
INTEGRATING CLIMATE JUSTICE INTO CLIMATE CHANGE ADAPTATION STRATEGIES: A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR INDIA

Vishal Kumar, Research Scholar, Faculty of Law, University of Lucknow.

ABSTRACT

Climate change adaptation is no longer a purely technical exercise of building embankments, installing early warning systems or changing crop varieties. It is the constitutional, human rights and governance question about whose lives are protected first, whose knowledge is valued, whose land is acquired, who receives public finance, and who can challenge maladaptive decisions. This article develops a policy framework for integrating climate justice into climate change adaptation strategies in India. It argues that existing adaptation instruments-especially the National Action Plan on Climate Change, State Action Plans on Climate Change and the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change-create a substantial policy base, but they do not yet convert climate justice into enforceable standards for planning, finance, implementation and accountability. The article uses a doctrinal and policy-analysis method. It reads the Paris Agreement, IPCC findings and international human rights standards together with India's constitutional jurisprudence, particularly *M.K. Ranjitsinh v. Union of India*, which recognised a right against the adverse effects of climate change under Articles 14 and 21. The article proposes the CJ-ADAPT framework: a rights-based cycle of vulnerability mapping, participatory priority-setting, justice screening, equitable financing, safeguards, monitoring and remedies. It concludes that India should move from rhetorical commitment to climate justice towards measurable adaptation duties, justice-budget tagging, community participation, social audits and accessible remedies.

Keywords: Climate Justice; Climate Change Adaptation; Right to Life; NAPCC; SAPCC; Vulnerable Communities; Human Rights; Environmental Governance.

1. Introduction

Climate change adaptation has become one of the central tests of environmental governance in the twenty-first century. Scientific assessments show that climate impacts are already causing losses to human systems, ecosystems and livelihoods, while approximately 3.3 to 3.6 billion people live in contexts that are highly vulnerable to climate change.¹ Adaptation is therefore not a future-oriented charity measure; it is a present obligation of governance. For India, the concern is particularly immediate. Heat waves, cyclones, floods, water stress, sea-level rise, glacial instability, forest degradation and agricultural vulnerability do not affect all persons equally. They interact with caste, class, gender, age, disability, livelihood, location and land tenure. A farmer in a rain-fed region, an informal worker exposed to extreme heat, a fisher household facing coastal erosion, a woman collecting water during drought, and an indigenous community dependent upon forests experience climate risk through very different social and legal positions.

The conventional language of adaptation often treats vulnerability as a matter of exposure to hazards. Climate justice requires a deeper inquiry. It asks who created the conditions of vulnerability, who participates in defining risk, who obtains adaptation finance, who bears the costs of relocation or infrastructure, and who can secure remedies when adaptation itself causes harm. The Paris Agreement reflects this shift by establishing a global goal on adaptation and by requiring adaptation action to be country-driven, gender-responsive, participatory and transparent, taking vulnerable groups, communities, ecosystems, traditional knowledge and indigenous knowledge into account.² The human rights framework similarly treats climate action as a matter of obligations owed by duty bearers to rights holders, especially those in vulnerable situations.³

India has expressly used the vocabulary of climate justice in its updated Nationally Determined Contribution, which is titled “Working Towards Climate Justice”.⁴ Yet a policy phrase does not automatically become an operational rule. Adaptation planning in India remains scattered across national missions, state action plans, disaster management guidelines,

¹Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers 7* (H.-O. Pörtner et al. eds., Cambridge University Press, 2022).

²United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, *The Paris Agreement*, arts. 2 and 7.

³Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, *OHCHR and Climate Change*.

⁴Government of India, *India’s Updated First Nationally Determined Contribution under Paris Agreement (2021–2030)* 1–3 (August 2022).

sectoral schemes and local development programmes. Many of these instruments are valuable, but they do not always require decision-makers to demonstrate that adaptation priorities are distributively fair, procedurally inclusive, culturally respectful and remedially accountable. This gap becomes constitutionally significant after *M.K. Ranjitsinh & Ors. v. Union of India & Ors.*, where the Supreme Court held that the right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change is recognised through Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution.⁵

The central argument of this article is that climate justice must be integrated into adaptation as a binding policy standard, not merely as a moral aspiration. The proposed framework proceeds from three propositions. First, adaptation is a rights-sensitive public function because climate risk threatens life, health, housing, food, water, livelihood and equality. Secondly, adaptation is prone to maladaptation if decision-making ignores local knowledge, social inequalities and long-term ecological effects. Thirdly, Indian constitutional law already contains the normative basis for justice-centred adaptation through Articles 14 and 21, read with Articles 48A and 51A(g), environmental statutes and disaster management institutions.⁶ The task is therefore to translate this normative base into policy architecture.

2. Research Problem, Questions and Methodology

The research problem addressed in this article is the weak operationalisation of climate justice within adaptation strategies in India. The country has developed several policy instruments, including the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC)⁷, State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs), the National Adaptation Fund for Climate Change (NAFCC), disaster management guidelines and sectoral programmes. However, these instruments do not consistently apply a common justice test to decide which communities receive priority, how affected people participate, how adaptation finance is allocated, how cultural and livelihood rights are recognized, and how affected persons obtain remedies when adaptation projects fail or produce unequal consequences.

The article is guided by three research questions. First, what does climate justice mean when applied specifically to adaptation? Secondly, how do Indian constitutional, legal and policy instruments support or constrain justice-based adaptation? Thirdly, what institutional

⁵*M.K. Ranjitsinh & Ors. v. Union of India & Ors.*, (2024) SCC Online SC 570: 2024 INSC 280.

⁶The Constitution of India, arts. 14 and 21.

⁷ <https://static.pib.gov.in/WriteReadData/specificdocs/documents/2021/dec/doc202112101.pdf> (visited on 26 April 2026).

framework can translate climate justice into measurable adaptation duties? The methodology is doctrinal and qualitative. It analyses international climate law, human rights standards, Indian constitutional jurisprudence, statutes and policy documents. The article does not conduct fieldwork; rather, it develops a normative and institutional framework that can be used by legislators, ministries, state governments, local bodies, courts, tribunals and civil society actors.

The scope is India-focused but internationally informed. International law is used not as an external command but as an interpretive source for domestic policy design. The Paris Agreement's adaptation provisions, IPCC findings and human rights principles provide criteria for evaluating domestic adaptation. Indian law provides the enforceable foundation. The proposed framework is therefore neither purely global nor purely local; it seeks to align India's development priorities with constitutional environmentalism and climate-resilient development.

3. Climate Justice as a Normative Lens for Adaptation

Climate justice is often associated with mitigation: historical responsibility, carbon budgets, climate finance and the obligation of developed countries to lead. Adaptation justice is distinct, though connected. It concerns the fair distribution of protection from climate harm and the fair distribution of burdens created by adaptation measures. It also concerns participation, recognition and remedies. The IPCC states that climate justice generally includes distributive justice, procedural justice and recognition, and that adaptation solutions should conform to principles of justice.⁸ These dimensions are especially important in India, where climate vulnerability is shaped by historical inequalities, informal labour, inadequate housing, dependence on climate-sensitive livelihoods and uneven access to public services.

Distributive justice asks whether adaptation resources reach those most exposed and least able to cope. A flood control project that protects high-value urban property but increases waterlogging in informal settlements may be an adaptation project in engineering terms and an injustice in constitutional terms. Procedural justice asks who decides. A coastal adaptation plan prepared without fisher communities, women fish vendors and local panchayats may overlook livelihood patterns, customary access and gendered work. Recognition justice asks whether policy respects distinct identities, cultures and knowledge systems. In forest and Himalayan

⁸Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers 7* (H.-O. Pörtner et al. eds., Cambridge University Press, 2022).

regions, this requires attention to indigenous and local knowledge, community forest rights and non-market relationships with land and ecosystems. Intergenerational justice asks whether present adaptation choices lock future generations into ecological fragility or debt. Corrective justice asks whether persons harmed by climate impacts or adaptation failures receive repair, compensation and accessible remedies.

The practical value of this framework is that it converts a broad moral idea into policy questions. Every adaptation strategy should be tested through five questions: who is most vulnerable; who participates; whose knowledge is recognized; who pays and who benefits; and what remedies exist if the measure fails or harms a group. These questions prevent adaptation from becoming a top-down project of infrastructure delivery. They also align adaptation with the human rights approach, which requires climate measures to be inclusive and respectful of affected communities.⁹

Table 1: Justice Dimensions in Climate Change Adaptation

| Justice dimension | Core adaptation question | Policy mechanism | Illustrative Indian application |
|----------------------|---|--|---|
| Distributive justice | Are protection, finance and benefits reaching the most climate-vulnerable groups? | Vulnerability-weighted climate tagging, priority for low-income and hazard-exposed districts | Heat shelters, water security and health services prioritised for outdoor workers, informal settlements and elderly persons |
| Procedural justice | Who decides adaptation priorities and project design? | Gram Sabha or ward-level consultations, public disclosure, | Community approval before relocation, coastal protection or forest- |

⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, OHCHR and Climate Change.

| | | | |
|---------------------------|--|--|--|
| | | social audit and grievance hearings | based adaptation projects |
| Recognition justice | Does policy respect culture, livelihood, tenure and local knowledge? | Indigenous/local knowledge registers, livelihood impact assessment and culturally appropriate safeguards | Protection of forest rights and fishing livelihoods while designing ecosystem-based adaptation |
| Intergenerational justice | Do present choices preserve future resilience? | Long-term risk scenarios, ecosystem restoration and no-regret planning | Avoiding hard infrastructure that transfers flood or erosion risks to future communities |
| Corrective justice | What remedy exists when climate harm or maladaptation occurs? | Compensation, rehabilitation, climate grievance authority and tribunal access | Remedy for unjust displacement, failed early warning or inequitable adaptation finance |

4. Indian Legal and Policy Landscape

India’s legal basis for justice-centered adaptation begins with the Constitution. Article 21¹⁰ has long been interpreted to include the right to live with dignity and the right to a clean and healthy environment. Article 14¹¹ requires equality before law and equal protection of laws. In climate adaptation, Article 14 is crucial because equal protection cannot mean identical treatment of unequally vulnerable persons. It requires public authorities to identify differential

¹⁰ Constitution of India, art. 21.

¹¹ Ibid., art. 14.

vulnerability and provide targeted protection. The Supreme Court's decision in *M.K. Ranjitsinh* is especially significant because it connects climate change with both life and equality, recognizing that poorer communities, island communities, forest dwellers, tribal and indigenous communities may suffer climate impacts in ways that implicate constitutional equality.¹²

The judgment also acknowledged a structural gap: despite policies and regulations addressing climate change, India does not have a single umbrella climate change legislation.¹³ This observation should not be read as merely descriptive. It indicates a governance problem. Where adaptation duties are spread across ministries and states without a common rights-based standard, vulnerable groups may fall between institutional mandates. The constitutional recognition of climate rights therefore requires a move from fragmented policy discretion to principled adaptation obligations. Articles 48A and 51A(g) reinforce this approach by directing environmental protection and recognizing duties towards forests, wildlife and the natural environment.

Statutory law also provides enabling authority. Section 3 of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 gives the Central Government broad power to take measures for protecting and improving the environment.¹⁴ This power could support national climate adaptation and justice guidelines. The Disaster Management Act, 2005 creates disaster management authorities and empowers the National Disaster Management Authority to lay down policies, plans and guidelines for disaster management.¹⁵ In practice, climate adaptation and disaster risk reduction overlap in areas such as heat waves, floods, cyclones, landslides and droughts. Forest and tribal areas require special attention because the Forest Rights Act, 2006 recognizes rights of forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers and provides institutional processes for vesting such rights.¹⁶ Adaptation cannot be just if it restores ecosystems by displacing communities whose rights and knowledge are central to those ecosystems.

At the policy level, the NAPCC, released in 2008, remains the foundational national climate policy. It aims to enable India to adapt to climate change while enhancing ecological

¹²*Supra* note 5, paras. 19–27.

¹³*Ibid.*, para. 19.

¹⁴The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, s. 3 (Act 29 of 1986).

¹⁵The Disaster Management Act, 2005, s. 6 (Act 53 of 2005).

¹⁶The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, ss. 3–6 (Act 2 of 2007).

sustainability and reducing vulnerability, and it identifies national missions on solar energy, energy efficiency, sustainable habitat, water, Himalayan ecosystems, green India, sustainable agriculture and strategic knowledge.¹⁷ State action plans are meant to translate climate priorities into state-specific measures.¹⁸ The Government of India has stated that thirty-four States and Union Territories have prepared SAPCCs in line with the NAPCC and that these plans outline sector-specific and cross-sectoral priority actions, including adaptation and climate-resilient infrastructure.¹⁹

Finance is channelized through instruments such as NAFCC. In 2024, the Government reported that NAFCC was established to support adaptation activities in vulnerable States and Union Territories, that thirty projects had been sanctioned in twenty-seven States and Union Territories, and that the total project cost was Rs. 847.48 crore.²⁰ India’s NDCs also provide important context. The 2022 updated NDC frames India’s climate commitments around climate justice and sustainable lifestyles.²¹ The subsequent 2031–2035 NDC reiterates equity and climate justice, records that India’s climate action is anchored in the NAPCC, and notes that State Action Plans are being revised to incorporate updated climate risks and vulnerabilities.²²

Table 2: Indian Legal and Policy Instruments Relevant to Justice-Centered Adaptation

| Instrument | Adaptation relevance | Justice opportunity | Key gap |
|-----------------------|---|---|---|
| Constitution of India | Articles 14 and 21 support climate-related life, health and equality claims | Converts adaptation from policy into discretion | No detailed statutory procedure for implementing climate rights |

¹⁷Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India, National Action Plan on Climate Change (2008).

¹⁸ Press Information Bureau, Government of India, National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) (Dec. 1, 2021).

¹⁹Press Information Bureau, Government of India, India is part of the solution and is doing more than its fair share to address climate change (Feb. 2, 2023).

²⁰Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Status of Projects under NAFCC (Aug. 5, 2024).

²¹Government of India, India’s Updated First Nationally Determined Contribution under Paris Agreement (2021–2030) 1–3 (August 2022).

²²Government of India, India’s Nationally Determined Contribution (2031–2035) 10–11 (2026).

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| | | rights-sensitive governance | |
| Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 | Broad central power to protect and improve environment | Can support binding climate justice guidelines and standards | Not designed specifically for adaptation or social vulnerability |
| Disaster Management Act, 2005 | Institutional framework for prevention, mitigation, preparedness and response | Can integrate heat, flood, cyclone and drought adaptation with social protection | Emergency orientation may underemphasise long-term adaptation justice |
| NAPCC and SAPCCs | Mainstream climate concerns into national and state planning | Can become vehicles for district-level rights-based adaptation | Justice indicators and remedies are uneven |
| NAFCC | Supports concrete adaptation projects in vulnerable states/UTs | Can prioritise vulnerable communities through formula-based grants | Project-mode finance may favour states with higher proposal capacity |
| Forest Rights Act, 2006 | Protects rights and governance role of forest-dependent communities | Recognition justice for ecosystem-based adaptation | Implementation gaps may weaken community participation |

5. Gaps in Existing Adaptation Governance

The first gap is the absence of a common legal definition of justice-based adaptation. The NAPCC and SAPCCs recognise vulnerability and sustainable development, but they do not consistently require a justice impact assessment before adaptation projects are approved. The result is that adaptation priorities may be framed in sectoral terms-water, agriculture, infrastructure, coastal protection or health-without a structured inquiry into caste, gender, disability, occupation, landlessness, informal housing or age. A drought adaptation programme may increase irrigation efficiency while excluding tenant farmers. A heat action plan may issue advisories while ignoring workers who cannot avoid afternoon labour without wage loss. A coastal defence project may protect assets while restricting fisher access to landing spaces.

The second gap is procedural. Participation is often treated as consultation after expert design rather than co-production of adaptation knowledge. The Paris Agreement makes participation, transparency, vulnerable groups and traditional knowledge central to adaptation.²³ The UNFCCC also states that successful adaptation depends not only on governments but on sustained engagement of stakeholders, including local communities, public and private actors, civil society and knowledge systems.²⁴ For India, this requires stronger institutional roles for gram sabhas, municipalities, ward committees, self-help groups, worker organisations, fisher collectives, forest rights committees and disaster management committees.

The third gap is the risk of maladaptation. The IPCC warns that maladaptive responses can create lock-ins of vulnerability, exposure and risk, exacerbate inequalities, and especially affect marginalised and vulnerable groups such as Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, low-income households and informal settlements.²⁵ In India, maladaptation can occur when embankments increase flood risk downstream, relocation severs livelihood networks, urban cooling plans favour commercial districts over informal settlements, or forest restoration excludes communities who have historically protected forests. Maladaptation is not merely policy inefficiency; it can be a violation of equality and dignity when it transfers risk to those least able to resist.

²³United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, The Paris Agreement, arts. 7(5) and 7(9).

²⁴UNFCCC, *Adaptation and Resilience: Introduction*.

²⁵Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability: Summary for Policymakers 27* (H.-O. Pörtner et al. eds., Cambridge University Press, 2022).

The fourth gap is finance. Adaptation finance is often project-based and administratively complex. Project mode can support innovation, but it can also reward states or agencies with higher technical capacity rather than communities with higher vulnerability. A justice framework requires formula-based allocation that includes exposure, poverty, social vulnerability, ecological fragility and local capacity constraints. It also requires transparent disclosure of who benefits from adaptation expenditure, whether women and marginalised communities are represented, and whether funds reach local institutions.

The fifth gap is accountability. Adaptation documents frequently measure outputs—kilometres of embankments, number of water structures, number of trainings or hectares restored. Justice requires outcome indicators: reduction in heat mortality among outdoor workers, improved water access for women, reduced crop loss for small farmers, protection of customary fishing spaces, restoration of forest livelihoods, and timely compensation for climate-related displacement. Without social audit, climate audit and grievance redress, adaptation remains vulnerable to bureaucratic reporting rather than rights-based evaluation.

6. The CJ-ADAPT Policy Framework

This article proposes CJ-ADAPT: a Climate Justice Adaptation Framework for India. The framework is designed as a cycle rather than a one-time checklist because adaptation must respond to changing risks, new evidence and community feedback. It has seven pillars: legal anchoring, vulnerability mapping, participatory prioritisation, justice screening, equitable finance, implementation safeguards and accountability.

First, legal anchoring requires the Union Government to adopt either a National Climate Adaptation and Justice Act or binding Climate Justice Adaptation Guidelines under the Environment (Protection) Act, read with the Disaster Management Act. The instrument should define climate-vulnerable persons and communities, mandate justice screening for adaptation projects, require disclosure of adaptation finance and create a grievance mechanism. It should not replace state action plans; rather, it should supply a minimum rights-based floor for all adaptation measures.

Secondly, vulnerability mapping must combine climate science with social data. India needs district, block, ward and village-level climate justice atlases that overlay hazard exposure with income, caste, gender, disability, age, occupation, housing, land tenure, water access,

health status and ecosystem dependence. The purpose is not surveillance but priority-setting. Data should be public, privacy-protective and periodically revised. Local and indigenous knowledge should be recorded with safeguards against extraction or misuse.

Thirdly, participatory prioritisation requires that communities affected by adaptation projects participate before priorities are finalised. In rural areas, gram sabhas and panchayats should approve local adaptation priorities. In urban areas, ward committees, resident groups, informal settlement representatives, labour unions and street vendor organisations should be included. Participation must be meaningful: documents should be translated, technical information simplified, dissent recorded, and reasons given when community proposals are rejected.

Fourthly, every adaptation project should pass a climate justice screening. The screening should ask whether the project reduces vulnerability for the most at-risk groups, whether it creates new risks for any group, whether it affects land, livelihood or culture, whether less harmful alternatives exist, whether gender and disability concerns are addressed, and whether remedies are built in. Projects that fail the screen should be redesigned, not merely approved with mitigation conditions.

Fifthly, equitable finance requires adaptation budget tagging and vulnerability-weighted allocation. A portion of national and state adaptation finance should be earmarked for local bodies and community institutions. Finance should support not only infrastructure but also social protection, public health, climate-resilient livelihoods, insurance support, community seed banks, local water commons, heat shelters, cooling access and ecosystem restoration. The framework should also require disclosure of beneficiaries disaggregated by gender, caste, tribe, disability, age and livelihood group where appropriate and privacy-compatible.

Sixthly, implementation safeguards should protect rights during adaptation. Relocation should be a measure of last resort, undertaken only with informed participation, livelihood restoration, land-for-land or adequate compensation where applicable, and post-relocation monitoring. Ecosystem-based adaptation should recognise community rights. Heat adaptation should include labour protections, wage safeguards, drinking water, shaded rest spaces and health response systems. Coastal adaptation should protect access to the sea, landing sites and markets.

Seventhly, accountability must be institutionalized. Each state should establish a Climate Adaptation Justice Cell linked to the State Climate Change Cell and State Disaster Management Authority. District-level adaptation plans should be subject to annual social audits. The Comptroller and Auditor General or state audit institutions may develop climate-adaptation audit templates. The National Green Tribunal and High Courts should remain available where adaptation decisions violate environmental or constitutional rights. The framework is consistent with the Supreme Court’s warning that courts must remain alive to other rights of affected communities, including rights against displacement, while giving effect to climate rights.²⁶

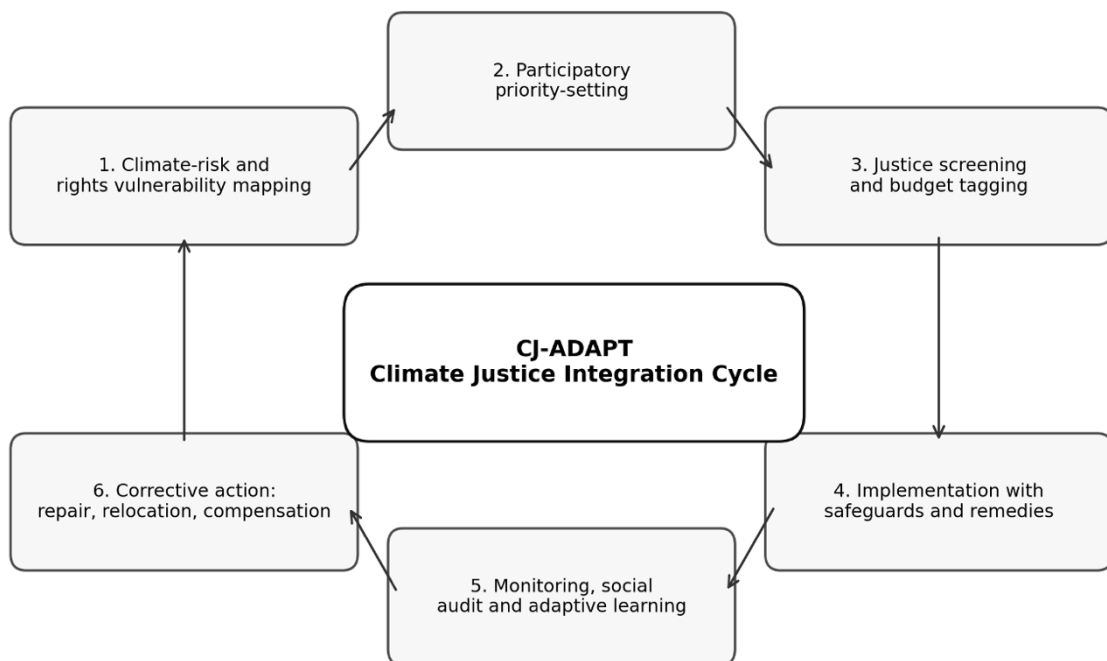


Figure 1: CJ-ADAPT Climate Justice Integration Cycle - a six-step framework for embedding equity and rights into climate adaptation policy.

²⁶Supra note 5, para. 27.

Table 3: CJ-ADAPT Framework Matrix

| Pillar | Lead institution | Legal/policy basis | Minimum indicator |
|------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Legal anchoring | MoEFCC with Parliament/Union Government | EPA, DM Act, Articles 14 and 21 | Adoption of binding guidelines or legislation with justice standards |
| Vulnerability mapping | State Climate Change Cells and district administrations | NAPCC, SAPCCs, Paris art. 7 | Public district/ward vulnerability atlas with social indicators |
| Participatory prioritisation | Panchayats, municipalities and line departments | Constitutional equality, local self-government, Paris art. 7(5) | Recorded consultations and reasoned response to community proposals |
| Justice screening | Project approving authorities | Climate rights under Articles 14 and 21 | Screening report before project sanction |
| Equitable finance | Finance departments, MoEFCC, NABARD/implementing agencies | NAFCC, NDC, state budgets | Adaptation budget tagging and vulnerability-weighted allocation |
| Safeguards and remedies | District authorities, SDMAs, tribunals and courts | FRA, DM Act, constitutional remedies | Functional grievance mechanism and compensation/rehabilitation protocol |
| Monitoring and learning | State Climate Justice Cells and social audit bodies | IPCC good practice; SAPCC review | Annual justice outcomes report with disaggregated indicators |

7. Sectoral Operationalisation

A framework has value only if it changes sectoral decisions. In agriculture, adaptation must prioritise small and marginal farmers, tenant cultivators, landless labourers and women farmers. Climate-resilient seeds, water-efficient irrigation, agro-ecology, crop insurance and extension services should be linked with land-tenure realities. A farmer without formal land title may be highly vulnerable but excluded from compensation or insurance. Justice-based adaptation therefore requires beneficiary rules that recognise actual cultivators and agricultural labour, not only landowners.

In water governance, adaptation should treat water security as a rights and equity issue. Drought-proofing, watershed management, groundwater regulation and urban water planning must account for unequal access. Women, Dalits, informal settlements and remote habitations often experience water scarcity first and most severely. Local water budgeting, protection of commons, decentralised storage and transparent allocation rules should be integrated into SAPCCs and district plans.

Urban heat adaptation requires a direct justice lens. The NDMA notes that heat waves involve abnormally high temperatures and can cause physiological stress and death, and that climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of heat waves in India.²⁷ A justice-centred heat plan cannot rely only on public advisories. It must include cool shelters accessible to homeless persons and informal workers, drinking water points, shaded public spaces, heat-resilient housing, school and work-hour protocols, protections for construction and delivery workers, emergency health services and wage protection where work stoppage is necessary. Cities should map heat vulnerability at ward level rather than only reporting average temperature.

Coastal and riverine adaptation raises hard questions of relocation, embankments, mangrove restoration, ports and coastal infrastructure. Justice requires that fisher communities, boat workers, women vendors and coastal informal settlements participate in planning. Managed retreat, where unavoidable, must not be disguised eviction. It should include livelihood restoration, cultural continuity, access to fishing grounds, schools, health services

²⁷ National Disaster Management Authority, Government of India, Heat Wave.

and post-relocation monitoring. Ecosystem-based adaptation such as mangrove restoration should be designed with local communities rather than imposed against them.

Forest, tribal and Himalayan regions require recognition justice. The Forest Rights Act is central because climate adaptation may involve afforestation, biodiversity conservation, watershed restoration and ecosystem resilience. These measures can either strengthen community rights or reproduce conservation-led exclusion. Adaptation strategies should recognise community forest resource rights, support community-led fire and biodiversity management, and protect cultural relationships with land. Traditional knowledge should be used with consent and benefit-sharing rather than extracted as free technical input.

Public health adaptation should integrate climate surveillance with primary healthcare. Heat stress, vector-borne diseases, malnutrition, air pollution, mental health impacts after disasters and water-borne diseases require local health preparedness. A justice approach demands disaggregated health data, mobile health units for remote areas, special measures for children, elderly persons, pregnant women and persons with disabilities, and climate-health training for frontline workers.

8. Recommendations

The first recommendation is to adopt a national legal instrument on climate adaptation and justice. Whether enacted as legislation or issued as binding guidelines, it should contain definitions, duties, procedures, participation requirements, justice screening, safeguards, finance disclosure and remedies. The second recommendation is to revise SAPCCs through a uniform justice template while preserving state-specific flexibility. Each SAPCC should include a vulnerability atlas, adaptation finance plan, community participation record and annual justice outcomes report.

The third recommendation is to create climate justice budget tagging. Adaptation expenditure should be classified not only by sector but by beneficiary vulnerability. This would enable Parliament, state legislatures, courts, auditors and citizens to examine whether funds are reaching those most at risk. The fourth recommendation is to institutionalise social audit of adaptation projects. Social audit should not be limited to financial expenditure; it should assess whether the project reduced vulnerability, respected rights and avoided maladaptation.

The fifth recommendation is to integrate labour and social protection into adaptation. Heat plans, drought plans and disaster plans must include wage protection, occupational safety, insurance, access to drinking water and emergency healthcare. The sixth recommendation is to require free, prior and informed participation, adapted to Indian constitutional and statutory contexts, for projects affecting forest-dependent and indigenous communities. The seventh recommendation is to strengthen remedies through district grievance authorities, State Climate Justice Cells, the National Green Tribunal, High Courts and the Supreme Court.

The eighth recommendation is to build capacity at local levels. Panchayats, municipalities, district disaster management authorities, health workers, agricultural officers and community organisations need training in climate science, rights, gender, disability and participatory planning. The ninth recommendation is to integrate traditional, indigenous and local knowledge with scientific evidence in a respectful manner. The tenth recommendation is to develop national adaptation indicators that measure justice outcomes, including reduced mortality, reduced livelihood loss, improved water access, protection of tenure, participation quality, grievance resolution and community satisfaction.

9. Conclusion

Integrating climate justice into climate change adaptation strategies is not an optional ethical addition to policy. It is a constitutional necessity and a practical condition for effective adaptation. India's policy architecture already contains important foundations: the NAPCC, SAPCCs, NAFCC, disaster management institutions, environmental law, forest rights and NDC commitments. The Supreme Court's recognition of a right against the adverse effects of climate change gives this architecture a rights-based direction. The challenge is implementation.

This article has argued that adaptation must be judged by the protection it provides to the most vulnerable, the participation it enables, the knowledge it recognises, the finance it distributes, the safeguards it applies and the remedies it guarantees. Without these criteria, adaptation may become another form of unequal development. With them, adaptation can become a pathway to climate-resilient constitutionalism. The CJ-ADAPT framework offers one route for this transition. It seeks to move India from climate justice as a slogan to climate justice as a planning method, budgeting principle, institutional duty and enforceable right.