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Utilizing a Variable Material Approach to Combat Climate Change

JYOTI BHATTACHARJEE and SUBHASIS ROY*

Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Calcutta, 92 A.P.C. Road, Kolkata, India.

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Climate, the intricate coordinator of seasons and the creator of ecosystems, is crucial in shaping our world and affecting every aspect of its inhabitants. Climate change has accelerated recently, making it one of humanity's most critical concerns. Rising sea levels and more extreme weather events, agriculture, and water resources disruptions are already being felt worldwide due to global warming. Amid unprecedented environmental challenges, material science emerges as a beacon of hope, providing concrete solutions to protect our planet. This editorial write-up highlights the recent advancements providing insights into the novel material-based innovations to combat climate change.

Since Syukuro Manabe, Klaus Hasselmann, and Giorgio Parisi were awarded the Nobel Prize in 2021 for their work on physical modeling of the climate of the Earth, quantifying fluctuation, and reliably predicting global warming, the importance of novel batteries, renewable technologies, recycling equipment, have become essential for mitigating the effects of climate change.[1] Material research, emphasizing the smart manipulation of matter, has emerged as a crucial player in tackling the obstacles posed by unsustainable material consumption. Material scientists are paving the way for a circular economy in which resources are continuously utilized, reused, and recycled, minimizing waste and maximizing resource efficiency. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that climate change will cause over 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2040, mostly from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases.[2]

Climate variations are causing burdens on ecosystems worldwide, with effects ranging from deforestation to coral bleaching. Biomimetic materials mirror the natural structures and qualities of live organisms and are being created to safeguard coral reefs. Scientists are working on biomimetic scaffolds that can give

CONTACT Subhasis Roy subhasis1093@gmail.com Department of Chemical Engineering, University of Calcutta, 92 A.P.C. Road, Kolkata, India.

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structural support for damaged coral reefs, supporting their rehabilitation and growth. Artificial reefs are made from porous concrete that can provide a habitat for coral larvae and help restore damaged reefs. Similarly, artificial intelligence (AI) powered drones and sensors outfitted with sensors monitor coral reefs such as the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, offering early warnings of bleaching and acidification occurrences and assisting conservation efforts.[3]

On November 12, 2023, a volcano in Iceland erupted. The eruption occurred around 11:30 p.m. local time and could be seen from Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, roughly 100 kilometers away. A fissure in the Fagradalsfjall mountain range causes the eruption. Thor Thorson, professor of volcanology at the University of Iceland, told the BBC that magma was now less than 800m below the surface and that an eruption was imminent.[4] Accelerometers measure the acceleration of the ground and are used to detect P-waves, the fastest seismic waves that move through the Earth. Fiber optic sensors can identify minute patterns indicating an impending eruption by analyzing seismic data, gas emissions, and ground deformation. Satellite technology, geophones, and artificial intelligence (AI) have enabled continuous global monitoring of volcanic activity.[5]

Nanostructured sensors can detect smoke particles and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) produced by burning vegetation, providing important time for evacuation and firefighting activities. Fire-resistant materials, such as ceramic composites and intumescent coatings, can be utilized to build firebreaks and safeguard infrastructure in wildfire-prone locations. Self-healing materials can automatically mend cracks and damage, prolonging the lifespan of constructions exposed to extreme circumstances. Aerogels, which are 3D materials made up of a network of pores, are very light and have excellent thermal insulation properties. They can be used to develop new building materials that can help to reduce energy consumption for a sustainable ecosystem.[6] High-strength composites and flexible membranes can withstand the enormous forces of storm surges, averting floods and devastation.

Solar energy is a cornerstone in transitioning to a low-carbon future, and material science is at the forefront of improving its efficiency. Flexible perovskite solar cells and organic photovoltaics are reshaping the solar energy landscape since they are more efficient and less expensive than classic silicon solar cells. These materials have greater performance, cheaper production costs, and the capacity to be integrated into many surfaces, paving the path for the widespread use of solar technology and reducing our reliance on fossil fuels. Cesium tin iodide ($CsSnI_3$) is a perovskite substance being researched for usage in perovskite batteries. $CsSnI_3$ has a theoretical capacity of 840 mAh/g, significantly higher than standard lithium-ion batteries.[7]

Zeolites absorb CO_2 from the environment and can also be utilized to create novel catalysts for chemical reactions. Graphene is a single sheet of carbon atoms organized in a honeycomb lattice. It has a very high surface area and is an excellent CO_2 adsorbent. Metal-organic frameworks (MOFs) are porous material with metal ions and organic ligands. They have a large surface area and can be customized to selectively trap CO_2.[8] However, capturing CO_2 from industrial sources can be expensive, and there is a risk that CO_2 will leak from storage formations and into the atmosphere. Nanomaterials are being researched for sustainable wood coatings, increasing the longevity of wooden structures while decreasing the requirement for new timber.

Material scientists are leading the way in designing green packaging solutions that transcend the drawbacks of single-use plastics. Bioplastics from renewable materials like maize starch and sugarcane are promising alternatives. Recyclable nano-adsorbents like activated carbon and metal oxides can effectively trap contaminants in water and prevent their discharge into the environment. Photocatalytic nanomaterials, such as titanium dioxide, can destroy organic contaminants and pesticides in water by using sunlight.[9]

Recyclable battery materials made of solid-state electrolytes made lithium lanthanum titanate (LLTO), polymers have the potential to significantly improve battery energy density, extending EV longevity and contributing to sustainable development. Carbon fiber composites and high-strength alloys are making automobiles of lighter weight, without compromising on strength and safety [10]. Ford uses recycled plastics to make various car parts, such as bumpers and dashboards.

Material science and environmental life-cycle assessments can play a significant role in combating climate change by enhancing our ability to understand, monitor, and address ecotoxicity issues. Here are several ways in which different materials can be applied to tackle climate change[11-14]

- Perovskite Solar Cells: Perovskite solar cells have a better power conversion efficiency than silicon-based solar cells. Their low cost and ease of manufacture make them an appealing choice for harvesting solar energy and boosting the use of renewable energy sources.
- Biodegradable Materials: Biodegradable algae-based packaging materials solve the issue of plastic pollution in the oceans. These materials not only degrade naturally, even though they also can nourish marine habitats, making them a more sustainable alternative to conventional packaging. Mycelium, the root system of fungi, and hemp cultivation have gained popularity as a sustainable alternative to standard packaging materials. It is recyclable, uses fewer resources, and can replace environmentally hazardous materials such as Styrofoam.
- Fuel cell catalysts: Advanced nanomaterials can improve the efficiency and durability of fuel cells, which generate electricity from hydrogen and oxygen without emitting toxic emissions. For instance, researchers at the University of California, Berkeley have created a new catalyst that considerably decreases the cost and enhances the performance of fuel cells. Vanadium oxide nanoparticles are used in thermochromic smart windows that can switch from transparent to dark when heated, allowing for passive solar control and reducing the need for heating, cooling, and artificial lighting.
- Oceanic Plastic Upcycling: The continuous ocean pollution problem requires environmentally friendly solutions. Material Science steps in to help by inventing materials that can upcycle oceanic plastic garbage. In recent times Adidas has been developing shoes made from recycled ocean plastics, changing a source of pollution into a helpful resource. This decreases the environmental impact of plastic waste and raises awareness about the revolutionary potential of chemicals in addressing major global issues.
- Thermoelectric Materials: Many industrial operations waste a significant quantity of energy as waste heat. Temperature differences can create electricity in thermoelectric materials such as bismuth telluride and skutterudites. This innovation not only improves energy efficiency but also contributes to a reduction in overall energy consumption, greenhouse effect, and reduction of reliance on fossil fuels.
- Nano-sensors: Nanomaterial-based sensors provide real-time monitoring of environmental parameters. Carbon nanotube sensors, for instance, can detect and measure air contaminants in extremely low concentrations. These tiny sensors provide crucial data to government officials, allowing them to make more informed decisions in the fight against climate change and prevent deforestation. Electrochromic nanoparticles enable windows to tint in reaction to sunlight, lowering air cooling and heating requirements. This advancement enhances energy efficiency in buildings, an important part of sustainable urban development. Nanoparticles, such as zinc oxide, can decrease plant stresses, resulting in more effective fertilizer use and a less detrimental effect on the environment.
- Nanocomposites: Recyclable nanocomposites, such as carbon fiber-reinforced polymers, can manufacture lightweight vehicle components, improving fuel efficiency and cutting pollutants. For instance, researchers at the Fraunhofer Institute for Material and Beam Technology (IWS) developed a nanocomposite material that is 50% lighter than steel but has stronger strength and stiffness, making it ideal for use in automobiles. Advanced nanostructures can increase the efficiency and safety of batteries used in electric vehicles, cutting their carbon footprint and expanding their driving range. Scientists at the University of California, Los Angeles, have created a nano-textured surface that can reduce friction by up to 90%, potentially revolutionizing the design of bearings and other wear-and-tear parts in automobiles.

While the sustainable material world holds great potential, it's crucial to consider ethical implications, potential biases, and environmental impact. Additionally, collaborative efforts between governments, businesses, and the research community are essential for effectively implementing material science in the fight against climate change. However, many regions lack extraction, manufacture, and disposal techniques for certain sophisticated materials, resulting in pollution, resource depletion, and other adverse environmental effects. In summary, the studies outlined in this write-up demonstrate that incorporating new materials into the battle against climate variations represents a revolutionary force with the potential to restructure our approach to environmental sustainability.

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