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Research paper



Studying The Health Implications of Metro Rail Or Highway Construction on Local Communities

Prof Dr. Gigimon V. S. [1], Parvathy Anu Lee [2] *

[1] Dean, Amity Law School, Amity University Mumbai, Maharashtra- 410206, India
[2] Research Scholar, Amity Law School, Amity University Mumbai, Maharashtra- 410206, India
**Corresponding author E-mail: parvathy.lee@s.amity.edu*

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Abstract

This paper examines the frequently neglected public health consequences of constructing metro rail and highways on adjacent villages, considering Indian law. As India's cities grow quickly and its economy grows, infrastructure development is speeding up. This is bad for the health of people living near construction sites. Air pollution, noise pollution, contaminated water, and the stress of having to move your whole life are all possible risks. For instance, the Center for Science and Environment (2019) says that since PM2.5, there have been more instances of asthma and bronchitis in the affected communities. Five levels at construction sites for the Delhi Metro were three to five times higher than what the World Health Organization says is safe.

But the current rules in India don't do enough to deal with the health problems that come with these kinds of big city projects, even though they do have these effects.

The analysis includes a thorough look at Indian laws, pertinent case law, and environmental rules. It also compares the legal systems of other countries, such as the US, the EU, Australia, and Canada. These countries use health impact assessments (HIAs), public involvement methods, and strict monitoring systems to plan infrastructure.

The results show that the Indian court system generally puts economic or environmental issues ahead of health concerns, rather than community health. Health impact assessments are not actually a part of the process of managing infrastructure. There have been no systemic legal protections or enforceable health standards put in place for infrastructure projects, even though the courts play a big role in establishing the right to health under Article 21.

This study highlights the importance of health impact assessments (HIAs), public involvement, and post-approval monitoring in ensuring proper accountability for health outcomes. This article highlights the imperative necessity for reform by juxtaposing India's policies and regulations with those of other developed countries. It calls for health impact assessments to be a required part of environmental impact assessments (EIAs), more community participation, and health audits after projects. Health departments, urban planners, and legal bodies should work together, it says, to institutionalize development that is more holistic and preventative.

Rather than relying on reactive legal frameworks, the report argues for proactive frameworks that address health concerns at every stage of infrastructure development. Public health must be recognized as an essential ethical and legal issue if India's urban development is to be inclusive, sustainable, and socially equal. Detailed legal and policy recommendations are offered in the paper to align the administration of India's infrastructure with the country's constitutional guarantee of the right to health.

Keywords: *Health Impact Assessment (HIA); Infrastructure Law; Metro Rail and Highway Projects; Right to Health (Article 21); Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA); Urban Development and Public Health; Local communities; Legal framework; Right to Development; Sustainable Development; Displacement; Noise pollution; Air quality; Land Acquisition.*

1. Introduction

In recent decades, rapid urbanization and economic development have led to an unprecedented surge in infrastructure projects across the globe, particularly in developing nations like India. Metro rail systems and the extension of national highways have become important parts of modern city design, mobility, and connectivity. those who say that these changes are good because they make cities easier to get around and will help the economy in the long run. However, they have also brought to light a critical side effect that is typically ignored: the bad health consequences on those who live near building sites. For instance, a study on the Phase III expansion of the Delhi Metro found that noise and dust pollution levels were substantially higher in neighboring residential areas, and respiratory problems were getting worse among vulnerable groups (CSE, 2019). The Yamuna Expressway corridor has also been linked to major air quality problems and injuries from incidents that happened before and after the road was built. This illustrates that these kinds of tasks can be hazardous for both your body and your mind.

It normally takes a long time and costs a lot of money to build metro rail and highways. This might be bad for the health of the towns where they are created. Some factors that could cause a lot of health problems are breathing in tiny particles, being around loud noises, having

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dirty soil and water, and kicking out those who are weak. These include not being able to get clean air and water, having mental health issues, getting sick with respiratory and cardiovascular ailments, and even starving because they lost money. You can often find construction projects in busy cities or in neighborhoods that are poor and can't be relocated or changed. Building sites have a bigger impact on certain places than on others.

This makes a very important link between protecting Article 21 of the Indian Constitution's right to health and improving infrastructure. Even with progressive judicial interpretations and a strong set of environmental laws and rules, like the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification under the Environment (Protection) Act of 1986 and the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act of 2013, there is still a big gap between policy and practice.

This study aims to investigate the health effects of metro rail and highway development on neighboring communities, emphasizing the legal framework's response to these effects. It will evaluate the degree of health protection integrated within India's legal frameworks during infrastructure development, pinpoint deficiencies in execution and accountability, and analyze the functions of environmental justice and public engagement. This work will add to the expanding conversation about how to include public health in laws about the environment and infrastructure by using a doctrinal legal research method backed up by real-world data and case studies.

The essay aims to provide legislative and policy reforms to establish a more equitable development plan that fosters economic progress while protecting the health and welfare of local communities. The major goal is to shift the focus from reactive mitigation to proactive legal planning that includes public health as a key component in making decisions about infrastructure.

Furthermore, a multidisciplinary approach where law, public health, and urban planning genuinely connect is required due to the complexity of urban development. As building sites become permanent parts of city life, the lack of continuing health monitoring and legal regulation is becoming a bigger problem. Planning and legal processes have a big impact on vulnerable populations like kids, seniors, and workers in the unorganized sector, yet they aren't effectively represented in these processes. This highlights how crucial it is to transform the way we think about building infrastructure from a technical or economic endeavor to a legal and moral matter that puts health and social justice first.

2. Literature Review

Cities need to build highways and metro rail lines to flourish, but these projects can sometimes make the areas where they are built less healthy. This literature study examines the efficacy of existing legislation in addressing these concerns by meticulously analyzing both legal and academic perspectives on the impact of infrastructure development on public health, particularly regarding stress, pollution, and population displacement. This part talks about the problems with legal protections for affected groups, using examples from environmental laws, the Indian Constitution, and best practices from throughout the world. It also stresses the importance of a rights-based, integrated approach that puts health first when planning and building infrastructure projects.

Infrastructure projects like building highways and metro train lines can sometimes generate health problems that the current standards don't do enough to fix. People have to move and lose their jobs, which makes communities more likely to be exposed to noise and air pollution, have more accidents, hurt local ecosystems, and feel anxious.

Li et al. (2019) found that kids who lived within two kilometers of big highway construction sites in Beijing were 20% more likely to have asthma than kids who lived farther away. In São Paulo, studies during metro development documented a 15 percent rise in reported sleep disorders among adjacent communities (de Souza et al., 2017). However, public health issues are sometimes put on the back burner in favor of economic or infrastructure goals, and diverse environmental and urban development norms are not always applied equally.

Additionally, social inequities are intensified as vulnerable groups—such as marginalized communities and low-income populations—are disproportionately impacted. This review of the literature shows how important it is to have a multidisciplinary legal framework that includes public health expertise in infrastructure governance. Integrating environmental justice and the right to health into urban planning may help policymakers better protect the health of communities and promote sustainable development that balances growth with human dignity.

2.1. Health implications of infrastructure projects: a global overview

A lot of individuals think that highways and metro train networks help cities and the economy flourish. Nonetheless, a growing body of research underscores the unforeseen public health ramifications of these advancements. Since. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) has consistently cautioned that fine particulate matter (PM2.5), emitted during extensive construction activities, exacerbates respiratory and cardiovascular conditions.

Research conducted in China, Brazil, and South Africa corroborates these hazards, indicating that proximity to significant infrastructure projects increases the likelihood of bronchitis, asthma, and mental health disorders (Li et al., 2019; de Souza et al., 2017). These findings underscore the need to incorporate Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) during the planning phases of projects. This is still not common in most poor countries.

2.2. Legal recognition of health in environmental law

Nonetheless, an increasing amount of research highlights the unanticipated public health consequences of these breakthroughs. Since. The World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) has frequently warned that microscopic particles (PM2.5) released during large construction projects make breathing and heart problems worse.

Studies in China, Brazil, and South Africa confirm these risks, demonstrating that proximity to major infrastructure projects elevates the risk of bronchitis, asthma, and mental health disorders (Li et al., 2019; de Souza et al., 2017). These findings emphasize the necessity of integrating Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) into the planning stages of projects. Most poor countries still don't do this very often.

2.3. Right to health and judicial activism in India

The Indian judiciary has interpreted Article 21's constitutional right to life to include the right to health and a pollution-free environment. Subhash Kumar v. State of Bihar (1991) and MC Mehta v. Union of India (1987, 1999) are two important instances that helped establish environmental rights. But implementation is still not always the same. Sometimes, courts have ordered compensation or rehabilitation, but

it is rare for someone to be held responsible for long-term effects on public health. The Center for Policy Research (2020) says that judicial interventions are generally reactive, case-specific, and don't change the system.

2.4. Social justice, displacement, and health

Infrastructure projects frequently require land acquisition, leading to the displacement of communities, especially socio-economically weaker groups. Literature highlights health inequities stemming from displacement, including deterioration of mental health, disease vulnerability in temporary shelters, and lack of sanitation or healthcare access (Cernea, 2000; Fernandes, 2006). Although the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 sought to address these challenges, its implementation has been inconsistent. Research shows that resettlement planning rarely integrates health services such as mobile clinics or psychological counseling, reflecting systemic indifference to health needs.

2.5. Comparative global practices: legal integration of health assessments

Several nations have legislated health considerations into infrastructure planning. In the US, federally funded projects under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) often incorporate HIAs. The EU's Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (2001/42/EC) mandates inclusion of human health criteria. Australia's Queensland Public Health Act urban planning, while Canada's Impact Assessment Act (2019) requires explicit review of health, social, and economic effects. These models illustrate how participatory planning, enforceable assessments, and post-project monitoring can institutionalize health-sensitive development.

2.6. Gaps in research and the need for interdisciplinary legal approaches

Despite rising awareness, there remains a lack of interdisciplinary legal research directly linking urban infrastructure, law, and health. Existing studies remain siloed within public health or environmental science, leaving little understanding of systemic issues such as the weak justiciability of health rights, ineffective grievance mechanisms, and minimal participatory governance. This paper addresses that gap by integrating legal analysis with scientific evidence and health as a substantive element in India's infrastructure.

3. Research Objectives

1) To investigate how local communities, especially those in urban and peri-urban areas, are affected both directly and indirectly in terms of health by metro rail and highway development projects.
2) To evaluate critically how well India's current legal and regulatory frameworks—such as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) procedure and constitutional clauses—protect public health while infrastructure is being developed.
3) To assess how court actions in cases involving infrastructure projects contribute to the protection of the right to health guaranteed by Article 21 of the Indian Constitution.
4) To find best practices that can be modified for the Indian context and compare international legal approaches to health protection in infrastructure construction.
5) To suggest legislative and policy changes that would incorporate public health concerns into the large-scale construction project planning, approval, and monitoring procedures.

4. Methodology

Within the framework of Indian law, this study examines the health effects of metro rail and highway construction on nearby communities using a doctrinal legal research technique bolstered by qualitative analysis. Constitutional provisions, environmental statutes like the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, the Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981, the "Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)'' Notification, 2006, and pertinent court rulings interpreting the right to health under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution are the main secondary sources used in this study.

The study incorporates case law analysis of significant and recent court rulings where public health and infrastructure development converge to enhance the analysis. Furthermore, it integrates comparative legal analysis, referencing global best practices from countries like Australia, the United States, and the European Union, where legal planning procedures include health impact studies. To contextualize legal conclusions, qualitative insights from academic studies, government papers, and non-governmental organization publications on community health outcomes close to construction zones are incorporated into the legal review.

The study utilizes legal materials and secondary health statistics, including Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) reports on PM2.5 levels, Ministry of Health surveys, and WHO evaluations of urban air pollution in India. Case study examples, such as the Delhi Metro Phase III expansion and the Yamuna Expressway corridor, are cited to illustrate the real health effects of large-scale construction projects. This interdisciplinary approach enables a comprehensive assessment of the interplay between legal frameworks and public health outcomes, ensuring that doctrinal analysis is rooted in empirical evidence.

4.1. Comparative legal analysis: integrating health into infrastructure law

India has made strides in environmental regulation; yet, there is minimal formal incorporation of public health considerations into infrastructure design. Conversely, several industrialized nations offer more extensive models. For instance, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) in the US says that federal authorities must look at the environmental effects of a project, including its effects on public health, before giving it the go-ahead. Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) are a regular part of infrastructure projects. They look at risks like noise exposure, air quality getting worse, and moving effects. In practice, lawsuits under NEPA have often forced agencies to look closely at health outcomes, which makes enforcement stronger than in India.

In the same way, the European Union's Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive says that environmental reports must especially look at how they affect people's health. The European Commission still has the capacity to oversee things, and member states must hold public discussions and explain why they are following the rules.. In the event of non-compliance, penalties and infringement proceedings can be initiated at the EU level.

The Public Health Act in Queensland, Australia, requires public authorities and developers to incorporate health considerations into urban development, especially for marginalized populations. Here, local councils and health departments jointly enforce compliance, demonstrating effective interagency coordination. Canada's Impact Assessment Act (2019) goes even further by explicitly requiring assessment of health, social, and economic effects, backed by continuous impact reporting and periodic audits. For example, Canadian infrastructure projects have been subjected to post-project health monitoring, with developers mandated to provide mitigation measures if adverse outcomes emerge.

These areas show how post-project monitoring mechanisms, participatory planning, and enforced assessments may bring health into infrastructure law. India, on the other hand, still depends on the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification from 2006, which only indirectly addresses health problems and doesn't have enforceable limits. The WHO says that people should be exposed to no more than 25 µg/m³ of PM2.5 per year. However, data from the CPCB shows that levels around Indian metro and highway projects often go above 80–100 µg/m³. This highlights the difference between what the law says and what is good for health. India might establish a more health-sensitive infrastructure governance by using some international practices, like mandated HIAs, regular audits, and legal benchmarks. However, problems with bureaucratic delays and inadequate enforcement still exist.

Table 1: Comparative Legal Frameworks for Health Integration in Infrastructure Development

Country/Region	Legal Instrument	Health Integration Mechanism	Mandatory Public Health Assessment	Community Participation	Monitoring & Enforcement
India	Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006	Health impacts are considered marginally; no standalone HIA mechanism	No	Weak	Limited post-approval monitoring; no air quality or health benchmarks (PM2.5 often >80–100 µg/m³ vs WHO safe limit of 25 µg/m³)
United States	National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)	Encourages HIA as part of Environmental Impact Statements for major federal projects	Yes (encouraged, not always mandatory)	Strong (NEPA Scoping and Review)	Regular audits; litigation compels compliance
European Union	Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive (2001/42/EC)	Human health is a core component of assessments	Yes	Mandatory public consultation	EU Commission oversight; penalties for non-compliance
Australia (QLD)	Queensland Public Health Act & Planning Act	Mandates the integration of health in planning, especially for marginalized groups	Yes	Required by law	Local councils and health departments enforce
Canada	Impact Assessment Act, 2019	Explicit review of health, social, and economic impacts	Yes	Extensive consultation process	Continuous reporting; developers must provide mitigation if adverse health effects occur

5. Discussion

This study has brought attention to the pressing need to review India's infrastructure development laws from a public health standpoint. Even though metro rail and highway construction projects are crucial for urban and economic development, they may have unforeseen health effects on the local populace. These include both direct and indirect consequences for physical and mental well-being, ranging from increased exposure to air and noise pollution to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and diminished access to essential services such as clean water and healthcare.

The doctrinal and comparative analysis demonstrates that India's legal framework, particularly the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, 2006, does not provide a focused method for evaluating and mitigating health risks. Despite judicial recognition of the constitutional right to health under Article 21, implementation remains uneven, fragmented, and reactive. The absence of compulsory Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), insufficient post-clearance monitoring, and restricted public engagement sustain a system that prioritizes economic growth over community health.

International methods, on the other hand, show India how to apply enforceable procedures. The NEPA framework in the United States shows how lawsuits and community involvement can force agencies to use HIAs. The SEA Directive from the European Union is an example of binding oversight, and Australia and Canada are examples of interagency cooperation and ongoing health reporting. These models demonstrate that health-sensitive infrastructure governance is both viable and enforceable, provided there is legal clarity and institutional accountability.

5.1. India needs to change things quickly, and it can. there are three specific steps suggested

1) Mandatory Health Impact Assessments (HIAs): Change the EIA Notification, 2006, to add a distinct need for HIAs, with measurable indicators like the WHO's PM2.5 levels (25 µg/m³ annual mean) and the CPCB's national guidelines. Before a project is approved, these benchmarks would make sure that health consequences linked to air, noise, and displacement are always checked.
2) Health audits and mechanisms to hold people accountable after a project: Developers should have to check on the health of the people who were touched by the project every few years for at least five years after it is done. State health departments should keep an eye on independent audits that look at mental, respiratory, and cardiovascular health outcomes. The Impact Assessment Act (2019) in Canada specifies that people who don't follow the rules should either pay fines or have their project approvals put on hold.
3) Working together as agencies: Make sure that the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC), and the city development authority all have committees that are always there. These groups would make sure that health is a part of infrastructure governance at all stages, from planning and approval to monitoring and enforcement.

If these reforms were accomplished, it would signify a dramatic shift from a reactive, lawsuit-driven strategy to a proactive, preventive structure for governance. It is vital to remember that integrating health issues in infrastructure legislation would not only safeguard weak populations but it would also make India's route to growth more legitimate and long-lasting.

This paper argues that health ought to be considered a primary legal and ethical obligation, rather than simply a secondary consequence of infrastructural development. India can bring infrastructure governance back in line with its constitutional promise under Article 21 by

making HIAs a regular part of the process, making post-project accountability stronger, and encouraging cooperation between agencies. This kind of rights-based, health-focused strategy would make infrastructure development inclusive, long-lasting, and fair for everyone. It would make sure that urban growth doesn't hurt people's health.

6. Conclusion

This study has brought attention to the pressing need to review India's infrastructure development laws from a public health standpoint. Even though metro rail and highway construction projects are crucial for urban and economic development, they may have unforeseen health effects on the local populace. These have both direct and indirect effects on physical and mental health, and they include anything from increased exposure to air and noise pollution to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and decreased access to basic services.

A focused method for evaluating and reducing health hazards is absent from the Indian legal system, specifically the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification, according to the doctrinal and comparative analysis. Despite providing a fundamental legal underpinning, the constitutional right to health under Article 21 is nonetheless inconsistently and inadequately implemented in infrastructure projects. The issue is made worse by the lack of required Health Impact Assessments (HIAs), low levels of public involvement, and inadequate post-approval monitoring. On the other hand, international legal models—from the US to the EU, Canada, and Australia—showcase how strong legal requirements, institutional accountability, and participatory governance may successfully include health into infrastructure development.

Thus, the study concludes that India has to change its laws and policies to specifically include health effect assessments in infrastructure governance. This entails incorporating the right to health into the stages of project approval and implementation, enhancing interagency collaboration, and changing current environmental legislation to require HIAs. The only way to make infrastructure development in India genuinely inclusive, sustainable, and just is to adopt a rights-based, health-centric legislative framework.

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