
CONSCIOUS COLLECTIONS, UNCONSCIOUS RIVERS: THE GAP IN INDIA'S GREENWASHING LAW

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ABSTRACT

The true cost of fast fashion is now becoming apparent, which includes pink rivers, polluted reservoirs, and India alone produces roughly 7,800 kilotons of waste every year. The awareness about the cost of fast fashion and the environmental issues associated with it has led to increased greenwashing – a practice where companies sell products using their sustainability practices despite the lack of responsibility in their supply chains. This article will discuss some of India's efforts at combating greenwashing through legislation, focusing on the Consumer Protection Act 2019, the ASCI Environmental and Green Claims Guidelines 2024, and the CCPA Greenwashing Guidelines 2024. Although these policies represent a step forward for India, there are still major shortcomings in these laws, such as the dependence on complaints for enforcing penalties, which are not proportional to the profits generated by greenwashing. By contrasting these Indian guidelines to the AGECLaw of France and the European Union's Green Claims Directive, this article concludes that proper greenwashing regulation needs to mandate supply chain transparency and enforce penalties according to profit.

The Pantone Colour Institute decides the colour of the year, but you can also tell the 'it' colour of the season by looking at the rivers of China. While that might sound like an urban legend, it's an industrial reality that locals have been observing since the rise of fast fashion and Greenwashing.

Harmful bleaches, dyes and toxins drain directly into waterways, tainting once-clear rivers. China, the world's largest mass manufacturing and dyeing hub, contributed 40.22 billion tonnes¹ of printing and dyeing wastewater in 2022 alone, according to the China Statistical Yearbook on Environment (2023). The Central Consumer Protection Authority guidelines define greenwashing as any deceptive practice involving the concealment, omission or misrepresentation of information regarding environmental claims. This includes using vague, exaggerated, or unsubstantiated statements, as well as misleading symbols or visuals.

This industrial reality isn't just limited to China. From the pink Yamuna, the blue Kasadi, to the not-so-serene hills of Ghazipur, India has its own fair share of textile industrial waste mismanagement examples. And that fair share is a whopping 7,800 kilotonnes of waste every year by the textile industry, according to Fashion for Good, a non-profit organisation² (2022). Yet, global fast fashion giants that extensively outsource their manufacturing to Indian textile hubs continue to market "Conscious Collections" and "sustainable" lines, presenting themselves as champions of ethical fashion while their supply chains tell a very different story.

In mid-March 2026, Team Earth Warrior³, a city-based environmental NGO, noticed the usual white foam in the Yamuna turn pink, a clear indicator, according to the NGO founder Pankaj Kumar's letter to the Delhi Pollution Control Committee, of severe industrial pollution from untreated textile and dyeing discharges in Delhi, Sonipat, and Panipat. This wasn't the first time. In March 2016, NDTV⁴ reported the same phenomenon.

In 2023, the NGT⁵ pulled up illegally operating dyeing units in Matiala, Khyala, Meethapur and Badarpur for discharging effluents into the Najafgarh drain, ordering the closure of all

¹ China Statistical Yearbook on Environment, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, People's Republic of China (2023).

² Fashion for Good, Unlocking the Billion Dollar Circular Opportunity (2022).

³ Pankaj Kumar, Letter to Delhi Pollution Control Committee and Chief Minister Rekha Gupta (Mar. 2026) <https://theprint.in/environment/yamunas-froth-pink-industries-scrutiny/2880300/>

⁴ Yamuna River Turns Pink in Parts of Delhi, NDTV <https://www.ndtv.com/delhi-news/pink-foam-flowing-in-the-yamuna-is-toxic-industrial-waste-1290859> ⁵

⁵ National Green Tribunal, Order Regarding Closure of Unauthorised Denim and Textile Dyeing Units in Delhi-NCR (2023).

unauthorised denim and textile dyeing units in Delhi-NCR. Despite this, the Yamuna continues to turn pink.

From a river that changed colour to a reservoir that changed purpose entirely. The Jojari-Bandi-Luni river system in western Rajasthan tells an even grimmer story. The Nehda dam, built in 1985 to supply freshwater, has been reduced to what a Supreme Court-appointed committee described as an "industrial drain." Balotra alone houses nearly 1,000 textile units, Pali over 500, and Jodhpur more than 300; many discharging untreated waste directly into the river system. The Supreme Court took suo motu cognisance in September 2025, and on 21st November constituted a High-Level Ecosystem Oversight Committee⁶, criticising decades of administrative apathy by the Rajasthan government.

India's regulatory framework has not been entirely silent on this. The legislative groundwork of greenwashing in India is formed by The Consumer Protection Act 2019. Which prohibits unfair trade practices and misleading advertisements, giving regulatory bodies the authority to act against false or exaggerated claims including the times they lie about being environmentally conscious. Central Consumer Protection Authority is a regulatory authority set up under Section 10(1) of the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. It issues guidelines and penalizes non compliant businesses. This acts in public interest and helps promote consumer trust.

Building on this groundwork the Advertising Standards Council of India⁷ issued its Guidelines for Advertisements Making Environmental and Green Claims in February 2024. In 1985 the

Advertising Standards Council of India was founded under Section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956 (now Section 8⁸ of the Companies Act, 2013) as a voluntary self-regulatory organisation responsible for overseeing advertising standards in India. With these new environmental and green claims guidelines the burden of proof is slowly being shift to the businesses, they require advertisers to substantiate absolute claims like "eco-friendly", "sustainable" or "conscious" through verifiable evidence.

Then came the most significant development so far. Central Consumer Protection Authority,

⁶ *In re 2 Million Lives at Risk, Contamination in Jojari River, Rajasthan*, Suo Motu WP(C) No. 8/2025 (Nov. 21, 2025) (India).

⁷ Advertising Standards Council of India, Guidelines for Advertisements Making Environmental and Green Claims (Feb. 2024)

⁸ Consumer Protection Act, No. 35 of 2019, § 10(1)

in October 2024 issued the Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing and Misleading Environmental Claims⁹ which is India's first dedicated legal framework that directly addresses greenwashing. These guidelines apply to all manufacturers, advertisers, service providers and endorsers making environmental claims. They define greenwashing explicitly, as well as prohibit vague or unsubstantiated sustainability claims. It also charges penalties of up to ₹10 lakh for violations, extendable to ₹50 lakh for repeat offenders.

The framework looks comprehensive on paper, but a closer look reveals significant gaps. Enforcement being one of the most crucial one. Although the CCPA is designated as the monitoring authority under the 2024 guidelines, the guidelines themselves do not outline a clear mechanism for how compliance is evaluated or what triggers an action. There is no dedicated watchdog authority which is actively auditing fashion brands for greenwashing, and action depends largely on the complaints being filed.

Then there's the penalty problem. The CCPA can impose fines of up to ₹10 lakh on first-time offenders and ₹50 lakh on repeat offenders. But as one legal analysis by GNLU¹⁰ pointed out, this is generalised and inadequate, related to the revenue brands generate from greenwashing campaigns. A fast fashion brand running a misleading "conscious collection" marketing campaign across India stands to make crores and a ₹10 lakh penalty is not a deterrent, rather it's a rounding error.

But the largest gap is the supply chain blind spot. The CCPA and ASCI guidelines regulate what brands say, not what their supply chains do. A brand can technically comply with every guideline by adding qualifiers to its sustainability marketing, while its contracted manufacturers discharge untreated dye effluents into rivers like the Yamuna and the Bandi.

This is where India's greenwashing framework fundamentally falls short; it treats greenwashing as a single company issue. They don't take into account the revenue generated from greenwashing to penalise accordingly. The compliance frameworks have gaps that international guidelines have found ways to tackle, and a supply chain accountability problem

⁹ Central Consumer Protection Authority, Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims (Oct. 15, 2024)

¹⁰ Eco-Friendly or Eco-Fraud: Analysing the Indian Regulatory Framework on Greenwashing, GNLU Ctr. for Competition L. & Pol'y Rsch. (2025), <https://www.cceplrgnul.com/post/eco-friendly-or-eco-fraud-analysing-the-indian-regulatory-framework-on-greenwashing>.

that doesn't get addressed.

India is not alone in grappling with fashion greenwashing, but it sure is behind in how it responds to it.

India's supply chain framework blind spots can perhaps be resolved through understanding France's approach. Under the AGEC Law¹¹ and Decree 2022-748¹², large clothing brands selling in France are required to display a mandatory environmental score on every garment; a single, standardised label based on lifecycle analysis covering water use, carbon emissions, recyclability and microfibre release. Crucially, this score is verified, not just self-declared like in India. Brands cannot simply call a collection "conscious", they must also prove it, down to the GPS coordinates of key production stages. Non-compliance carries strict penalties of up to 5% of their annual revenue, making it financially meaningful in a way that India's ₹10 lakh ceiling is not. The EU's Green Claims Directive¹³ goes a step further on the enforcement. It proposes fines of at least 4% of company turnover for greenwashing violations which is proportionate to the profit generated from deception, not a flat cap. It also bans generic claims like "eco-friendly" and "climate neutral" unless substantiated by full lifecycle evidence.

Both models share one principle India's framework currently lacks, they regulate the supply chain, rather than just regulating the advertisement.

The Pantone Colour Institute will keep announcing its colour of the year. And somewhere along the Yamuna or the Bandi, that colour may already be visible.

India's 2024 regulatory framework, the CCPA guidelines, the ASCI environmental claims standards, and the Consumer Protection Act represents a genuine first step toward holding fashion brands accountable for their environmental claims. But a first step is not exactly a destination. The framework remains complaint driven, lenient on penalty, and fundamentally blind to the supply chain which is precisely where the damage happens.

¹¹ Eurofins Sustainability Services, *Climate Impact Labels on Clothing Becomes Law* (2023), <https://sustainabilityservices.eurofins.com/news/climate-impact-labels-on-clothing-becomes-law>

¹² Décret No. 2022-748 du 29 avril 2022 relatif à l'information du consommateur sur les qualités et caractéristiques environnementales des produits générateurs de déchets, Journal Officiel de la République Française (Apr. 30, 2022)

¹³ Eurofins Sustainability Services, *Climate Impact Labels on Clothing Becomes Law* (2023), <https://sustainabilityservices.eurofins.com/news/climate-impact-labels-on-clothing-becomes-law>

As France and the EU have demonstrated, meaningful greenwashing regulation requires more than restricting what brands say. It requires verifying what their supply chains do. Until India moves in that direction through mandatory supply chain disclosure, revenue-proportionate penalties, and proactive monitoring the "eco-friendly" label will remain what it largely is today: a marketing decision. While we should work on making a legal commitment.