

Integral Humanism: Bridging Poverty Alleviation and Environmental Sustainability

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Abstract: This study investigates the applicability of Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya's Integral Humanism in tackling the intertwined issues of poverty and environmental degradation, collectively referred to as the poverty–environment nexus. Developed in the mid-twentieth century, Integral Humanism is a philosophical and socio-economic framework that emphasizes holistic human development, ethical responsibility, cultural rootedness, and ecological sustainability. It conceptualizes human beings as multi-dimensional, encompassing material, social, cultural, and spiritual needs, and advocates for development that promotes dignity, moral integrity, and collective well-being alongside economic advancement. The philosophy encourages decentralization, self-reliance, and participatory governance, enabling local communities to manage resources sustainably. Central to its vision is the welfare of marginalized populations, ensuring that both development and environmental policies are inclusive. By integrating ethical limits on resource use, cultural values, and multi-dimensional sustainability, Integral Humanism offers both normative guidance and practical strategies to align human welfare with environmental stewardship. The study examines policy examples such as joint forest management, agroforestry, water conservation initiatives, renewable energy programs, and poverty alleviation schemes with environmental components to demonstrate its practical application. In the context of contemporary challenges—including climate change, globalization, inequality, and public health crises—Integral Humanism provides a coherent, actionable, and value-driven framework for inclusive and sustainable development, underscoring its enduring significance in addressing 21st-century socio-ecological issues.

Key Words: Integral Humanism, Poverty, Environmental Sustainability, Pandit Deendayal.

1. INTRODUCTION

Integral Humanism, propounded by Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya in the mid-twentieth century, is a philosophical and socio-economic framework that seeks to harmonize material progress with moral, cultural, and spiritual well-being. Conceived as an alternative to Western capitalist individualism and Soviet-style socialism, it envisions a development model rooted in Indian values, emphasizing balance rather than conflict between individual and collective interests (Deendayal Sansar, 2025; Dharmalingam & Sheela P. Karthick, 2023). At its core, Integral Humanism perceives human beings as holistic entities with material, intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. It rejects purely economic definitions of progress, advocating instead for development that nurtures human dignity, ethics, and ecological harmony. Upadhyaya argued that India's growth must reflect its civilizational ethos—its culture, traditions, and moral foundations—rather than imitate foreign models of industrialization (Deendayal Research Institute, 2025).

The philosophy also stresses self-reliance, decentralized governance, and ethical responsibility. It envisions a society where local communities are empowered to meet their own needs sustainably, guided by *dharma* (righteous duty) and respect for nature. Economic activity, according to Integral Humanism, should serve humanity and preserve the environment, not exploit them (Singh, 2022; Sharma, 2016). In essence, Integral Humanism presents a balanced vision of development—one that integrates economic prosperity with cultural integrity, social justice, environmental consciousness, and spiritual fulfilment.

2. INTEGRAL HUMANISM: HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT, ETHICS, AND SUSTAINABILITY

- i. **Holistic Vision of the Human Being:** Integral Humanism views human beings as holistic and multi-dimensional, transcending the narrow identity of economic agents or mere producers and consumers. As emphasized by the Deendayal Research Institute, every individual possesses material, intellectual, social, cultural, and spiritual needs that must develop in harmony. True progress lies in nurturing all these dimensions rather than focusing solely on economic growth. This vision promotes the integration of ethical and spiritual values with material advancement, ensuring that development enhances both personal fulfilment and collective well-being. It seeks to create a balanced, humane, and morally conscious society rooted in holistic human growth (Singh, 2022).
- ii. **Cultural Rootedness:** Integral Humanism emphasizes cultural rootedness by anchoring development in India's civilizational ethos, local values, and traditions. It asserts that true progress must arise from the nation's own cultural and moral foundations rather than through imitation of Western models. Drawing inspiration from India's rich heritage, it promotes a development path that harmonizes material advancement with ethical and social responsibility. Without romanticizing the past, Integral Humanism recognizes that culture profoundly influences economic behaviour, social relations, and environmental attitudes. By integrating cultural wisdom with modern knowledge, it envisions a sustainable and value-based model of national development and human well-being (Dharmalingam, 2025 (a)).
- iii. **Decentralization and Self-Reliance:** Integral Humanism advocates decentralization and self-reliance as essential principles of sustainable development. It envisions villages and local communities as the foundation of economic and social organization, where governance and decision-making are participatory and people-centred. Production and resource use should align with local needs, skills, and ecological capacities, reducing dependence on centralized systems. This approach promotes self-sufficiency, equitable growth, and environmental balance. By empowering smaller units to manage their own resources and development priorities, Integral Humanism fosters social harmony, economic independence, and community resilience, ensuring that progress is both inclusive and environmentally sustainable at the grassroots level (Sharma, 2016).
- iv. **Ethics, Duty, and Moral Foundations:** Integral Humanism places strong emphasis on ethics, duty (*dharma*), and moral responsibility as the foundation of a just and balanced society. It recognizes that while economic growth and material wealth are essential, they are not the ultimate goals of human life. True well-being arises from harmony between material prosperity and moral integrity. By upholding ethical behaviour, compassion, and a sense of duty toward others and nature, individuals contribute to collective welfare. Integral Humanism thus envisions a value-based social order where spiritual and moral development guide economic actions, ensuring that progress remains humane, equitable, and sustainable (Kumar, 2021).
- v. **Environmental Consciousness:** Integral Humanism emphasizes ecological balance and sustainable coexistence with nature as essential to human well-being. It recognizes that humanity is not separate from the environment but an integral part of it. The philosophy advocates responsible use of natural resources, ensuring that development does not lead to environmental degradation or resource exhaustion. It stresses that progress must be ecologically balanced, preserving the earth's regenerative capacity for future generations. Though not always highlighted in popular discourse, Integral Humanism inherently promotes environmental ethics—urging individuals and communities to protect nature, maintain harmony with all living beings, and pursue sustainable, holistic growth (Sharma, 2016).

3. POVERTY–ENVIRONMENT DYNAMICS

Understanding the complex interconnection between poverty and the environment is essential for achieving sustainable development. Poverty and environmental degradation are deeply intertwined, often reinforcing one another in a cyclical manner. Environmental decline worsens the living conditions of the poor, while poverty-induced survival strategies can further degrade natural resources (Duraiappah, 1998). Recognizing and addressing this nexus is key to designing policies that promote both ecological sustainability and social equity.

- i. **Dependency on Natural Resources:** Poor communities in developing regions often depend directly on natural resources for their daily survival and livelihoods. Forests, fisheries, small-scale agriculture, and grazing lands provide food, fuel, water, and income. However, the degradation of these ecosystems—through deforestation,

soil erosion, water pollution, and overfishing—directly undermines their livelihood base. When forest cover diminishes or soil fertility declines, agricultural productivity falls, forcing families to work longer hours for lower returns. This leads to food insecurity, malnutrition, and loss of income. Environmental decline, therefore, becomes a powerful driver of persistent poverty (Barbier, 2010).

- ii. **Vulnerability to Environmental Shocks:** The poor are disproportionately exposed to environmental risks because they often live in ecologically fragile or marginal areas such as floodplains, arid zones, and hill slopes. These regions are more prone to floods, droughts, landslides, and other natural hazards. Moreover, inadequate housing, weak infrastructure, and limited access to public services increase their vulnerability to disasters. Climate change intensifies these challenges by making weather patterns more unpredictable and extreme. For instance, prolonged droughts or flash floods can destroy crops, livestock, and homes, pushing already fragile households into deeper poverty (Rakshit, 2023).
- iii. **Limited Capacity to Diversify:** Poverty also limits people's ability to diversify their income sources or adapt to environmentally sustainable livelihoods. Poor education, ill health, and lack of access to credit or technology reduce their ability to shift from resource-depleting activities to more sustainable ones (Ssekibaala, 2023). For example, small farmers may continue to cultivate marginal lands or rely on traditional methods because they cannot afford improved irrigation systems, fertilizers, or alternative employment opportunities. The absence of institutional support and market access further restricts innovation, trapping them in low-productivity, environmentally harmful cycles.
- iv. **The Degradation Feedback Loop:** A particularly harmful dynamic is the feedback loop between poverty and environmental degradation. To meet short-term subsistence needs, poor households may overexploit available resources—cutting trees for fuel, overgrazing livestock, or practicing slash-and-burn cultivation. These activities lead to deforestation, soil erosion, and declining water tables, which reduce long-term agricultural productivity. As yields fall, the poor must intensify their exploitation of the environment just to survive, perpetuating a downward spiral. Breaking this cycle requires providing sustainable alternatives and social protection mechanisms that allow people to meet their needs without depleting natural capital (Duraiappah, 1998).
- v. **Externalities and Commons Problems:** Environmental degradation is often linked to collective action failures and weak governance. Common property resources such as groundwater, grazing lands, or fisheries are easily overexploited when regulatory frameworks are weak or enforcement is absent. Industrial pollution and climate change represent global externalities that disproportionately affect the poor, even though they contribute least to the problem. Contaminated water sources, degraded air quality, and loss of biodiversity impose heavy costs on marginalized communities. Strengthening local institutions, promoting community-based resource management, and enforcing environmental regulations are therefore crucial to mitigate these inequities (World Bank, 2025).
- vi. **Health Impacts of Environmental Decline:** Environmental degradation also has severe consequences for human health, particularly among the poor. Lack of access to clean water, inadequate sanitation, and exposure to air pollution contribute to diseases such as diarrhea, respiratory infections, and vector-borne illnesses. Poor health reduces productivity, limits educational attainment, and increases medical expenditures, further entrenching poverty. According to global studies, the poorest populations bear the greatest burden of environmental health risks, reinforcing the urgency of integrating environmental management with public health strategies (Duraiappah, 1998).

In essence, poverty is not merely a matter of low income—it is also about limited capabilities, lack of resilience, and exposure to environmental hazards. Sustainable development must therefore address the poverty–environment nexus holistically by promoting inclusive growth, empowering local communities, and ensuring ecological stewardship (Gao, 2020). Only through policies that integrate environmental protection with poverty alleviation can societies achieve long-term human well-being and environmental sustainability.

4. POVERTY, ENVIRONMENT, AND INTEGRAL HUMANISM

Integral Humanism offers a comprehensive and integrated framework particularly suited to addressing the intertwined challenges of poverty and environmental degradation. Pandit Deendayal philosophy emphasizes holistic human development, ethical responsibility, and ecological balance, making it highly relevant for understanding and

resolving the poverty–environment nexus. By integrating material, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, Integral Humanism provides both conceptual guidance and policy directions to ensure that human welfare and environmental sustainability advance together (Dharmalingam, 2025 (c)).

- i. **Holistic Human Well-being:** Integral Humanism emphasizes that true development encompasses more than material wealth (artha); it also includes moral duty (dharma), desire (kama), and spiritual liberation (moksha), reflecting the rich philosophical heritage of India. According to the Deendayal Research Institute, this holistic perspective prevents the pitfall of pursuing growth solely for its own sake. Instead, development is measured by improvements in human dignity, health, security, and fulfilment. Recognizing that environmental quality directly affects these dimensions, policies inspired by Integral Humanism naturally incorporate ecological preservation. For instance, maintaining clean air, fertile soil, and adequate water is not seen as a mere technical or economic challenge but as central to human well-being (Kumar & Vineeta, 2024).
- ii. **Ethical Constraints on Consumption and Resource Use:** Integral Humanism places moral limits on resource use and consumption. It emphasizes the duty to respect nature and acknowledges the interdependence of all life forms, encapsulated in the concept of Vasudeva Kutumbakam—the world is one family. This ethical framework discourages exploitative behaviour and promotes balanced, replenishable use of natural resources. By integrating ethical responsibility into development planning, the philosophy ensures that environmental policies are not merely regulatory but morally compelling. Communities and policymakers are guided to adopt practices that preserve ecosystems for present and future generations, bridging the gap between environmental sustainability and social equity (Dharmalingam, 2025 (c)).
- iii. **Focus on the Antyodaya:** A defining feature of Integral Humanism is its emphasis on antyodaya, the welfare of the last or most marginalized person in society (Dharmalingam, 2025 (b)). The philosophy insists that policies must centre on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable (Centre for Integrated and Holistic Studies, 2024). In environmental terms, this implies that conservation measures, climate policies, and resource management strategies must not exclude or disadvantage the poor (Chathukulam et al., 2021). For example, protecting forests or regulating water use should be designed to support the livelihoods of communities dependent on these resources. This approach ensures that environmental initiatives contribute to poverty alleviation, rather than exacerbating social inequities.
- iv. **Decentralization and Localism:** Integral Humanism advocates decentralized governance and self-reliant local units, particularly at the village level. Local communities, being closely linked to their ecological and cultural context, are better positioned to manage resources sustainably. Decentralization allows for participatory decision-making, ensuring that environmental and poverty concerns are addressed by those directly affected, rather than imposed top-down. This localist approach fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility, improves compliance with sustainable practices, and aligns economic activities with ecological capacities. For instance, community-managed forests or water bodies are more likely to be maintained effectively when governance rests with those who depend on them (Kumari, 2025).
- v. **Multi-Dimensional Sustainability:** Under Integral Humanism, sustainability is not a peripheral concern but a core principle, encompassing economic, social, and ecological dimensions. Development that depletes natural capital violates ethical and social principles and undermines the very purpose of human advancement. The philosophy insists that policies should balance growth with ecological preservation, social equity, and long-term resilience. This principle guides investment in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly infrastructure while ensuring that marginalized populations benefit from these interventions. By integrating multiple dimensions of sustainability, Integral Humanism provides a coherent framework for tackling both poverty and environmental degradation simultaneously.

Overall, Integral Humanism provides a philosophically robust and practically relevant framework for addressing the poverty–environment nexus. Its emphasis on holistic well-being, ethical resource use, attention to the marginalized, decentralized governance, and multi-dimensional sustainability creates an integrated approach where human development and environmental preservation are mutually reinforcing. By adopting these principles, policymakers and communities can design strategies that not only alleviate poverty but also protect and restore the environment, ensuring long-term human and ecological flourishing.



5. CASE EXAMPLES / ILLUSTRATIONS: INDIA AND BEYOND

Integral Humanism's principles—holistic well-being, ethical resource use, decentralization, and attention to the marginalized—find practical resonance in several initiatives across India and beyond. These cases demonstrate how poverty alleviation and environmental sustainability can be pursued simultaneously.

- i. **Joint Forest Management (JFM)** in India illustrates community-led conservation. Local populations participate in managing and protecting forests, sharing benefits, and safeguarding ecological resources. This approach enhances livelihoods for forest-dependent communities while promoting environmental stewardship, reflecting Integral Humanism's emphasis on decentralized, participatory governance and ethical responsibility toward nature.
- ii. **Agroforestry Policy (2014)** encourages the integration of trees, crops, and livestock. By combining agriculture and forestry, it maintains soil fertility, diversifies income sources, and provides ecological benefits such as carbon sequestration and biodiversity support. This policy aligns with Integral Humanism's holistic vision, linking human well-being with sustainable ecosystem management.
- iii. **Water Conservation Movements**, often led by NGOs and civil society, revive traditional rainwater harvesting, check dams, and wetland restoration. These efforts, especially in rural and marginalized regions, improve water security, agricultural productivity, and health outcomes, demonstrating how local knowledge and decentralized action can tackle environmental and poverty challenges together.
- iv. **Poverty Alleviation Schemes with Environmental Components**—such as LPG subsidies for clean cooking, access to safe drinking water, and sanitation programs—reduce environmental pollution, prevent indoor air- and water-borne diseases, and lessen health expenditures for the poor.
- v. **Renewable Energy and Decentralized Clean Energy Access**, including solar micro-grids and biogas systems in off-grid villages, reduce reliance on wood or dung, mitigate environmental degradation, improve health, and enhance energy availability.

Together, these examples show that policies and practices inspired by Integral Humanism can simultaneously address ecological sustainability, social equity, and poverty reduction, creating models for inclusive and environmentally responsible development.

6. TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED POLICY FRAMEWORK

Using the insights of Integral Humanism, a policy framework to address the poverty-environment nexus might include the following pillars:

Pillar	Key Focus	Institutional/Policy Measures
Inclusive Ecological Governance	Ensure environmental policymaking includes the poor; protect their rights; community management of commons.	Legal frameworks for community forest rights; participatory impact assessments; grievance redressal; co-management regimes.
Sustainable Livelihoods & Resource Use	Shift from short-term extraction to long-term sustainability; diversification; promotion of sustainable agriculture, fisheries, forestry.	Support for agroecology; subsidies/incentives for sustainable practices; funding for local cooperatives; extension services; access to markets; value-added processing.
Resilience & Environmental Justice	Reduce vulnerability to environmental shocks; ensure poor are not unfairly burdened.	Disaster risk reduction; insurance; infrastructure (safe housing, flood defences); pollution control; access to clean water, sanitation; relocation support where needed.



Pillar	Key Focus	Institutional/Policy Measures
Education, Culture & Values	Build awareness, ethical attitudes; integrate spiritual, moral dimension of environmental stewardship.	Curriculum reforms; public awareness campaigns; integrating traditional ecological knowledge; community storytelling; ethical leadership.
Decentralized Governance & Local Autonomy	Empower villages/local units to plan and manage resources.	Strengthening Panchayati Raj; devolved budgets; local planning; support in technical capacity; transparent local governance.
Metrics, Monitoring & Accountability	Measure what matters: beyond GDP to well-being, ecological health, equity.	Use of multidimensional poverty indices; environmental quality indices; sustainability indicators; regular reporting; community monitoring.

7. RELEVANCE IN CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT: CLIMATE CHANGE, GLOBALIZATION, INEQUALITY

Integral Humanism, though formulated decades ago, remains highly relevant in addressing contemporary global challenges, including climate change, globalization pressures, economic inequality, and public health crises. Its principles of holistic well-being, ethical responsibility, localism, and concern for the marginalized provide a valuable framework for sustainable and inclusive policy.

- i. **Climate Change** disproportionately affects the poor, who are often concentrated in ecologically vulnerable areas such as floodplains, arid zones, and coastal regions. Rising temperatures, erratic rainfall, and extreme weather events threaten livelihoods, food security, and health. Integral Humanism's emphasis on sustainability, local adaptation, and environmental justice encourages policies that protect both ecosystems and vulnerable communities. Decentralized, community-driven climate adaptation strategies, consistent with Integral Humanism, enhance resilience while preserving natural resources.
- ii. **Globalization and Market Pressures** sometimes drive local producers into unsustainable practices, including monocultures, overfishing, and excessive groundwater extraction. Integral Humanism advocates balancing global integration with cultural and ecological rootedness, ensuring that development respects local environmental capacities and preserves regional diversity. This perspective supports economic models that are both globally connected and locally sustainable.
- iii. **Inequality** further compounds environmental vulnerability. Poor communities often bear the heaviest environmental burdens, living in polluted urban slums or degraded rural lands. Integral Humanism's focus on justice, dignity, and antyodaya—prioritizing the welfare of the “last man”—offers guidance for designing policies that protect marginalized populations while promoting equitable access to resources and services.
- iv. **Pandemics and Health** also highlight the interdependence of environment and human well-being. Deforestation, biodiversity loss, and pollution increase disease risks, while poor environmental quality exacerbates health problems among the disadvantaged. Integral Humanism's holistic approach integrates environmental stewardship with human health, emphasizing sustainable practices that safeguard both ecosystems and societal well-being.

Integral Humanism provides a multidimensional framework for confronting 21st-century challenges, linking environmental sustainability, social equity, and human flourishing in a coherent and actionable philosophy (Sharma & Raj, 2024).

8. CONCLUSION

The poverty–environment nexus represents one of the most critical challenges of our era. Poverty and environmental degradation are mutually reinforcing: impoverished communities often overexploit natural resources to survive, while environmental decline reduces productivity, worsens health, and deepens poverty. Addressing these issues requires an approach that integrates human welfare, ecological sustainability, and social justice.

Integral Humanism provides a comprehensive philosophical framework to meet this challenge. Its holistic view of human beings emphasizes not only material well-being but also moral, social, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. Ethical constraints on resource use, attention to the welfare of the marginalized and cultural rootedness guide development in ways that protect both people and the environment. Decentralization and local governance ensure participatory decision-making, aligning economic activity with ecological capacities. Sustainability, in economic, social, and ecological terms, is treated as a central principle rather than an afterthought.

If Integral Humanism is translated effectively into governance, public policy, institutional practices, and individual behaviour, it can provide a path toward development that is simultaneously economically productive, socially equitable, culturally grounded, and environmentally sustainable. By integrating poverty alleviation with ecological stewardship, this approach offers a model for long-term human and planetary well-being, ensuring that progress benefits all sections of society without compromising natural resources for future generations.

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