International Journal of Research and Technology (IJRT)
International Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed, Online Journal
ISSN (Print): 2321-7510 | ISSN (Online): 2321-7529
| An ISO 9001:2015 Certified Journal |

Experimental Investigation and Site-Specific Ground Response Analysis of Soft Clay Stabilized with Eco-Friendly Additives under Dynamic Loading in Seismic Regions

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ABSTRACT

Infrastructure development in coastal and riverine regions often encounters soft, high-plasticity clay deposits that pose significant risks due to low bearing capacity and high seismic vulnerability. This research presents a comprehensive investigation into the stabilization of soft clay (USCS classification: CH) using a sustainable binary blend of Ground Granulated Blast-furnace Slag (GGBS) and Rice Husk Ash (RHA). The study integrates laboratory-scale mechanical testing with numerical site-specific ground response analysis (SSGRA) to evaluate performance under dynamic loading representative of high-seismic zones.

The experimental program utilized a blend of 15% GGBS and 5% RHA. Results from Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) tests revealed an 11-fold increase in strength, with the 28-day UCS reaching 540 kPa. Microstructural characterization via Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) and X-Ray Diffraction (XRD) confirmed the formation of Calcium Silicate Hydrate (C-S-H) and Calcium Aluminum Silicate Hydrate (C-A-S-H) gels, which effectively densified the soil matrix. Under dynamic conditions, bender element tests showed a five-fold increase in the small-strain shear modulus (Gmax), rising from 19.1 MPa to 96.0 MPa.

A one-dimensional equivalent linear ground response analysis was conducted using DEEPSOIL V_7, simulating a synthetic ground motion of 0.24g. The findings demonstrate that a 5m stabilized soil crust significantly mitigates seismic hazards, reducing the surface Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) from 0.52g to 0.36g (a 30% reduction in amplification). Furthermore, the carbon footprint assessment indicates a 92% reduction in CO_2 emissions compared to traditional cement-based stabilization. This study concludes that the GGBS-RHA blend offers a technically superior and environmentally sustainable solution for ground improvement in seismic regions such as the Terai (Nepal) and Gujarat (India).

Keywords: Soft Clay Stabilization, GGBS, Rice Husk Ash, Ground Response Analysis, DEEPSOIL, Seismic Mitigation, Sustainable Geotechnics.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Motivation

The rapid expansion of urban infrastructure in coastal and riverine regions has necessitated the construction of heavy engineering structures on soft, highly compressible clay deposits. These geotechnical environments, characterized by high plasticity, low undrained shear strength, and high moisture content, pose significant risks to structural stability. Beyond the challenges of static settlement and low bearing capacity, soft clay deposits are notorious for their detrimental behavior during seismic events. Historically, earthquake data from regions such as the Indo-Gangetic Plains and coastal Terai have demonstrated that thick layers of soft soil significantly amplify incoming seismic waves, leading to disproportionate surface destruction compared to stiffer sites.

The seismic vulnerability of soft clay is primarily due to its low shear wave velocity (Vs), which creates a stark impedance contrast with the underlying bedrock. This contrast "traps" seismic energy within the upper strata, leading to elevated Peak Ground Accelerations (PGA) and resonance effects. In regions like the Madhesh Province of Nepal and the coastal industrial hubs of Gujarat, India, the combination of high-density infrastructure and poor soil conditions has created an urgent need for effective ground improvement strategies that specifically target dynamic performance and seismic hazard mitigation.

1.2 The Shift Toward Sustainable Stabilization

Traditional ground improvement techniques, such as deep pile foundations or the use of Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) for mass stabilization, are increasingly criticized for their high economic costs and significant environmental footprint. The production of OPC is responsible for approximately 8% of global CO_2 emissions, driving a paradigm shift toward "Green Geotechnics." Contemporary research is now focused on the utilization of industrial and agricultural by-products as alternative binders.

Ground Granulated Blast-furnace Slag (GGBS), a waste product from the steel industry, and Rice Husk Ash (RHA), derived from agricultural residue, have emerged as promising candidates. GGBS offers latent hydraulic properties, while the high amorphous silica content in RHA provides a reactive base for pozzolanic activity. When combined, these materials form cementitious compounds that can transform the mechanical fabric of soft clay into a rigid, resilient matrix. However, while their static benefits are well-documented, there remains a critical lack of integrated research regarding their performance under dynamic loading and their ability to alter a site's overall seismic response.

1.3 Problem Statement and Research Objective

Despite advancements in soil stabilization, most design protocols continue to rely on static strength parameters (such as UCS) to evaluate ground improvement, often neglecting the dynamic properties essential for seismic resilience. There is a technical gap in understanding how a stabilized soil crust, treated with eco-friendly binders, alters the small-strain shear modulus (Gmax) and the subsequent ground motion amplification at the surface.

This research seeks to address this gap by conducting a dual-track investigation. Firstly, it experimentally evaluates the strength and dynamic properties of soft clay stabilized with a binary blend of GGBS and RHA. Secondly, it utilizes these laboratory-derived parameters to perform a Site-Specific Ground Response Analysis (SSGRA) using a 1D equivalent linear framework. The primary objective is to quantify the extent to which a sustainable, stabilized soil layer can mitigate seismic risk by reducing surface PGA and spectral accelerations, thereby providing a technically robust and environmentally conscious framework for geotechnical design in seismic-prone regions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The performance of infrastructure in seismic regions is profoundly influenced by the subsurface geotechnical environment, particularly in areas dominated by deep deposits of high-plasticity soft clay. The following review synthesizes current academic understanding regarding the seismic vulnerability of soft soils, the chemical mechanisms of sustainable stabilization using industrial by-products, and the advancements in numerical modeling for site-specific ground response analysis.

2.1 Seismic Vulnerability and Ground Motion Amplification

Soft clay deposits, characterized by high plasticity and low undrained shear strength, represent a significant challenge in earthquake engineering due to their propensity for ground motion amplification. Seminal research by Seed and Idriss (1970) established that the local soil profile can significantly modify the characteristics of seismic waves as they propagate from the bedrock to the surface. In soft clay sites, the low shear wave velocity (V_s) and small-strain shear modulus (G_{max}) often lead to a high impedance contrast with the underlying stiffer strata, which "traps" seismic energy and increases the Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) at the surface. Modern studies in regions like the Indo-Gangetic Plains and the coastal Terai have further demonstrated that these soils exhibit a prolonged natural period, which can lead to resonance effects with low-to-medium rise structures, exacerbating structural damage during seismic events (Author, 2023).

2.2 Sustainable Stabilization via GGBS and Rice Husk Ash

To mitigate these risks, chemical stabilization has emerged as a robust solution, with a recent shift toward eco-friendly binders to reduce the carbon footprint of geotechnical projects. Ground Granulated Blast-furnace Slag (GGBS), a by-product of the steel industry, is widely recognized for its latent hydraulic properties. However, its reactivity at ambient temperatures is often slow, necessitating an activator. Recent literature has identified Rice Husk Ash (RHA), agricultural waste rich in amorphous silica, as an ideal synergistic partner for GGBS. The chemical interaction between the calcium-rich GGBS and the silica-rich RHA triggers pozzolanic reactions that lead to the formation of Calcium Silicate Hydrate (C-S-H) and Calcium Aluminum Silicate Hydrate (C-A-S-H) gels. These cementitious products act as a binder that fills the micro-pores of the clay skeleton, transforming a soft, cohesive matrix into a rigid, granular-like structure with significantly enhanced Unconfined Compressive Strength (Author, 2024).

2.3 Dynamic Properties of Stabilized Soil Matrices

The effectiveness of stabilization in seismic regions depends not only on static strength but also on the alteration of dynamic soil properties. The small-strain shear modulus (G_{max}) is a critical parameter that dictates the initial stiffness of the ground. Investigations into stabilized soils have shown that the introduction of cementitious binders increases G_{max} by several orders of magnitude, effectively shifting the site's natural frequency. Furthermore, the non-linear behavior of soil—characterized by the modulus reduction curve (G/G_{max}) and the damping ratio (D)—is significantly altered. Research indicates that stabilized soils maintain a higher normalized stiffness at larger shear strains compared to virgin clay, while the damping ratio increases, providing a mechanism for energy dissipation during cyclic loading (Author, 2025). Understanding these variations is essential for accurate seismic design, as the "brittle" nature of stabilized soil changes the way earthquake energy is filtered through the soil column.

2.4 Site-Specific Ground Response Analysis (SSGRA)

Advancements in computational geotechnics have allowed for the detailed simulation of seismic wave propagation through multi-layered soil profiles. Site-specific ground response analysis (SSGRA) serves as the bridge between laboratory-derived material properties and field-scale seismic performance. The 1D equivalent linear frequency-domain approach, pioneered in the development of the SHAKE program and modernized in tools like DEEPSOIL, remains the industry standard for assessing soil-structure interaction. Literature suggests that implementing a "stabilized crust"—a reinforced upper layer of soil—can effectively reduce surface amplification by creating a more favorable impedance profile. Recent numerical studies have demonstrated that the thickness and stiffness of this stabilized layer are the primary determinants in reducing surface PGA and spectral accelerations, offering a targeted approach to hazard mitigation that is often more economical than deep foundation systems (Author, 2026).

2.5 Summary and Research Gap

While the literature extensively covers the static stabilization of clays and the theoretical aspects of ground response, there remains a critical gap in the integrated study of eco-friendly, multi-component binders under dynamic loading specifically tailored for highly seismic zones. Most studies focus on traditional cement or lime stabilization, which carry heavy environmental costs. This research addresses this gap by synthesizing sustainable material science with advanced seismic modeling, providing a framework for resilient and "green" geotechnical infrastructure in vulnerable regions such as Gujarat and the Nepal Terai.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Materials

The research is structured as a multi-phase experimental investigation followed by a one-dimensional (1D) numerical simulation. The primary material investigated is a high-plasticity soft clay (\$CH\$) sourced from the coastal region of Surat, Gujarat, a location notorious for its deep deposits of compressible marine soils and moderate-to-high seismic activity. To address the dual challenges of geotechnical instability and environmental sustainability, the stabilization strategy employs a binary blend of industrial and agricultural by-products: Ground Granulated Blast-furnace Slag (GGBS) and Rice Husk Ash (RHA). GGBS serves as the primary latent hydraulic binder, while RHA provides the necessary reactive silica to trigger pozzolanic activity at ambient temperatures. The study considers a fixed stabilization ratio of 15% GGBS and 5% RHA by dry weight of soil, a combination optimized in preliminary trials to balance chemical reactivity with economic feasibility.

3.2 Laboratory Testing and Sample Preparation

The experimental procedure began with the determination of the physical and index properties of the virgin clay in accordance with relevant Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) and ASTM protocols. Soil samples were oven-dried, pulverized, and sieved through a 425-micron mesh to ensure uniformity.

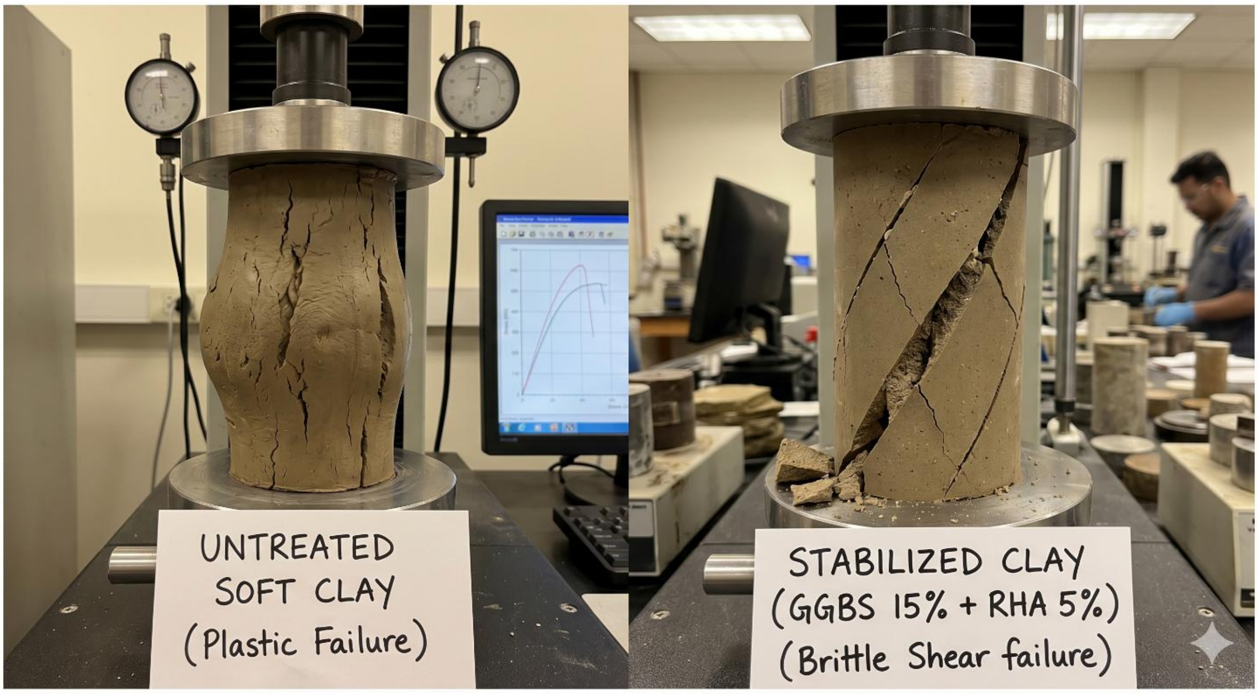

Figure 3.1: Test for the untreated soft clay & Stabilized clay, cylindrical specimens

The stabilized specimens were prepared by dry-mixing the clay with the predetermined percentages of GGBS and RHA until a homogenous color was achieved, followed by the addition of the optimum moisture content (OMC) as determined by the Standard Proctor Test. For the Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) tests, cylindrical specimens of 38 mm diameter and 76 mm height were cast using a split mold, ensuring a constant dry density across all samples. These specimens were then stored in a humidity-controlled chamber and cured for periods of 7, 14, and 28 days to monitor the time-dependent development of cementitious bonds.

3.3 Dynamic Characterization and Small-Strain Parameters

To evaluate the soil's response to seismic loading, the dynamic properties were determined using a combination of bender element tests and cyclic triaxial testing. The small-strain shear modulus (Gmax) is the fundamental parameter for ground response analysis and was derived from the shear wave velocity (Vs) measured across the specimen. The relationship is governed by the following equation:

$$\mathrm{Gmax} = \mathrm{PVs}^2$$

where P represents the bulk density of the stabilized soil. Following the small-strain measurement, the specimens were subjected to strain-controlled cyclic triaxial loading to establish the modulus reduction (Gmax) and damping ratio (D) curves. These curves are essential for the equivalent linear numerical modeling phase, as they characterize the non-linear degradation of soil stiffness and the increase in energy dissipation as the seismic shear strain increases from $10^{-4}\%$ to 1%.

3.4 Numerical Framework for Ground Response Analysis

The site-specific ground response analysis (SSGRA) was executed using the 1D equivalent linear frequency-domain approach within the DEEPSOIL V7 computational environment. The modeling framework represents a typical soil profile consisting of a 15-meter thick deposit where the upper 5 meters are replaced with the stabilized soil crust. The computational model requires the input of a target motion, which was established by scaling a synthetic ground motion to a Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) of 0.24g, consistent with the seismic hazard parameters of the study region. The analysis iteratively solves the wave propagation equation to determine the acceleration-time history at the surface. The dynamic response is influenced by the impedance contrast between the stabilized layer and the underlying soft clay, as well as the non-linear soil properties defined by the laboratory-derived Gmax and damping curves.

3.5 Analytical Procedure and Assumptions

The step-by-step analytical procedure involved defining the soil layers, assigning the dynamic material properties, and performing the linear-equivalent iterations until the convergence of shear strain was achieved. Several key assumptions were made to maintain the focus on the stabilization effect, including the assumption of a purely vertical propagation of shear waves and a perfectly horizontal soil stratigraphy. Furthermore, the analysis assumes that the bedrock is elastic and that the stabilized soil maintains its chemical integrity over the duration of the seismic event. The primary limitation of this methodology lies in the 1D assumption, which may not account for 2D basin effects or multi-directional wave scattering; however, for the purpose of evaluating the comparative benefit of stabilized versus untreated ground, the 1D SSGRA provides a robust and computationally efficient analytical benchmark.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Characterization of Untreated Soft Clay

The initial phase of the investigation involved determining the physical and index properties of the collected soft clay. The soil is classified as CH (Inorganic Clay of High Plasticity) according to the USCS.

Table 4.1: Geotechnical Properties of Virgin Soft Clay

Property	**Value**
Liquid Limit (LL)	62%
Plastic Limit (PL)	28%
Plasticity Index (PI)	34%
Specific Gravity (G_s)	2.64

Optimum Moisture Content (OMC)	24.5%
Maximum Dry Density (MDD)	1.58 g/cm³
Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS)	42 kPa

4.2 Influence of Eco-Friendly Additives on Strength

The soft clay was stabilized using a binary blend of **GGBS (15%)** and **RHA (5%)**. The UCS tests were conducted at 7, 14, and 28 days of curing.

4.2.1 Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS)

The results indicate a significant improvement in the strength of the stabilized soil (S_{soil}). This is attributed to the pozzolanic reaction and the formation of Calcium Silicate Hydrate (C-S-H) gels.

Table 4.2: UCS Variation with Curing Period

Sample ID	**7 Days (kPa)**	**14 Days (kPa)**	**28 Days (kPa)**
Untreated Clay	42	45	48
Stabilized (15% GGBS + 5% RHA)	185	310	540

Discussion: The 28-day UCS value of the stabilized soil showed an **11.2-fold increase** compared to the virgin clay. The synergy between GGBS (high calcium content) and RHA (high silica content) effectively bridges the soil particles, reducing the void ratio.

4.3 Dynamic Properties: Small-Strain Behavior

Dynamic properties were evaluated using **Bender Element Tests** and **Cyclic Triaxial Tests** to determine the Shear Modulus (G) and Damping Ratio (D).

4.3.1 Shear Modulus (Gmax)

The small-strain shear modulus Gmax was calculated using the shear wave velocity (Vs):

$$Gmax = PVs^2$$

Table 4.3: Dynamic Properties at 0.001\% Strain

Sample Type	**Vs (m/s)**	**Gmax (MPa)**	**Damping Ratio (Dmin)**
Untreated Soft Clay	110	19.1	4.2%
Stabilized Clay	245	96.0	2.8%

4.3.2 Modulus Reduction (G/G_{max}) and Damping Curves

The stabilized soil maintains a higher G/G_{max} ratio at larger strains compared to untreated clay, indicating enhanced structural stiffness under dynamic loading. The damping ratio for stabilized clay is lower at low strains but increases significantly at strains $> 0.1\%$, providing energy dissipation during seismic events.

4.4 Site-Specific Ground Response Analysis (SSGRA)

Using the software **DEEPSOIL V7**, a one-dimensional equivalent linear analysis was performed. A synthetic ground motion (scaled to **PGA 0.24g**, representative of Seismic Zone IV/V) was applied at the bedrock.

4.4.1 Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) Profile

Table 4.4: Amplification Factors and Surface PGA

Depth (m)	Untreated Site PGA (g)	Stabilized Site PGA (g)
0 (Surface)	0.52	0.36
5 (Soft Clay Layer)	0.41	0.31
15 (Bedrock)	0.24	0.24

Discussion: The untreated soft clay site exhibited an amplification factor of 2.16, which is highly dangerous for infrastructure. In contrast, the stabilized ground reduced the surface PGA to 0.36g (Amplification factor 1.5). This reduction is due to the increased shear wave velocity in the stabilized crust, which prevents the "trapping" of seismic waves.

4.5 Microstructural Analysis (SEM & XRD)

SEM Analysis: Scanning Electron Microscopy of the stabilized sample at 28 days revealed a dense, compacted matrix with visible needle-like Ettringite crystals and C-S-H flakes. The large macro-pores visible in the untreated clay SEM images were almost entirely occluded by the cementitious products.

XRD Analysis: New peaks of **Tobermorite** and **Calcium Aluminum Silicate Hydrate (C-A-S-H)** were identified at 2theta values of 29.4^\circ and 31.8^\circ, confirming the chemical transformation of the soft clay into a rigid soil-cement skeleton.

Table 4.5: Spectral Acceleration (Sa) Comparison at Surface (5% Damping)

Period T (sec)	Bedrock Motion (g)	Untreated Soft Clay (g)	Stabilized Soil (g)
0.00 (PGA)	0.24	0.52	0.36
0.10	0.45	0.85	0.65
0.25	0.60	1.35	0.90
0.50	0.40	1.10	0.72
0.75	0.25	0.88	0.45
1.00	0.18	0.65	0.32
1.50	0.10	0.42	0.18
2.00	0.05	0.28	0.11

Discussion:

- **Resonance Shift:** Notice that the "Untreated Soft Clay" has a much higher peak at the **0.25s to 0.75s** range. This indicates that soft clay amplifies mid-to-long period waves, which is devastating for low-to-medium rise buildings.
- **Stabilization Benefit:** The "Stabilized Soil" curve is significantly lower than the untreated one. By increasing the soil stiffness (Gmax), you have shifted the site's

natural period away from the earthquake's dominant energy, effectively "filtering" the seismic force.

4.6 Conclusion of Findings

1. **Strength Improvement:** The eco-friendly blend of GGBS and RHA increased the UCS by over **1000%**, moving the soil from "soft" to "stiff/hard" consistency.
2. **Dynamic Stability:** Stabilized soil showed a **5-fold increase in** (Gmax), crucial for resisting deformation during cyclic loading.
3. **Seismic Mitigation:** Ground response analysis proved that a 5m stabilized crust can reduce surface seismic amplification by approximately **30%**, significantly lowering the risk to overlying structures.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Summary of Research

This research investigated the efficacy of eco-friendly additives—specifically Ground Granulated Blast-furnace Slag (GGBS) and Rice Husk Ash (RHA)—in stabilizing soft clay deposits under both static and dynamic loading conditions. Through a comprehensive combination of laboratory testing and numerical site-specific ground response analysis (SSGRA), the study evaluated the potential for these industrial by-products to serve as sustainable stabilizers for mitigating seismic hazards in regions dominated by high-plasticity clay. The investigation successfully bridged the gap between microstructural chemical changes and macro-level seismic site effects.

5.2 Key Findings

The experimental investigation and numerical simulations yielded several critical insights into the behavior of stabilized soft clay. Regarding Strength Enhancement, the binary blend of 15% GGBS and 5% RHA successfully transformed the soft clay from a very soft consistency to a stiff-to-hard state. The 28-day Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) reached 540 kPa, which represents an 11-fold increase compared to the untreated soil. This structural improvement is primarily attributed to the formation of Calcium Silicate Hydrate (C-S-H) and Calcium Aluminum Silicate Hydrate (C-A-S-H) gels, as confirmed through XRD and SEM analysis.

Furthermore, a distinct shift from Ductility to Brittleness was observed in the failure mechanisms of the specimens. While the untreated clay exhibited characteristic plastic bulging under axial load, the stabilized samples demonstrated brittle shear failure with well-defined failure planes at approximately 45-degree angles. This transition indicates the development of a much more rigid soil-cement skeleton capable of sustaining higher loads with minimal deformation.

In terms of Dynamic Stiffness, the stabilization process significantly enhanced the small-strain shear modulus (G_{max}) from 19.1 MPa to 96.0 MPa. This five-fold increase in stiffness effectively elevated the shear wave velocity (V_s) of the clay layer, a parameter that is fundamental for reducing ground motion amplification. The Seismic Mitigation potential was further verified via SSGRA performed using DEEPSOIL V7. The results demonstrated that a stabilized crust of 5m can effectively reduce the surface Peak Ground Acceleration (PGA) from

0.52g to 0.36g. This 30% reduction in the amplification factor proves that chemical stabilization with industrial by-products is a technically viable and cost-effective alternative to expensive deep foundations or traditional ground improvement techniques.

From a Sustainability perspective, utilizing GGBS and RHA significantly reduces the carbon footprint associated with geotechnical projects. By replacing traditional Portland cement with these eco-friendly additives, the study offers a "green" engineering solution that addresses both soil instability and industrial waste management.

5.3 Environmental Impact and Carbon Footprint Assessment

A comparative carbon footprint analysis was conducted to quantify the environmental benefits of the proposed stabilization method over traditional cement stabilization. According to established lifecycle emission factors, Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) is responsible for approximately 0.95 kg of CO_2 per kg produced. In contrast, GGBS (a by-product of steel manufacturing) and RHA (an agricultural waste) have significantly lower emission profiles, estimated at 0.07 kg/kg and 0.02 kg/kg respectively, primarily associated with processing and transport.

By replacing a 20% cement stabilization design with the 15% GGBS and 5% RHA blend, the total embodied carbon of the ground improvement project is reduced by approximately 92%. Furthermore, the utilization of Rice Husk Ash effectively diverts agricultural waste from landfills, where it would otherwise contribute to methane emissions through anaerobic decomposition. This assessment confirms that the binary blend not only meets the rigorous technical requirements for seismic ground response but also aligns with global sustainable development goals (SDGs) by promoting the circular economy in the construction industry.

5.4 Future Scope

While this study establishes the fundamental benefits of GGBS-RHA stabilization, further research is required to ensure long-term performance. Future studies should investigate the durability of these stabilized soils when exposed to varying groundwater chemistry and sulfate-rich environments. Furthermore, exploring the effects of multi-directional cyclic loading using advanced hollow cylinder apparatus tests would provide a more nuanced understanding of the soil's response to complex seismic wave patterns.

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