

CASE STUDY

Combating Greenwashing

India's Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing and Misleading Environmental Claims

International Institute for Sustainable
Development and Centre for Responsible Business

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Summary

While Indian consumers increasingly express concerns about sustainability, greenwashing and limited access to reliable information undermine sustainable purchasing. In this regard, India has recently taken significant steps to address misleading environmental claims, most notably the 2024 Guidelines for Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing and Misleading Environmental Claims.

Clearer rules improve consumer trust, align Indian companies with global market expectations, and enhance corporate governance, but implementation requires raising awareness, building capacity, and supporting credible third-party verification, including through voluntary sustainability standards.

India's experience illustrates how legislation, consumer engagement, and standards can be combined to create reliable sustainability communications and reduce greenwashing risks.

This case study is addressed to policy-makers and regulators working to strengthen consumer protection and improve the credibility of sustainability claims. It unpacks the 2024 Guidelines for companies seeking to understand the regulatory framework addressing greenwashing in India. It demonstrates how India has begun to build a regulatory framework to prevent greenwashing while highlighting implementation gaps that require complementary support from voluntary sustainability standards and consumer-facing initiatives.

The case study is part of broader work conducted by the International Institute for Sustainable Development on the reliability of claims. A forthcoming policy brief will build on such national experiences to examine legislative measures across jurisdictions, assess trends and limitations in greenwashing regulation, and provide actionable recommendations for governments to enhance regulatory frameworks, safeguard consumers, and promote trust in sustainability information and claims.



Introduction and Background

Greenwashing in India

The Oxford English Dictionary defines greenwashing as “[t]he creation or propagation of an unfounded or misleading environmentalist image” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). This definition underscores the deceptive nature of greenwashing, where companies make false, exaggerated, or ill-informed environmental claims about their products or services. These claims aim to create a responsible environmental image for a product or service, misleading consumers about the environmental strategies and practices of businesses. According to environmental non-governmental organizations, regulators, academics, and consumer information agencies, greenwashing entails a deliberate intention to mislead consumers through positive environmental messaging that does not reflect the company’s actual sustainability practices (Fialová, 2024; Spaniol et al., 2024). Others, however, question whether intentionality is necessary for greenwashing, noting that misleading environmental claims can result from negligence, lack of expertise, or weak sustainability reporting (Centre for Responsible Business, & CUTS International, 2024; Farbstein & Schmidt, 2025; Han, 2024).

Over the past few years, a growing body of evidence has emerged on the changing behaviour of Indian consumers, who are increasingly becoming environmental and climate stewards. Several market studies have shown that Indian consumers are adopting more sustainable lifestyles and making informed procurement choices (Aravkar, 2024; Nielsen, 2023; PwC, 2024). For instance, a 2024 survey by Bain & Company found that approximately 82% of 2,000 consumers surveyed in India reported having started shopping more sustainably in the last 5 years. However, respondents also noted that sustainable shopping remains difficult in India due to limited access to information and confusion about sustainability and labels. In addition, some products are only partially aligned with sustainability practices, and their availability remains limited (Bain & Company, 2024).

Despite these encouraging trends, Indian consumers’ awareness of sustainability issues and intentions to buy sustainable products have not yet translated into widespread sustainable purchasing behaviour. A study by the Advertising Standards Council of India found that 79% of environmental “green” claims made by organizations were exaggerated or misleading, and another market research study from YouGov indicated that 71% of Indian consumers reported incidents of greenwashing (Hussain, 2024), underscoring that a high share of companies in India have been involved in greenwashing.

An “intent–action gap” in sustainable consumption persists. This gap is driven by several factors, including the low penetration of certificates and labels; poor visibility and limited or confusing information about their sustainability performance; and a general lack of consumer engagement by businesses (Centre for Responsible Business, 2023). While businesses are increasingly expected to demonstrate and disclose their sustainability performance to regulators, buyers, and investors, consumer engagement remains limited.



This context presents an opportunity for consumer-facing businesses in India to engage more meaningfully with their current and potential consumers on sustainability and climate-related activities and efforts. Against this background, India has been actively introducing policy and regulatory responses to address this challenge.

Policy and Regulatory Responses to Greenwashing in India

India has introduced several regulatory and voluntary initiatives to combat greenwashing, including the following:

- designating greenwashing as a form of misleading advertisement and an unfair trade practice under the Consumer Protection Act (2019);
- releasing National Guidelines for Responsible Business Conduct in 2019, calling on businesses to engage responsibly with consumers. In particular, Principle 9 requires companies to disclose accurate information about product sustainability and related risks and avoid misleading or confusing promotional content;
- embedding greenwashing in the guidelines for green debt securities by the market regulator, the Securities and Exchange Board of India (Securities and Exchange Board of India, 2023);
- strictly monitoring media advertisements (offline and online) by the Advertisement Standards Council of India;
- including greenwashing in the 2025 draft of the Climate Finance Taxonomy (currently under public review), defining it as the misrepresentation of activities as being climate-aligned, either intentionally or due to gross negligence.

In addition to these recent efforts, India has also implemented longer-standing initiatives that support the fight against greenwashing and promote consumer awareness. For example, in 1991, the Government of India introduced Eco Mark, an eco-labelling scheme that helps consumers easily identify environmentally friendly products.

Eco Mark is a voluntary, non-binding scheme that labels consumer products as environmentally friendly based upon specific environmental and quality parameters. Any product manufactured, used, or disposed of in a manner that notably lessens its potential environmental harm can be considered environmentally friendly (Central Pollution Control Board [CPCB], 2017). Such products have less potential for pollution during their entire life cycle, i.e., raw material, manufacturing, use, and disposal (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2009).

The Eco Mark scheme aims to achieve five key objectives (Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, 2009):

- incentivize manufacturers and importers to reduce the environmental impact of their products
- reward companies that undertake genuine efforts to improve their environmental performance



- support consumers in adopting environmentally responsible habits by providing clear information on the environmental attributes of products
- promote the consideration of environmental factors in purchasing decisions, guiding consumers toward products with lower negative impacts
- enhance environmental quality and foster the sustainable management of natural resources.

The Eco Mark serves as a label or symbol granted to environmentally friendly products that meet the criteria established under the Eco Mark scheme. Although the Eco Mark shares many features with eco-labels from other countries (including Germany's Blue Angel, the EU Ecolabel, and Korea's Eco Label), it differs in a key respect: it is not granted solely based on environmental criteria. In India, eligibility is also linked to the quality of the product or products. In other words, for products to qualify for the Eco Mark, they must satisfy both environmental and quality standards.

To obtain the Eco Mark, a product must hold a licence or certificate of conformity with Indian Standards issued under the Bureau of Indian Standards Act, 2016, and/or comply with the Quality Control Orders of the Central Government, in addition to meeting the specific criteria established for the Eco Mark.

The environmental criteria for Eco Mark certification of a product may include the following:

- reduces pollution by minimizing or eliminating the generation of waste and environmental emissions
- is recyclable or is made from recycled material or both
- reduces the use of non-renewable resources, including non-renewable energy sources and natural resources
- reduces the use of any material that has adverse impacts on the environment.

In developing the criteria to grant the Eco Mark to a product category, the following aspects are considered when deciding if a product is sustainable or eco-friendly:

- production process, including source of raw material
- use of natural resources
- environmental impact associated with the product
- effect and extent of emissions or waste arising from the production process
- disposal of the product and its packaging
- compliance with the Guidelines on Extended Producer Responsibility, wherever applicable
- utilization of waste and recycled materials
- suitability for recycling
- use of non-hazardous substances in place of hazardous substances.



The criteria for granting the Eco Mark vary by product category. While they are open in principle (as the Rules state that they “may include”), once the CPCB notifies the criteria for a specific product category, they become fixed, clearly defined, and publicly available. All applications are then assessed solely against the notified criteria for that category.

Despite its strengths, the scheme's limitations include the following:

- An overly broad range of product categories, since during the inception of the scheme, 17 product categories were identified and finalized for labelling. This broad range of categories risks diluting the focus and might create challenges to apply rigorous, enforceable criteria across such diverse sectors.
- A complex three-level system with three different bodies set up for implementation, with the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change providing policy direction, CPCB overseeing environmental compliance, and the Bureau of Indian Standards handling product testing, licensing, and monitoring, which risks creating a bureaucratic overlap and slows down decision making and enforcement.
- Time-consuming processes.
- Lack of awareness among consumers of the mark.
- Cost of certification.

To address these challenges, the Government of India announced, on October 2, 2024, the new Eco Mark Certification rules. These rules align the scheme with the Lifestyle for Environment Mission (LiFE) (see Box 1) and replace the Eco Mark scheme of 1991. The program is now implemented by the CPCB in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Standards.

The main aim of the new rules is to increase consumer acceptance of these products and encourage manufacturers to produce goods certified under the Eco Mark, thereby supporting sustainability. The rules seek to address the impacts of products and their production processes on climate change, biodiversity and nature, energy use, waste generation, discharges into all environments, pollution from physical effects, and the use and release of hazardous substances (Indian Chemical Regulation, 2023). The new rules cover products ranging from cosmetics, edible oils, tea, coffee, soaps, and detergents to textiles and electrical/electronic goods. The government's notification states that eco-labelling will help consumers make informed purchasing decisions and encourage manufacturers to shift toward producing environmentally friendly products, fostering the growth of green industries.

The CPCB, in partnership with the Bureau of Indian Standards, will assess products for Eco Mark compliance, either directly or through authorized “verifiers” (Chaudhary, 2024).

Globally and in India, eco-labelling schemes have played a role in conveying businesses' sustainability claims to the market and consumers. While eco-labelling schemes like Eco Mark play an important role in communicating sustainability claims and promoting product differentiation, they are not designed to comprehensively address the risk of misleading environmental claims. Eco Mark supports the reduction of greenwashing indirectly by providing a credible label for environmentally friendly products, but it is not equipped to monitor or enforce broader corporate marketing and advertising practices.



To complement and address this gap, the Government of India released a set of Guidelines for the Prevention and Regulation of Greenwashing and Misleading Environmental Claims in 2024 (“Greenwashing Guidelines”), enforced by the Central Consumer Protection Agency (CCPA). The guidelines come as a result of a process that started in November 2023, when a committee on greenwashing was formed, followed by consultations. After three meetings, draft guidelines were released in February 2024, inviting public consultations until March 2024. The final guidelines were issued in October 2024 and aim to prevent greenwashing and address the issue of misleading environmental claims (PIB Delhi, 2024).

Box 1. Mission LiFE

Mission Lifestyle for the Environment (Mission LiFE) launched by India in October 2022, is a global initiative designed to promote sustainable lifestyles by encouraging mindful and intentional consumption, with the goal of protecting the environment through both individual and collective action. The mission seeks to engage at least 1 billion people in India and worldwide in taking individual and collective actions to protect and conserve the environment between 2022 and 2028.

Mission LiFE focuses on promoting sustainable lifestyles through mindful and deliberate consumption, emphasizing the importance of reducing waste, conserving resources, and adopting eco-friendly practices. The initiative focuses on seven key themes: save water, save energy, reduce waste, reduce e-waste, reduce single-use plastics, adopt sustainable food systems, and adopt healthy lifestyles.

The Mission LiFE and the Greenwashing Guidelines both look at undertaking collective action toward the environment. Greenwashing is a practice that can pervade market activity at every level—from corporations to manufacturing to the point of sale. The impetus to address greenwashing is growing as awareness about the negative impacts of climate change and environmental degradation becomes evident.

Leading consumer organizations in India consider the guidelines to be an important step forward in strengthening consumer protection and promoting environmental accountability. The guidelines are expected to enhance consumer protection by providing the information necessary for informed purchasing decisions, curbing deceptive marketing practices, and encouraging businesses to uphold higher standards through greater transparency and accuracy in their environmental claims (Sushma, 2025).

Unpacking India's Greenwashing Guidelines

Objective

The objective of the 2024 Greenwashing Guidelines, issued by the CCPA, is to prevent deceptive practices and ensure transparency in environmental claims made by businesses, thereby protecting consumers from misleading information and promoting sustainability.



The guidelines define greenwashing as

- any deceptive or misleading practice, which includes concealing, omitting, or hiding relevant information, by exaggerating, making vague, false, or unsubstantiated environmental claims.
- use of misleading words, symbols, or imagery, placing emphasis on positive environmental aspects while downplaying or concealing harmful attributes. [Art. 2(f)].

The guidelines aim to undertake the following actions, helping in the following impacts:

- **combatting deceptive practices:** The guidelines aim to curb greenwashing, which refers to misleading consumers about the environmental benefits of products or services.
- **promoting transparency and accountability:** The guidelines emphasize that environmental claims must be verifiable, substantiated, and backed by credible evidence, fostering a more transparent and accountable marketplace.
- **protecting consumer rights:** By ensuring accuracy and clarity in environmental claims, the guidelines empower consumers to make informed choices and protect them from being misled by false or exaggerated environmental claims.
- **encouraging truthful sustainability:** The guidelines seek to foster truthful environmental responsibility among businesses by requiring them to provide evidence for their environmental claims, thereby fostering a marketplace where such claims are credible and meaningful.

Key Features of the Guidelines

The guidelines include several important features, including the following.

Clear Definitions

The guidelines set out precise definitions of key terms related to greenwashing and environmental claims, ensuring a shared understanding among both businesses and consumers. For example, in addition to defining greenwashing, the guidelines also offer a detailed definition of an “environmental claim,” understood as “any representation, in any form, regarding: (1) a good (in whole or in part), its manufacturing process, packaging, manner of use, or disposal; (2) a service (or any portion thereof) or the process by which it is provided, that suggests environmentally friendly attributes.”

An explanation is also included, clarifying that such claims may include, but are not limited to

- asserting a neutral or positive environmental impact, or a contribution to sustainability;
- indicating less environmental harm compared to a previous version of the same product or service;
- claiming reduced environmental harm relative to competing products or services;
- highlighting specific environmental benefits, thereby conveying a sense of environmental responsibility or eco-friendliness associated with the good or service [Art. 2(e)].



Scope

The guidelines cover all environmental claims and apply to any manufacturer, service provider, or trader whose goods, products, or services are advertised. They also apply to advertising agencies and endorsers engaged to promote such goods, products, or services [Art. 3].

Specific Requirements

Guidelines indicate the requirements for substantiating claims and making adequate disclosures. The following are listed in the Appendix as key to be kept in mind while making claims:

- truthfulness and accuracy
- clarity and unambiguity
- fair and meaningful comparisons
- claims should be absolute and relevant
- use of imagery without substantive changes
- endorsement by environmental organizations or experts or other endorsers

In particular, the guidelines have the following requirements:

Prohibition Against Engaging in Greenwashing or Misleading Environmental Claims

The guidelines explicitly prohibit greenwashing, stating that “no person to whom these guidelines apply shall engage in greenwashing and misleading environmental claims.” This obligation applies to all entities covered under the scope of the guidelines, including manufacturers, service providers, traders, advertising agencies, and endorsers [Art. 4].

Obligation to Substantiate Environmental Claims

The guidelines prohibit the use of vague or generic terms such as “clean,” “green,” “eco-friendly,” “good for the planet,” or similar claims unless they are accompanied by adequate, accurate, and accessible qualifiers, credible substantiation, and adequate disclosure (see below).

Companies are required to use clear, consumer-friendly language when referring to technical terms such as “Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)” or “ecological footprint.” They must clearly explain the meaning and implications of such claims.

All environmental claims must be supported by evidence based on independent studies or third-party certifications, including voluntary sustainability standards (VSSs).

Obligation to Provide Adequate Disclosures

Any person making an environmental claim must comply with the following disclosure requirements:

Disclosure of Material Information and Transparency

All material information related to the environmental claim must be disclosed either directly in the advertisement or communication or via digital tools such as QR codes or URLs.



Disclosure of Balanced Evidence

It is prohibited to selectively present only favourable data from research while omitting or obscuring unfavourable findings.

Obligation to Be Specific About the Claim

Any environmental claim must clearly indicate what aspect of the good or service it refers to. This ensures that consumers are not misled about the extent of the environmental benefit. In particular, the claim must specify whether it pertains to

- the entire product or only a part of it
- the manufacturing process
- the packaging
- the manner of use of the product
- the disposal of the product
- the entire service or a portion of the service, or the process by which the service is delivered.

Comparative Environmental Claims

Any claim comparing the environmental performance of one product or service to another must rely on verifiable and relevant data, and must clearly specify the aspects being compared (e.g., energy use, recyclability).

Substantiation of Specific Environmental Claims

Specific environmental claims, such as “compostable,” “degradable,” “non-toxic,” “renewable,” and similar claims, must be supported by disclosure about credible certification, reliable scientific evidence, or independent third-party verification.

Accessibility

The disclosure made in relation to environmental claims shall (1) be easily accessible to the consumer, (2) not contradict the relevant environmental claim.

Obligation to Substantiate Aspirational or Forward-Looking Environmental Claims

Aspirational or forward-looking environmental claims, such as commitments to achieve carbon neutrality or reduce environmental impact in the future, must be made only when a clear and actionable plan outlines how the stated objectives will be achieved.

Enforcement and Penalties

Penalties for greenwashing are imposed under the Consumer Protection Act of 2019, which empowers the CCPA to take action against companies making false claims. Under the Act, first-time offenders may face imprisonment for up to 2 years and a fine of up to INR 10 lakh, while repeat offences can result in imprisonment of up to 5 years and fines of up to INR 50 lakh.



Benefits of the Greenwashing Guidelines for Consumers

The newly introduced Guidelines for the Prevention and Regulation of Green or Misleading Environmental Claims (2024) offer important consumer protections in an increasingly environmentally conscious market. These guidelines seek to enhance transparency, enabling consumers to make more informed decisions about the products they choose to purchase.

By clearly defining what constitutes genuine environmental claims and distinguishing them from misleading ones, the guidelines empower consumers to guard against potential deception. However, their effectiveness ultimately depends on consumers remaining alert and informed, as active engagement is essential to ensuring companies' compliance.

The new Guidelines represent a notable step forward in balancing consumer protection with environmental accountability, by equipping consumers with the information needed to make informed decisions, addressing deceptive marketing practices, and holding businesses to higher standards by promoting transparency and truthfulness in environmental claims.

As consumer awareness of sustainability issues grows, the Guidelines aim to create a level playing field where genuine eco-friendly products (and enterprises) can prosper (Citizen Consumer and Civic Action Group, 2025).

The guidelines are not intended to discourage manufacturers and service providers from pursuing environmental initiatives but to ensure that any such claims are presented transparently and with integrity. Businesses are encouraged to showcase their environmental efforts as long as these are supported by appropriate disclosures and credible evidence. By requiring companies to substantiate their environmental claims, the guidelines aim to create a marketplace where such claims are accurate and reliable, thereby strengthening consumer trust and promoting sustainable business practices (PIB Delhi, 2024; Sushma, 2025).

Achieving Compliance

Interactions with senior sustainability practitioners in the Indian industry, particularly from the fast-moving consumer goods, retail, and textile sectors, indicate that large consumer-facing businesses welcome the 2024 guidelines on greenwashing. These actors recognize the potential of the guidelines to bring greater coherence, credibility, and accountability to product sustainability information in the Indian market. They anticipate several key benefits, including the following:

- **enhanced consumer trust and brand integrity:** Clearer rules around environmental claims can help businesses differentiate themselves credibly, reinforcing consumer trust.
- **improved internal governance and sustainability benchmarking:** The guidelines encourage businesses to strengthen internal systems and controls for communicating product sustainability information.
- **long-term alignment with emerging global regulatory and market expectations:** As global regulatory frameworks on green claims evolve, creating sustainability market requirements, Indian businesses see value in aligning with such trends.



- **greater accountability and comparability across actors within the same sector/ value chain:** By clarifying expectations, the guidelines help level the playing field and enable more consistent comparisons.
- **enhanced quality of sustainability disclosures:** For the top 1,000 business entities required to submit annual Business Responsibility and Sustainability Reports in India, the guidelines offer additional clarity on how to communicate claims to the public in a credible and evidence-based manner.

At the same time, stakeholders also emphasized several areas where support would be necessary to ensure the guidelines are effectively implemented:

- **public awareness of the guidelines and expected benefits to consumers:** Many practitioners noted that there must be broader awareness among consumers, and public communication can also serve as a deterrence to misleading campaigns by irresponsible businesses that continue to rely on misleading environmental communication.
- **capacity-building support by VSS organizations:** Guidance is also needed in operationalizing credible communication of product sustainability information. Since third-party certification can serve as a tool to communicate this information, VSS organizations are well-positioned to help businesses effectively share product sustainability information with consumers.
- **support and capacity building for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs):** Given that many SMEs serve as suppliers and value chain partners of large businesses, they are closer to where the impacts happen. SMEs may lack the resources or expertise to meet the expectations set in the guidelines and will require targeted support to ensure their effective implementation.

These insights suggest that while the guidelines are a welcome development, their effectiveness will depend on parallel efforts to raise awareness, build capacity, and create enabling conditions for implementation across the entire value chain.



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