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(Review Article)

A review on soil erosion and its control techniques

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Abstract

This study focuses on Soil erosion, which is a critical environmental challenge, and has profound impacts on agriculture, biodiversity, and water quality. This paper explores the historical and contemporary perspectives of soil erosion in India and globally, highlighting its causes, impacts, and mitigation strategies. India's agrarian economy has long grappled with soil erosion, exacerbated by monsoon-driven climates and unsustainable practices. Traditional conservation methods were undermined during colonial and industrial periods, but modern initiatives like watershed management and soil loss estimation models have renewed focus on combating erosion. At the global level, projects like the GLASOD provide insights into the severity of degradation and the urgency for sustainable practices. In India's arid regions, such as the Thar Desert, wind patterns play a significant role in soil erosion. Seasonal winds cause displacement and nutrient loss, affecting agriculture, infrastructure, and ecosystems. The paper outlines various mitigation strategies, including vegetative barriers, sand fences, chemical stabilizers, and advanced technologies like precision agriculture and geotextiles. Despite progress, challenges persist, such as integrating traditional knowledge with modern techniques and addressing socio-economic barriers. Future directions emphasize holistic approaches, community involvement, and climate-resilient strategies to ensure sustainable soil and ecosystem management.

Keywords*:* Soil Erosion; Soil Conservation; Climate Change; Desertification; Soil Stabilization Techniques

1. Introduction

Soil erosion has been a persistent environmental challenge since the advent of agriculture and civilization. It refers to the detachment, transportation, and deposition of soil particles by wind, water, or human activities. Historically, soil erosion has been a major cause of land degradation, leading to reduced agricultural productivity, loss of biodiversity, and sedimentation in water bodies. This has triggered global efforts to understand the phenomenon, its causes, impacts, and mitigation strategies (Pimentel et al., 1995).

2. History of Soil Erosion in India

India has a long history of soil erosion problems, closely tied to its agrarian economy and monsoon-driven climatic patterns. Soil erosion in India is not merely a consequence of natural factors but also a legacy of anthropogenic activities such as deforestation, overgrazing, and unsustainable agricultural practices. Historically, India's traditional knowledge systems and indigenous practices attempted to mitigate soil erosion, but colonial exploitation and post-independence industrialization exacerbated the issue, making it a critical concern for policymakers and researchers.

Before colonial rule, Indian agrarian systems included traditional methods of soil conservation rooted in sustainable land management practices. Farmers utilized techniques such as contour farming, terracing, and agroforestry, which minimized soil erosion and maintained soil fertility. Sacred groves, which were patches of forest protected for religious

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and cultural reasons, acted as natural barriers to erosion by stabilizing the soil and preventing excessive runoff (Chopra et At, 1993). These practices reflected a harmonious relationship between human activities and the natural environment.

3. Development of Soil Conservation Programs

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed significant strides in soil conservation efforts in India. The Damodar Valley Corporation (DVC), established in 1948, initiated integrated watershed management projects to control soil erosion and siltation in reservoirs. Similarly, the Chambal Valley Development Scheme addressed severe gully erosion in the ravines of Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh through afforestation and construction of check dams (Sharda et al., 2013).

The introduction of the Universal Soil Loss Equation (USLE) in India during the 1970s enabled scientists to estimate soil loss rates and prioritize areas for intervention. Research by the CSWCRTI and state agricultural universities identified erosion hotspots, such as the Shivalik Hills, the Western Ghats, and the Bundelkhand region, where soil loss exceeded tolerable limits (Narain et al., 1998).

3.1. Soil erosion at Global Level

The United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) undertook a groundbreaking global initiative to assess the severity and extent of soil degradation caused by human activities. Known as the Global Assessment of Soil Degradation (GLASOD), this project was carried out by the International Soil Research and Information Center (ISRIC) during 1996–1997. The assessment aimed to provide a comprehensive overview of soil degradation worldwide by categorizing various types of deterioration and evaluating their severity on a standardized scale.

GLASOD identified several critical types of soil degradation:

- Deformation of the terrain and loss of topsoil due to water erosion.
- Wind erosion causes overflowing, displacement of the land, and loss of topsoil.
- Decrease in soil fertility due to organic matter and nutrient loss.
- Water logging: sealing, compaction, and acidity.
- Salinization.

Table 1 Types of Soil degradation in India by GLASOD.

Type of Erosion	Degree of Degradation - Light	Degree of Degradation - Moderate	Degree of Degradation - Strong	Degree of Degradation - Total	Total as a Percentage of Agricultural Land
Water Erosion	1.2	0.0	1.7	2.9	18 percent
Dry and Humid region	1.8	17.2	10.9	29.9	
total	3.0	17.2	12.6	32.8	
Wind Erosion	0.0	1.8	9.0	10.8	6 percent
Dry and Humid region	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
total	0.0	1.8	9.0	10.8	
Lowering of water table –	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2	<1 percent
Dry region Humid region	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
total	0.1	0.1	0.0	0.2	
Soil fertility –	2.2	0.0	0.0	2.2	16 percent
Dry and Humid	24.2	0.0	3.2	27.2	
total	26.2	0.0	3.2	29.2	
Salinization -	0.0	3.5	3.5	7.0	4 percent
Dry region Humid	0.0	0.0	0.0	0	
total	0.0	3.5	3.5	73.3	
Water Logging	0.0	3.1	0.0	3.1	2 percent
Dry and Humid	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
total	0.0	3.1	0.0	3.1	

Source: FAO,1994.

The GLASOD project provided an invaluable global framework for understanding the extent and severity of soil degradation. Its findings emphasized the urgent need for sustainable soil management practices to address these widespread issues and to mitigate the adverse impacts of human-induced soil degradation on ecosystems and agricultural productivity.

4. Challenges and Lessons Learned

In recent decades, India has embraced a more holistic approach to soil conservation, emphasizing watershed management and community participation. Programs like the Integrated Watershed Management Programme (IWMP) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) have combined soil conservation with livelihood generation, achieving notable successes in erosion-prone regions (GOI et al., 2020).

Modern research has shifted towards understanding the impact of climate change on soil erosion in India. Studies have shown that increased rainfall variability and extreme weather events associated with climate change are likely to exacerbate soil loss, particularly in fragile ecosystems like the Himalayas and the coastal zones (Ghosh et al., 2012).

Advances in remote sensing and GIS have enhanced the ability to monitor and model soil erosion, enabling more targeted and effective interventions (Jain et al., 2021).

5. Current Gaps and Future Directions

Despite progress, significant gaps remain in India's efforts to combat soil erosion. There is a need for better integration of traditional knowledge systems with modern conservation techniques. For instance, the revival of tank irrigation systems and agroforestry practices could complement scientific approaches to soil conservation. Moreover, policies must address socio-economic barriers to adoption, such as land tenure insecurity and lack of financial incentives for farmers (Rao et al., 2014).

Controlling soil erosion is still difficult today. Applications of chemical dust suppressants, water spraying and the use of synthetic polymers are common methods for controlling wind-driven erosion. These techniques still have limits when it comes to broad applicability, though. Chloride salts and other chemical dust suppressants have a negative effect on groundwater and plants. Water spraying has a limited direct effect on controlling fugitive dust, lasting no more than three to four hours. As a result of evaporation, this method is not very successful in dry and semi-arid locations (Hamdan et At., 2016).

6. Wind Patterns in Indian Desert and Its Role in Soil Erosion

The Indian region experiences distinctive wind patterns that play a critical role in shaping its arid landscape and contributing to soil erosion. These wind patterns are influenced by seasonal climatic changes, local geography, and the desert’s proximity to the monsoon belt.

6.1. Seasonal Wind Patterns in the Thar Desert

The Thar Desert exhibits two major seasonal wind patterns: pre-monsoon winds (March to June) and post-monsoon winds (October to February). During the pre-monsoon season, high-intensity south-westerly winds dominate, driven by the increasing heat and low-pressure systems over the desert region (Kumar et al., 2020). These winds are often dry and strong, carrying vast amounts of sand and dust, leading to the formation of sand dunes and severe soil erosion.

In contrast, the post-monsoon period is characterized by northeasterly winds, which are cooler and weaker in intensity. While these winds also contribute to soil movement, their impact is less pronounced compared to pre-monsoon winds. The variability in wind speed and direction during these periods significantly influences the patterns of soil deposition and erosion across the desert (Das et al., 2018).

6.2. Role of Winds in Soil Erosion

High-speed winds in the Thar Desert are a primary agent of soil erosion, often referred to as wind erosion. These winds can dislodge fine soil particles from the surface, initiating processes like saltation, suspension, and surface creep. Saltation involves the bouncing movement of sand particles across the surface, which can displace lighter particles over long distances. Suspension carries finer particles, such as silt and clay, into the atmosphere, creating dust storms that exacerbate soil degradation and reduce visibility.

Surface creep, on the other hand, moves coarser sand grains along the ground, reshaping the desert's topography over time. Such wind-driven erosion depletes the fertile topsoil layer, leaving behind barren and nutrient-deficient land, which poses challenges for agriculture and vegetation in the region (Sharma et al., 2016).

6.3. Wind Erosion Hotspots

Specific areas in the Thar Desert, such as the Jaisalmer and Barmer regions, are more prone to wind erosion due to their loose, sandy soils and lack of vegetation cover. Studies have shown that wind speeds exceeding 20 km/h are particularly effective in initiating soil movement, making these regions vulnerable to desertification (Kumar et al., 2020). The frequency and intensity of windstorms during the summer months further accelerate the process of erosion, contributing to land degradation on a significant scale.

6.4. Mitigation Challenges and Strategies

Efforts to mitigate wind erosion in the Indian Desert face challenges due to the harsh climatic conditions and socio-economic dependence on land resources. Vegetative barriers, sand dune stabilization, and windbreaks have been implemented in some areas to reduce the impact of wind erosion. However, the success of these measures depends on sustained community involvement and policy support (Das et al., 2018).

The wind patterns in the Thar Desert are a defining feature of the region's arid environment and a significant driver of soil erosion. Understanding these patterns is crucial for developing effective erosion control strategies and ensuring the sustainable management of desert ecosystems.

7. Impacts of soil erosion

Accelerated erosion-induced soil deterioration is a severe issue that will persist in the twenty-first century, particularly in emerging tropical and subtropical nations. However, there is disagreement over its scope, intensity, and effects on the economy and environment. Estimates of the impacted land area, both globally and regionally, are imprecise and subjective. Field measurement results frequently rely on the approach used. Although modelling soil erosion has advanced significantly, field validation of these models for key soils and ecoregions is still needed.

The impacts of wind erosion in the Thar Desert are severe and multifaceted. One of the most immediate consequences is the loss of fertile topsoil, which is essential for agriculture. This leads to declining crop yields, forcing farmers to either abandon their fields or invest heavily in fertilizers to compensate for nutrient loss. Additionally, the displacement of soil contributes to the expansion of sand dunes, which interfere upon villages, agricultural lands, and roads, disrupting daily life and infrastructure. Dust storms, a frequent occurrence, reduce visibility and air quality, causing respiratory and other health issues among the local population (Lal et al., 2014).

Estimates of the effects of erosion on agricultural output, productivity, and soil quality are imprecise and subjective, much like the geographical area impacted. Furthermore, because of the compensating positive impacts on yields from depositional sites, erosion-induced losses in crop yield are scale-dependent. Additionally, because of the masking effects of inputs like fertilizers and irrigation, erosion-induced losses in crop yield are technology-dependent. Water contamination from non-point sources and changes in soil carbon dynamics brought on by erosion are significant environmental effects. Deposition can bury and trap part of the carbon, but erosion (such as detachment and transport) can release trace gasses into the atmosphere. Enhancing the information on the impacted land area is necessary, but so is evaluating the regional and global scale effects of erosion on soil balance and production. (Lal et al., 2001).

The loss of topsoil also undermines the soil's ability to retain moisture, critical in an already water-scarce region. As the soil becomes prone to runoff during rare but intense rainfall events, water resources are further diminished, limiting agricultural potential and threatening the availability of drinking water for humans and livestock. Additionally, sediment generated from eroded soil clogs nearby waterways and reservoirs, reducing their capacity and increasing maintenance costs (Kumar et. al., 2016).

Wind erosion also has far-reaching effects on infrastructure. Moving sand dunes encroach upon roads, settlements, and canal systems, necessitating constant intervention to maintain functionality. For instance, the Indira Gandhi Canal faces recurring silting issues due to wind-blown sand, while highways are periodically blocked by accumulating dunes, disrupting transportation and increasing upkeep costs (Joshi et. al., 2020).

8. Soil stabilization Techniques

Soil erosion in desert environments is a significant concern due to sparse vegetation, strong winds, and arid conditions that make the soil highly susceptible to degradation. Several techniques are used to mitigate soil erosion in deserts, combining biological, physical, and chemical approaches to address the challenges posed by these harsh environments.

8.1. Vegetative Cover and Reforestation

One of the most effective techniques is establishing vegetative cover through reforestation or planting native grass species. Vegetation acts as a natural barrier, reducing wind speed and stabilizing the soil through root networks. Desert-friendly species such as Prosopis juliflora and Acacia saligna are often used due to their drought resistance and soil-binding capabilities. Afforestation programs in desert areas can significantly reduce the risk of soil erosion while improving local biodiversity and microclimate conditions (Moghaddam et al., 2020).

8.2. Sand Fences and Windbreaks

Sand fences are physical barriers made of natural materials like reeds or synthetic fabrics, designed to trap wind-blown sand and stabilize dunes. Windbreaks, which often incorporate rows of trees or shrubs, are similarly effective in reducing wind velocity and protecting the soil from erosion. The spacing and orientation of these barriers are critical for maximizing their efficiency, as improper placement can lead to channelized wind flow and increased erosion.

8.3. Soil Stabilization Using Mulch and Organic Matter

Adding mulch or organic matter to desert soils can enhance soil structure and water retention, thereby reducing erosion risks. Organic mulches, such as straw or wood chips, form a protective layer over the soil, minimizing the direct impact of wind and water. This technique not only combats erosion but also improves soil fertility over time, making it a dual-purpose solution.

8.4. Chemical Soil Binders

In areas where vegetation establishment is challenging, chemical soil binders like polyacrylamide (PAM) can be applied to stabilize the soil surface. These binders create a crust-like layer that resists wind and water erosion while maintaining soil permeability Though effective, this method must be used judiciously to avoid potential environmental impacts, such as chemical leaching. (Zhang et al., 2018).

8.5. Contour Trenches and Terracing

Contour trenches and terracing involve creating horizontal trenches or terraces along the landscape's contours to reduce water runoff and promote soil retention. In desert areas, this technique is often combined with vegetation planting to maximize its effectiveness. These structures slow down water flow, allowing it to infiltrate the soil rather than wash it away (Morgan et al., 2005).

Modern techniques have introduced innovative solutions to address soil erosion more effectively. Geotextiles, for example, involve using synthetic or biodegradable fabrics to stabilize soil, particularly in areas susceptible to erosion due to construction or heavy rainfall. Riprap and gabions, which use rocks or stone-filled cages, have been effective in protecting shorelines and riverbanks from water erosion. Bioengineering, a modern yet natural approach, integrates vegetation to stabilize soil while enhancing biodiversity. Another advanced method, hydroseeding, combines seeds, mulch, and nutrients in a sprayable mixture, promoting rapid vegetation growth and reducing soil exposure. Precision agriculture, using GPS and sensors, has further optimized farming practices, minimizing soil disturbance and enhancing resource efficiency. Sediment control devices, such as silt fences and sediment basins, have also been deployed in urban development and industrial settings to trap displaced soil particles, thus protecting water bodies and surrounding areas (Pimentel et al., 2013).

9. Conclusion

Soil erosion remains a pressing environmental challenge, with significant implications for agriculture, biodiversity, and ecosystem services. This phenomenon, driven by both natural processes and human activities, requires urgent attention and innovative solutions. While traditional soil conservation practices like contour farming, agroforestry, and reforestation have proven effective, their integration with modern technologies such as GIS, remote sensing, and advanced soil stabilizers can enhance their impact.

India's diverse soil types and climatic conditions demand tailored approaches to erosion control, exemplified by successful programs like the Integrated Watershed Management Programme and the Chambal Valley Development Scheme. However, the challenges of policy implementation, socio-economic constraints, and climate change necessitate a multi-pronged strategy that includes community participation, awareness campaigns, and policy support.

Future efforts must prioritize the restoration of degraded lands, the sustainable use of natural resources, and the revival of indigenous practices. By fostering a synergy between traditional wisdom and contemporary science, soil erosion can be effectively mitigated, ensuring environmental sustainability and long-term agricultural productivity. This holistic approach is vital for maintaining soil health, combating desertification, and securing food and water resources for future generations.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed

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