated here have the potential to shape the broader discourse on sustainability and governance in India at a time of rapid economic transitions.

We are proposing two papers for preliminary consideration, and shall invite more papers through an open call for papers. We are open to hosting multi-session panel if needed:

1. Paper Title: Ethics of Science-based Targets

Authors: Dr. Sanchayan Nath (XLRI Xavier School of Management, Delhi-NCR)

Dr Ayatakshee Sarkar (XLRI Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur)

2. Paper Title: Whither environmental justice? ESG and shifting regimes of environmental governance

Authors: Dr. Priyanshu Gupta (Indian Institute of Management Lucknow)
Dr. Vandana (Jindal Global Business School, Sonepat)

CALL FOR PAPERS

India’s environmental governance landscape is undergoing a profound transformation. While public policy scholars and civil society actors raise concerns about the dilution of environmental regulations—through expedited clearances, reduced oversight, and shrinking deliberative spaces—corporate actors simultaneously face an expanding suite of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) expectations. These include evolving disclosure norms, enhanced Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reporting (BRSR) requirements, rapidly proliferating ESG ratings, sector-specific ecolabels, voluntary net-zero and science-based targets, as well as the rise of sustainable and transition finance.

This juxtaposition raises pressing questions about how corporate ESG instruments are reshaping accountability structures: Do new ESG policies and market-based tools meaningfully drive changes in firm behaviour, or do they risk becoming symbolic compliance mechanisms? How do rating agencies, investors, regulators, and civil society influence the design and enforcement of ESG norms? And how do these trends intersect with longstanding concerns around environmental justice, community rights, and the role of the state?

This panel invites theoretical, empirical, and conceptual papers that analyse the changing nature of environmental governance in India. We welcome work examining the performance, institutional dynamics, impacts, politics and ethics of ESG disclosures, reporting frameworks (including BRSR and global standards), rating methodologies, sustainable finance criteria, supply-chain accountability, voluntary commitments, and corporate climate strategies.

Interdisciplinary contributions from public policy, management studies, law, sustainability, environmental studies, ecology, economics, political science, and allied fields are encouraged. We particularly welcome research that illuminates how ESG-driven governance interacts with statutory regulation, shapes corporate conduct, and affects communities and ecosystems on the ground.