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Deforestation, Climate Disruption and Public Health: An Integrated Cause–Effect Analysis

Dr. Poornima Shukla

Assistant Professor, Head, Department of Sociology, Kanpur Vidya Mandir Mahila Mahavidyalay Swaroop Nagar Kanpur, Email: poornimashuklakn21@csjmu.ac.in

Mayank Bhooshan Ashutosh

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Kanpur Vidya Mandir Mahila Mahavidyalay Swaroop Nagar Kanpur CSJMU

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interconnected relationship between deforestation, climate disruption, agricultural instability, and emerging public health risks in the contemporary era. While existing literature discusses climate change, biodiversity loss, and disease patterns separately, this paper argues that these processes operate within an integrated cause–effect chain. Based entirely on secondary data drawn from reports of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and official Indian sources, the study adopts a qualitative analytical approach to explore the structural linkages between forest degradation and human vulnerability. The analysis demonstrates that large-scale deforestation weakens ecological stability and reduces carbon sequestration capacity, contributing to climate variability. Climatic disturbances affect rainfall patterns and agricultural productivity, increasing dependence on chemical inputs and generating food system stress. Environmental change further influences disease dynamics by expanding the ecological range of vector-borne and zoonotic diseases and intensifying heat-related health

risks. The findings suggest that deforestation should not be treated as an isolated environmental concern but as a multidimensional issue with significant implications for climate stability, food security, and public health. An integrated policy approach linking forest governance, climate mitigation, and health adaptation strategies is essential to reduce long-term environmental and social vulnerability.

Introduction

Forests have been an integral part of human civilization since ancient times. Human life has historically depended on forests not only for livelihood but also for survival. They provide oxygen, regulate climate, and sustain ecological balance. Early human societies relied on forests for food, clothing materials, shelter, and most importantly, medicinal resources. Seasonal fruits, herbs, and plant-based remedies played a significant role in traditional healthcare systems. In addition, forests helped moderate floods, stabilize soil, and maintain the water cycle. Large trees protected settlements from environmental extremes, while forest ecosystems supported rainfall patterns through their role in regulating atmospheric moisture.

The rich biodiversity found within forests created habitats for a wide range of animals and birds, many of which contributed directly or indirectly to human sustenance. Forest ecosystems also positively influenced agriculture by maintaining soil fertility and supporting pollination and nutrient cycles. In this way, forests not only sustained life but also made human existence more stable and secure.

However, the twenty-first century has witnessed an unprecedented acceleration in deforestation. Across the world, including India, forest cover is declining at an alarming rate. This rapid loss of forests is generating serious environmental and socio-economic consequences. Deforestation contributes significantly to climate change, which in turn disrupts rainfall patterns, agricultural cycles, and global food production systems. Concerns about food insecurity and rising hunger are increasingly linked to environmental degradation and unpredictable climatic conditions.

The cutting of forests also reduces soil fertility and increases dependence on chemical fertilizers, altering traditional crop cycles. Rising global temperatures—closely associated with climate change—have intensified heatwaves and extreme weather events. These changes pose serious risks to vulnerable

populations, particularly children and the elderly. Increased temperatures contribute to dehydration, respiratory problems such as asthma, and other heat-related illnesses.

Moreover, deforestation has been linked to the spread of infectious diseases. The destruction of natural habitats brings humans into closer contact with disease-carrying vectors and wildlife reservoirs. The emergence and spread of diseases such as malaria, dengue, and even Ebola have been examined in relation to ecological disturbance and forest loss. These developments suggest that deforestation is not merely an environmental issue; it is deeply interconnected with public health, food security, and global stability.

Thus, forest depletion in the contemporary era represents a multidimensional crisis—environmental, economic, and epidemiological—demanding urgent scholarly attention and policy intervention.

Review of Literature

Global Deforestation Trends

According to the *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020* released by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the world has lost approximately **420 million hectares of forest area since 1990**, mainly due to agricultural expansion, infrastructure development, and commercial land use change. Although the annual rate of deforestation has slightly slowed in recent years, tropical regions—particularly parts of South America and Africa—continue to experience significant forest loss.

In the post-Cold War era, especially after the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, the global economic order shifted more decisively toward liberal market policies. In India, the introduction of **Liberalization, Privatization, and Globalization (LPG) reforms in 1991** accelerated industrial growth, urban expansion, mining, and infrastructure development. While these reforms contributed to GDP growth, they also intensified pressure on land resources, resulting in forest diversion for industrial corridors, mining zones, dams, and urban settlements.

In Latin America, particularly the Amazon region, forest clearing has been closely linked to cattle ranching and soybean cultivation for global export markets. Similarly, in parts of sub-Saharan Africa, forests have been converted into agricultural land to boost economic productivity. These development-driven land-use changes have altered local ecosystems and contributed significantly to greenhouse gas emissions.

Indian Forest Status

India's forest status is periodically assessed through the *India State of Forest Report (ISFR)* published by the Forest Survey of India. The **ISFR 2021** reports that India's total forest cover constitutes about **21.71%** of its geographical area, while forest and tree cover together account for approximately **24.62%**. However, the National Forest Policy (1988) recommends that **33% of the country's land area** should ideally be under forest cover (and 66% in hilly regions).

Although there has been a marginal overall increase in total forest and tree cover in recent assessments, concerns remain regarding the quality and density of forests. Diversion of forest land for mining, road construction, dams, and urban development continues under various approval mechanisms.

Recent public debates have highlighted cases such as the **Hasdeo Arand forest region in Chhattisgarh**, where coal mining projects have raised ecological concerns. In metropolitan regions such as Mumbai (Aarey Forest area protests) and Hyderabad, expansion of infrastructure projects has also triggered discussions regarding urban forest conservation. These examples illustrate the tension between development imperatives and environmental sustainability.

Deforestation and Climate Change

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), particularly in its *Sixth Assessment Report (2021–2022)*, recognizes deforestation as a major contributor to anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions. Forest ecosystems act as critical carbon sinks, absorbing significant amounts of carbon dioxide (CO_2) from the atmosphere. When forests are cleared or burned, stored carbon is released, thereby intensifying global warming.

Changes in forest cover affect regional rainfall patterns, soil moisture retention, and surface temperatures. The IPCC notes that climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of heatwaves, heavy rainfall events, and drought conditions. Such disruptions impact agricultural productivity and may indirectly contribute to food insecurity.

Deforestation and Public Health

The World Health Organization (WHO) has acknowledged that environmental changes—including deforestation and climate variability—affect the distribution of vector-borne and zoonotic diseases. Habitat disturbance increases human exposure to disease vectors such as mosquitoes, thereby influencing

the spread of illnesses like malaria and dengue. Ecological disruption may also facilitate zoonotic spillover, where pathogens move from wildlife to human populations.

Rising temperatures associated with climate change pose additional health risks, particularly for vulnerable groups such as children, elderly individuals, and pregnant women. Heat stress, dehydration, and respiratory complications are increasingly reported in regions experiencing prolonged heatwaves. Furthermore, climate-induced agricultural instability may affect food security and nutritional outcomes, indirectly influencing public health conditions.

Thus, deforestation cannot be understood solely as an environmental concern; it represents an interconnected ecological and health challenge with significant socio-economic consequences.

Research Gap

A substantial body of literature exists on climate change and environmental transformation across the globe. Numerous studies discuss the relationship between climate change and emerging diseases, while others focus on its impact on agricultural productivity, rainfall variability, floods, and droughts. Similarly, deforestation has been examined in relation to biodiversity loss and ecological imbalance. However, much of this scholarship tends to address these dimensions separately, often concentrating on a single aspect of the broader environmental crisis.

There is comparatively limited integrative analysis that simultaneously examines deforestation, climate change, food security, and public health within a unified analytical framework. In particular, the interconnected relationship between forest degradation, changing rainfall patterns, agricultural disruption, and human health vulnerability remains underexplored in a combined manner.

This research paper seeks to bridge this gap by analyzing these dimensions together, emphasizing their structural interconnections rather than treating them as isolated phenomena.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the major socio-economic and environmental drivers contributing to deforestation in the 21st century.
2. To analyze the relationship between deforestation and the emergence and transmission of infectious diseases, particularly vector-borne and zoonotic diseases.

3. To critically evaluate existing national and international legal and policy frameworks aimed at preventing deforestation and mitigating associated health risks.

Methodology

This research paper is based entirely on secondary data. The study relies on official reports, policy documents, and published research articles to examine the interconnections between deforestation, climate change, and public health. Data and statistical information have been drawn from reports of the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), and the Forest Survey of India (FSI), along with relevant Government of India publications.

In addition to institutional reports, peer-reviewed journal articles and academic literature related to environmental change, infectious diseases, and forest governance have been reviewed. The study follows a qualitative and analytical approach, synthesizing existing data to identify patterns and relationships among ecological degradation, agricultural disruption, and emerging health risks.

No primary field survey or experimental method has been employed; the analysis is interpretative and based on comparative assessment of available secondary sources.

V. Analysis and Discussion

1. Deforestation as the Structural Trigger

Deforestation functions as the foundational structural disturbance in the environmental–health nexus. As global population crossed **6 billion in 1999** (UN estimates) and continued to rise, pressures on land resources intensified. Industrial expansion, mining activities, infrastructure development, and urbanization accelerated particularly in the post-1990 period, when many developing economies, including India (following the **1991 Liberalization reforms**), adopted market-oriented growth models.

According to the *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020*, the world has lost approximately **420 million hectares of forest since 1990**, primarily due to agricultural expansion and commercial land conversion. Forest diversion for mining, roads, dams, and urban settlements has significantly fragmented ecosystems.

Large-scale forest clearance reduces biodiversity and weakens ecological resilience. Forests function as major carbon sinks; their destruction releases stored carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. The (IPCC) has identified land-use change and deforestation as significant contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, deforestation is not merely a land-use change, but a structural environmental shift with long-term climatic consequences.

2. Climate Disruption as an Intermediate Mechanism

Climate disruption emerges as an intermediate mechanism linking ecological degradation to socio-economic instability. Forest loss reduces carbon sequestration capacity, contributing to rising atmospheric CO_2 levels. The IPCC *Sixth Assessment Report (2021–2022)* confirms that global surface temperature has increased by approximately **1.1°C above pre-industrial levels**, intensifying extreme weather events.

Changes in forest cover influence regional rainfall systems, evapotranspiration cycles, and local temperature regulation. Increased frequency of heatwaves, erratic rainfall, floods, and droughts has been documented across multiple regions. For instance:

- Severe flooding in Kerala (2018)
- Repeated heatwaves in India (2022–2023)
- Wildfires in Australia (2019–2020) and Canada (2023)

While such events are multi-causal, climate change significantly increases their intensity and frequency.

Sea-level rise, glacier retreat, and coastal vulnerability—especially in regions like the Sundarbans in India—reflect broader climatic shifts associated with global warming. Climate disruption thus acts as a bridge between ecological damage and human exposure to risk.

3. Agricultural Instability and Food System Stress

Agriculture is highly climate-sensitive. Variability in rainfall, rising temperatures, and declining soil moisture directly affect crop productivity. Deforestation also reduces soil fertility by disturbing nutrient cycles and weakening natural organic processes.

The and have noted that climate variability threatens global food security, particularly in developing countries where agriculture remains dependent on seasonal rainfall.

Increased dependence on chemical fertilizers and pesticides has been observed in many agricultural regions as farmers attempt to compensate for unstable climatic conditions. However, excessive agrochemical use carries environmental and health implications, including soil degradation and contamination.

Agricultural instability generates economic stress for rural populations, especially small and marginal farmers, increasing vulnerability to poverty and malnutrition.

4. Disease Dynamics and Health Risks

Environmental disturbance alters disease ecology. The (WHO) has repeatedly emphasized that climate change and environmental degradation affect the distribution and intensity of communicable diseases.

A. Vector-Borne Diseases: Malaria and Dengue

Changes in land use and forest fragmentation can create favorable breeding conditions for mosquitoes. Rising temperatures and altered rainfall patterns influence the life cycle of vectors such as *Anopheles* (malaria) and *Aedes* (dengue).

WHO estimates indicate that climate change is expected to increase the risk of vector-borne diseases in tropical and subtropical regions. Expansion of mosquito habitats into previously cooler areas has been documented in several studies.

Deforestation does not directly “create” diseases, but it modifies ecological balance and may increase human exposure to vectors, especially in forest-edge and peri-urban regions.

B. Zoonotic Diseases and Spillover Risks

Habitat destruction increases human–wildlife interactions. Scholars have linked certain outbreaks, such as Ebola in Central and West Africa, to ecological disturbances and forest fragmentation.

The WHO and various epidemiological studies highlight that approximately **60–75% of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic in origin**. Environmental disruption increases the probability of

pathogen spillover from wildlife to humans. Deforestation thus indirectly shapes disease transmission pathways.

C. Heat-Related Illnesses and Respiratory Conditions

The WHO has warned that climate change may cause an additional **250,000 deaths per year between 2030 and 2050**, due to heat stress, malnutrition, malaria, and diarrheal diseases. Rising temperatures increase the frequency of heat exhaustion, dehydration, and respiratory complications.

Forest loss exacerbates local heating effects by reducing natural cooling mechanisms. Vulnerable populations—including children, elderly individuals, pregnant women, and outdoor laborers—face disproportionate risk exposure.

5. Human Vulnerability and Social Inequality

Environmental degradation does not affect all populations equally. Existing socio-economic inequalities amplify climate-related vulnerabilities. Marginalized communities, agricultural laborers, and informal workers often lack access to healthcare, adaptive infrastructure, and social protection mechanisms.

Thus, deforestation contributes to a cumulative vulnerability framework in which ecological stress intersects with poverty, nutritional insecurity, and limited institutional support. Environmental change therefore reinforces structural inequality.

6. Policy and Structural Implications

Multiple legal frameworks seek to regulate forest diversion and climate mitigation at national and international levels. In India, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 establishes a regulatory mechanism requiring central government approval for the diversion of forest land for non-forest purposes. This Act was introduced to restrict indiscriminate deforestation and to ensure institutional scrutiny over land-use change.

Similarly, the National Forest Policy, 1988 emphasizes ecological stability, biodiversity conservation, and the objective of maintaining one-third (33%) of the country's geographical area under forest cover. The policy recognizes forests not merely as economic resources but as ecological assets essential for environmental balance and public welfare.

At the global level, climate mitigation efforts operate within multilateral frameworks such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which seeks to coordinate international responses to greenhouse gas emissions and climate adaptation. Despite these regulatory structures, policy implementation gaps, economic pressures, and competing development priorities often weaken enforcement mechanisms.

Therefore, an integrated governance approach that combines forest conservation, climate mitigation, disaster risk reduction, and public health adaptation strategies is essential to address the systemic nature of environmental vulnerability.

7. Comparative Case Illustrations: India and the Global Context

Recent environmental experiences across different regions of the world provide concrete illustrations of the interconnected environmental–climate–health nexus discussed in this study. These cases do not represent isolated disasters; rather, they reflect structurally produced ecological vulnerability shaped by deforestation, land-use change, infrastructural pressure, and climate variability.

In India, the land subsidence crisis in Joshimath (2023) highlighted the fragility of Himalayan ecosystems. Rapid infrastructure expansion, hydropower development, road construction, and increasing climatic stress in a geologically sensitive zone collectively intensified environmental instability. While subsidence cannot be attributed to a single factor, the interaction between ecological disturbance and climatic variability illustrates cumulative environmental stress.

Similarly, recurrent landslides and extreme flooding events in Kerala, particularly since 2018, demonstrate how intense rainfall combined with hill-area deforestation, quarrying, and settlement expansion can magnify disaster vulnerability. Mountain ecosystems, when ecologically disturbed, become highly susceptible to heavy precipitation events that are increasingly associated with climate change.

Urban flooding in Tamil Nadu, especially in the Chennai metropolitan region, further illustrates how wetland encroachment, loss of urban tree cover, and drainage disruption interact with extreme rainfall episodes. Such cases indicate that environmental degradation amplifies the impact of climate variability in densely populated regions.

Comparable patterns can be observed globally. Large-scale deforestation in the Amazon rainforest has significantly reduced one of the world's largest carbon sinks, contributing to global greenhouse gas emissions and altering regional rainfall cycles. In developed countries as well, environmental vulnerability is increasingly evident. The catastrophic wildfires in Australia (2019–2020) and extensive forest fires in Canada (2023) reflect how prolonged heatwaves, forest dryness, and climate intensification interact within stressed ecosystems.

Coastal forest regions such as the Sundarbans (India–Bangladesh delta) further demonstrate the compound risks of sea-level rise, cyclonic intensity, mangrove degradation, and human displacement. Here, environmental instability directly intersects with livelihood insecurity and public health risks.

Taken together, these comparative illustrations reinforce the central argument of this study: environmental crises across regions are not merely episodic natural events but manifestations of deeper structural interactions between deforestation, climate disruption, land-use transformation, and socio-economic vulnerability. The global pattern suggests that forest degradation and ecological imbalance intensify climate extremes, which in turn affect agriculture, disease dynamics, and human health systems.

Conclusion

Deforestation is often examined as an independent environmental issue, while ecological imbalance is treated as a separate concern. However, as this study has demonstrated, these processes are deeply interconnected. Environmental degradation does not emerge in isolation; rather, it is the cumulative outcome of human-induced pressures on natural systems. Forest destruction, land-use change, and unregulated extraction have contributed to disturbances in the climate system, which in turn have affected rainfall patterns and temperature stability.

The alteration of climatic conditions has influenced agricultural productivity, resulting in irregular crop cycles and increased dependence on chemical fertilizers. At times production fluctuates between surplus and shortage, placing stress on food systems. These agricultural changes indirectly affect human health through food quality, nutritional instability, and environmental exposure.

Climate disruption linked to deforestation has also influenced the emergence and spread of vector-borne diseases. Rising temperatures and altered rainfall patterns create conditions suitable for mosquito breeding and the spread of infections. Heat-related stress, dehydration, and respiratory complications

have increasingly affected vulnerable populations, including children, elderly individuals, women, and socially marginalized groups.

Thus, the issue of deforestation cannot be separated from climate instability, agricultural stress, disease dynamics, and human vulnerability. These dimensions function within a connected chain rather than as isolated phenomena. Recognizing this interconnected structure is essential in understanding the broader implications of environmental degradation on human well-being.

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