

When the monsoon turned merciless last December, a government school in North Chennai saw its classrooms sink under waist-deep water.

A student said, “We knew the chapter on floods by heart but not what to do when the water came for us.” That single sentence is a mirror to our education system; overflowing with facts, but starved of resilience. Their syllabus covered the water cycle, but not the cycle of neglect that made their house flood year after year.

Environmental education must evolve – from moral science to moral responsibility. Posters proclaim “Save the Earth”, but students are rarely taught to how to do so.

Lived curriculum

Across India, floods drown schools, heatwaves close universities, and smog turns morning assemblies into health hazards. Yet, for most students, climate change remains an annual essay topic, not a lived curriculum. Environmental education in its current form often ends where the examination does. What we lack is not awareness but the kind of awakening that connects climate science with constitutional rights, ethics, and daily choices.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 speaks of “environmental awareness” and “sustainability at every level,” but in practice, ecology remains a polite elective, not a civic ne-

cessity. Students can graduate in any discipline without ever confronting questions such as Who bears the cost of climate change? Whose lands are flooded so that cities may breathe? Whose voices are drowned when developmental advances?

Environmental rights are not a footnote in civics textbooks; they are the frontline of justice. When disasters strike, it is the poor, the rural, the women, and the children who lose first and rebuild last. Teaching climate resilience, therefore, is not

about recycling drives and plantation days. It is about nurturing empathy, responsibility, and civic courage.

Around the world, education systems are awakening to this truth. In Italy, climate education is compulsory across grades, woven into Literature, Science, and History. In New Zealand, indigenous Maori wisdom anchors the climate curriculum, linking stewardship with heritage. Finland conducts “climate drills” alongside fire drills; Japan ties tsunami

drills to moral education; Rwanda’s eco-clubs reforest hillsides. These are not electives but essentials that produce a generation that sees sustainability as survival, not symbolism.

Promising initiatives

India, too, has sparks of promise. Kerala’s Flood Literacy Programme, Tamil Nadu’s Green Campus Initiative, and Delhi’s Eco-Clubs show what happens when policy meets participation. The challenge now is to weave environmental rights into every discipline:

Law, Economics, Sociology, even Engineering. A Commerce student must learn that corporate responsibility extends beyond profit margins to carbon footprints. A lawyer must see that justice is incomplete without environmental equity. A scientist must measure innovation by sustainability, not novelty.

In Chennai, students at an engineering college built a low-cost flood-alert system using recycled sensors after Cyclone Michaung. What began as a class project became a life-saving tool. That could well be the manifesto for a new age of learning, where climate literacy becomes civic literacy.

In Kerala, students formed an “eco-justice club” after the 2018 floods, lobbying for safer housing in their panchayat. That is education in its truest form; not information, but transformation.

Physics can teach energy justice, Economics can teach carbon equity, and

Literature can explore eco-feminism through poetry and protest. The goal is not to add another subject, but to infuse every subject with the consciousness of a warming planet.

Resilience literacy

Schools and colleges should introduce “resilience literacy” – teaching students to interpret weather warnings, manage resources, and understand local ecosystems. Equally vital is mental resilience. Amid headlines of fires, floods, and extinction, the young experience “eco-anxiety.” Education must turn worry into agency.

The UN SDG 13 on Climate Action and SDG 4.7 on Education for Sustainable Development urge nations to merge justice, rights, and sustainability. The NEP 2020 gives us the framework; what remains is imagination. Let our classrooms become laboratories of empathy where sustainability is not memorised, but lived.

Teaching the young to conquer the world while their world collapses is not progress. It is time our classrooms stop treating Nature as a backdrop and recognise it as the protagonist. Climate resilience will take root when a child plants a sapling and knows why it matters; when a teacher pauses a lesson on the water cycle to ask, “Whose right is clean water?” When education begins there, sustainability ceases to be a slogan and becomes a way of being.

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The Hindu, dt:20.10.25, pg.no.15



Build climate resilience

By linking climate science with real-life challenges, colleges can turn awareness into action and create a generation ready to protect their future