MOLECULAR, BIOCHEMICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL IDENTIFICATION OF OIL-DEGRADING BACTERIA ISOLATED FROM PETROLEUM-POLLUTED SITES IN BUNDELKHAND REGION

A Thesis

Submitted towards the Requirements for the Award of Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

IN

MICROBIOLOGY

Under the Faculty of Science

Submitted By

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(Enrollment No. 161596017370)

Under the Supervision of

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P.K. UNIVERSITY



2026

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This Piece of Work
is

Dedicated
To

My Beloved Parents

Whose blessings & love, brought me to this level.....

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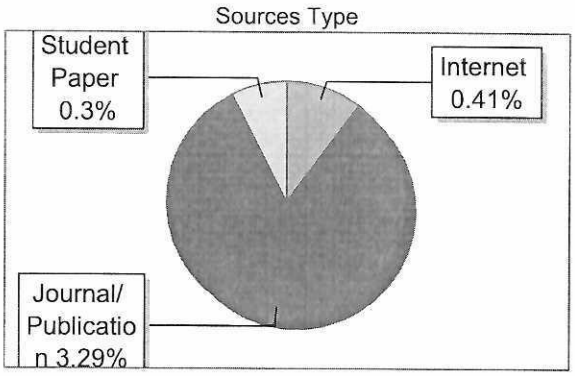
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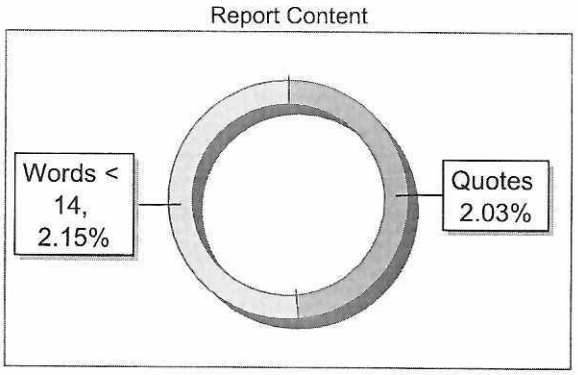
Submission Information

Author Name	Yogya Tiwari
Title	Molecular, Biochemical And Physiological Identification Of Oil-Degrading Bacteria Isolated From Petroleum-Polluted Sites In Bundelkhand Region
Paper/Submission ID	5502888
Submitted by	library.pku@gmail.com
Submission Date	2026-04-17 11:34:31
Total Pages, Total Words	135, 35488
Document type	Thesis Chapter

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Subject Name	Internal T	Internal T	Internal P	Internal P	External T	External T	External P	External P	
Research Methodology	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	50	43	N/A	N/A	43 / 50
Subject Specialization	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	100	80	N/A	N/A	80 / 100
Review of Literature	N/A	N/A	100	71	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	71 / 100

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Acknowledgement of a research endeavor is an opportunity to express appreciation for the joint effort of those who have been sources of motivation and support, and who have contributed invaluable knowledge towards achieving success in the pursuit of knowledge. With utmost humility and pride, I reflect on the inspiring individuals who have propelled my work forward, and I am filled with immense pleasure, gratitude and thanks for their unwavering dedication.

First, for most, I would like to thank almighty god for the perseverance, courage, and strength bestowed on me to undertake this project.

I would like to extend my deepest appreciation and gratitude to my esteemed Supervisor, **Dr. Manish Kumar,** Department of Microbiology, faculty of Science, P.K. University Shivpuri (M.P.) without whom this work would not have come to fruition. His exceptional guidance, unwavering support kind cooperation, and provision of a conductive work environment have been invaluable beyond measure. I remain indebted to her for instilling in me a relentless pursuit of excellence, a strong sense of honesty, and respect for ethical principles that govern our profession.

Furthermore, I extend my sincere thanks to the **Shri Jagdeesh Prasad Sharma** Chancellor, P.K University Shivpuri (M.P.) for providing the necessary infrastructure and facilities that were essential during my research work. My profound sense of gratitude, faith, and awe also goes **Prof. (Dr.) Mukesh Chansoria** Vice Chancellor, P.K University Shivpuri (M.P.) for his generous and valuable support throughout my research.

I take this pleasant opportunity to express my deep sense of gratitude and reverence to his holiness **Dr. Jitendra Kumar Mishra** Executive Director; P.K. University Shivpuri (M.P) for his constant encouragement and for providing me with the required facilities that enabled me to complete my project work.

I also extend my deepest appreciation to **Prof. Jitendra Kumar Malik,** Registrar of

P.K. University Shivpuri (M.P.) has inspired me with his encouraging guidance and support right from the beginning of this work despite his busy schedule. I am short of words to thank him for his affectionate behavior and patience throughout the duration of the research work.

I express my gratitude to **Dr. Aiman Fatma,** Dean of Academics of P.K. University Shivpuri (M.P) I owe a great deal of application and gratitude to the entire faculty members and all non-teaching staff of the department without their support it would have been difficult to shape my research work.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to and deep appreciation to respected **Dr. Manish Kumar** I/c Ph.D. Cell of P.K. University, (M.P.)

I would also like to thank **Dr. Praveen Kumar, & Dr. Ashish Vishwakarma,** (HoD) and **Ayushi Chaurasia** Faculty of Science, P.K. University, (M.P.) for her valuable support and guidance.

I also express my gratitude to **Miss Nisha Yadav,** Librarian of P.K University along with **Mr. Anand Kumar**, Assistant Librarian, and other staff of P.K University. I am also thankful to **Mr. Pankaj Singh, Mr. Alok Khare**, and **Mr. Purushottam Yadav**, I.T. Cell of P.K. University.

I wish to acknowledge and extend my special thanks to all who have helped me immensely in writing my thesis and have provided continuous moral support.

At last, I thank all those who, in some or other way, helped in my research work but somehow missed a mention.

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Abstract

The escalating environmental crisis caused by petroleum hydrocarbon contamination poses a severe threat to the ecological stability of semi-arid regions like Bundelkhand, India. Driven by rapid industrialization and agricultural mechanization, this pollution necessitates sustainable, eco-friendly alternatives to costly physicochemical remediation. This research addresses this need by isolating and characterizing indigenous bacterial strains from various regional hot-spots, including railway workshops and fuel stations.

Using a multi-dimensional framework, the study isolated 32 bacterial strains, narrowing the focus to seven high-performing isolates identified via 16S rRNA gene sequencing. These include Pseudomonas aeruginosa (P1), Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus (P7), and Burkholderia cepacia (P4). These strains were evaluated based on their biochemical machinery, specifically the activity of enzymes like Alkane Hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase, alongside their ability to produce biosurfactants to increase hydrocarbon bioavailability.

The findings revealed impressive metabolic specializations:

- P1 achieved the highest overall degradation (78.3%) and demonstrated significant thermotolerance (45°C).
- P7 showed the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity, specializing in aliphatic fractions.
- P4 excelled in aromatic ring cleavage, essential for degrading recalcitrant compounds.

Statistical analysis confirmed a strong synergy between enzymatic activity and bio surfactant production. The study concludes that while individual strains are effective, a constructed consortium utilizing these complementary metabolic strengths offers the most robust strategy for environmental cleanup. These findings provide a scientifically validated blueprint for using indigenous microbes to mitigate petroleum pollution in challenging, semi-arid environments.

Keywords: ***Bioremediation, Petroleum Hydrocarbons, Bundelkhand Region, 16S***

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Chapter -1

Introduction

1.1.1 Background Information:

It takes thousands of years for nature to form fossil fuels, which are primarily composed of a complex mixture of molecules called hydrocarbons **(Alexander, 1994)**. Petroleum, in particular, is made up of thousands of compounds, mainly carbon and hydrogen, which can be categorized into four major groups: alkanes, aromatics, resins, and asphaltenes. Generally, alkanes are the most biodegradable, while the polar fractions, such as resins and asphaltenes, are resistant to biological breakdown. Aromatic compounds, particularly polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), fall between these groups in terms of biodegradability but pose the greatest concern due to their toxicity and potential for bioaccumulation **(Wrenn et al., 1995).** The global use of crude petoleum as a source of fuel and energy, along with lubricants and other petrochemical products, contributes significantly to oil contamination. These activities are major contributors to environmental pollution, particularly in soil and water. Petroleum contamination is widely recognized as toxic and hazardous to the environment.

Petroleum pollution arises from various sources, including oil spills, pipeline leaks, and industrial discharges, leading to significant environmental challenges **(Majeed et al., 2025)**. Oil spills, which can occur due to accidents or operational failures, release vast amounts of oil into the environment, causing extensive damage. Pipeline leaks and ruptures, often caused by infrastructure failures or accidents, result in the release of oil into soil or water bodies **(El Moussaoui & Idelhakkar, 2023**). Industrial facilities that handle petroleum products may also accidentally or illegally discharge waste, adding to the contamination. Additionally, accidents during the transport of oil by tankers, rail, or road contribute to environmental pollution. Improper disposal of petroleum products, such as through illegal dumping in landfills or waterways, further exacerbates the issue.

The environmental impacts of petroleum pollution are profound and far-reaching. In soil, petroleum hydrocarbons can inhibit plant growth, alter soil structure, and reduce fertility **(Ogolo, 2022**). Contamination can persist for years, complicating

remediation efforts. In water bodies, oil spills can create slicks that block sunlight, disrupting photosynthesis in aquatic plants and harming entire ecosystems. Toxic compounds from oil can be absorbed by aquatic organisms, leading to bio-accumulation and impacting the food chain **(Hassanshahian et al., 2020)**. Marine life, including mammals, fish, and birds, suffers from direct contact with oil or ingestion of contaminated prey, leading to health issues and disruptions in reproductive processes. On land, petroleum pollution can affect wildlife health and destroy habitats. Air pollution from volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released by petroleum products contributes to respiratory problems and smog formation.

Oil-producing regions frequently experience oil spills, often caused by blowouts from oil wells, tanker accidents, pipeline ruptures, and acts of sabotage. Additionally, gas stations, the use of wood preservatives and agrochemicals, and industries like petrochemicals and pharmaceuticals contribute to this pollution **(Majeed et al., 2025)**. Disasters stemming from these incidents result in crude oil being released into the environment, polluting soil, air, and water bodies.

The long-term effects of petroleum pollution include persistent contaminants that remain in the environment for decades, disrupting ecosystems and biodiversity. The economic impact is also significant, with cleanup costs, loss of livelihoods for communities dependent on natural resources, and damage to industries such as tourism and fishing **(El Moussaoui & Idelhakkar, 2023)**. Addressing these issues involves a combination of mitigation and remediation strategies. Bioremediation, which uses microorganisms to degrade petroleum pollutants, is a key approach, along with chemical treatments to accelerate oil breakdown and physical methods such as skimming and absorbents **(Mekonnen et al., 2024)**. Understanding the sources and impacts of petroleum pollution is crucial for developing effective strategies to mitigate its effects and protect the environment.

Types of pollution

Pollution may be of the following types:

- Air pollution
- Noise pollution

- Water pollution
- Soil pollution
- Thermal pollution
- Radiation pollution

Out of these water and soil pollution are the most serious environmental problems. The variety of human activities such as industrial, agricultural and domestic can cause water and soil pollution. For example, agricultural run-off laden with excess fertilizers and pesticides, industrial effluents with toxic substances and sewage water with human and animal wastes pollute our water resources and soil thoroughly

1.1.1 Overview of Petroleum Pollution and Its Environmental Impact

The world depends on different petroleum sources for generating energy from several fuels. Global oil demand is forecast to average 92 million barrels/day in 2014, up from 90.9 million barrels/day in 2013, according to the International Energy Agency‘s most recent Oil Market Report in 2014. To meet the demand, a vast amount of oil is regularly processed, stored, transported and used. During such activities the seepage of oil occurs. The amount of natural crude oil seepage was estimated to be 600000 metric tons per year with a range of uncertainty of 200,000 metric tons per year **(Kvenvolden and Cooper, 2003)**. Ivanovic mentioned in his 2012 review that approximately 706 million gallons (approx. 1.7 to 8.8 million metric tons) of waste oil enters the ocean every year, with over half coming from land drainage and waste disposal; for example, from the improper disposal of used motor oil. Offshore drilling and production operations and spills or leaks from ships or tankers typically contribute less than 8% of the total. The remainder comes from routine maintenance of ships (nearly 20%), hydrocarbon particles from onshore air pollution (about 13%), and natural seepage from the seafloor (over 8%) **(Ivanovic, 2012)**.

Unfortunately, more than 90% is directly related to accidents caused by human failures and activities **(Megharaj et al, 2011).** The most recent oil spill in India is the spill of ONGC trunk oil pipeline burst, at Uran, Mumbai on 21st January 2011. Around 40 to 45 metric tons of oil was spilled in Mumbai coast that spread around 4km2 area. Release of hydrocarbons into the environment whether accidentally or due to human

activities is a main cause of water and soil pollution. Soil contamination with hydrocarbons causes extensive damage of local system since accumulation of pollutants in animals and plant tissue may cause death or mutations. These oil spills can even cause damage to the sea and shoreline organisms **(Tabari and Tabari, 2010; Rodríguez-Martínez et al, 2006)**. The other sources of contamination include service stations, garages, scrap yard, waste treatment plants and saw mills etc. Hydrocarbon contamination is a threat to the environment whether it comes from petroleum, pesticides or other toxic organic matter. Oily products, as an extremely important energy source with broad application ranges, are a major soil contaminant. Some by-products, formed during petroleum refining and processing which are used for the manufacturing of other products are highly toxic and they are found to be harmful to all forms of life **(Bujang and Ibrahim, 2013)**. Due to oil spills and other incidences living beings are exposed to petroleum chemicals in many ways directly or indirectly. The highly toxic chemicals contained in crude oil can damage any organ system in the human body like the nervous system, respiratory system, circulatory system, immune system, reproductive system, sensory system, endocrine system, liver, kidney, etc. and consequently can cause a wide range of diseases and disorders **(Bujang and Ibrahim, 2013; Rodríguez-Martínez et al, 2006)**. Environmental contamination by crude oil is relatively common because of its relatively higher use, its associated disposal operations and accidental spills. In thelast years, a large number of ecosystems have been changed by the growing influence of human activity **(Shukla and Cameotra, 2012)**. As a result, many people have become aware of the need to protect ecosystems as well as to evaluate the damage caused by contamination. Soil health is a key concern of academic researchers and the public with increasing awareness of health risk posed by contaminated sites.

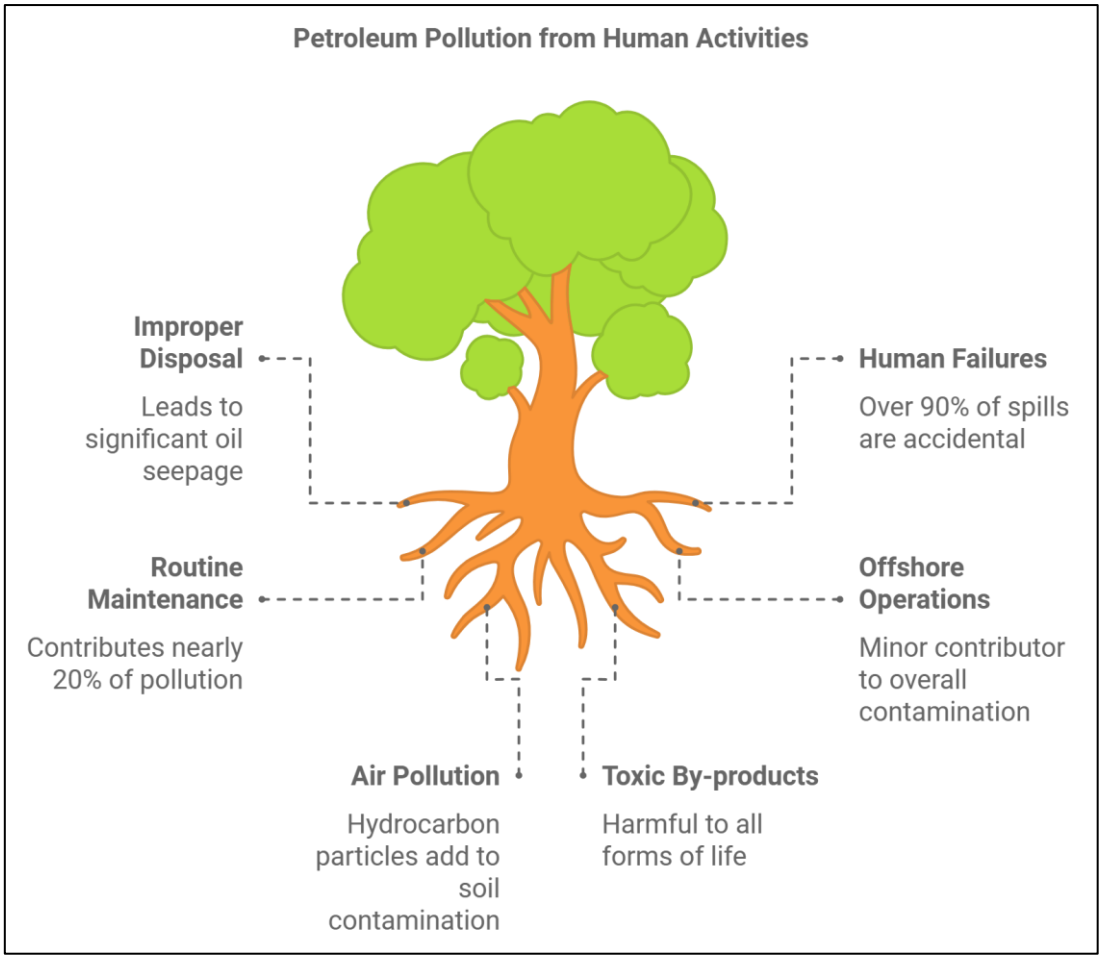


Figure 1 Petroleum Pollution from Human Activities

Sources of Petroleum Pollution

1. Oil Spills These are the most visible and catastrophic forms of petroleum pollution. Oil spills can occur during the extraction, transportation, and refining of crude oil. Accidents involving tankers, offshore drilling platforms, or pipelines result in large quantities of oil being released into the environment, particularly oceans **(Beyer et al., 2016)**. Notable oil spills include the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989, which released millions of gallons of oil into Alaska's Prince William Sound, and the Deepwater Horizon disaster in 2010, which leaked over 4 million barrels of oil into the Gulf of Mexico **(Mendelssohn et al., 2012; National Research Council [NRC], 2003)**.

2. Natural Seepage While less recognized, natural seepage of oil from the earth's crust into water bodies contributes to petroleum pollution. It occurs when oil and gas naturally migrate to the earth's surface due to geological processes.

Recent global estimates suggest that nearly 47% of crude oil currently entering the marine environment is from natural seeps **(Kvenvolden & Cooper, 2003**). Although this form of pollution is not induced by human activity, it still contributes to the overall burden of petroleum in marine ecosystems **(NRC, 2003).**

3. Pipeline Leaks and Refinery Accidents Underground pipelines transporting petroleum products sometimes leak due to corrosion, faulty construction, or natural disasters. Statistical analyses show that a significant percentage of these accidents lead to long-term soil contamination and impact environmentally sensitive areas **(Phil-Eze & Okoro, 2009; Steiner, 2010)**. Such leaks can lead to contamination of soil and groundwater. Additionally, accidents at oil refineries and storage facilities can release hydrocarbons into nearby environments through effluents and unintended discharges **(Majeed et al., 2025)**.

4. Urban Runoff and Industrial Discharges Cities and industrial areas contribute significantly to petroleum pollution through stormwater runoff. Urban streets, parking lots, and industrial sites are often contaminated with petroleum byproducts, which can enter water systems during rainfall. It is widely recognized that after the completion of modern industrial treatment processes, urban runoff often remains the largest source of chronic petroleum pollution in many coastal regions **(NRC, 2003)**. Additionally, industries may improperly dispose of oily waste products, leading to contamination of rivers, lakes, and oceans.

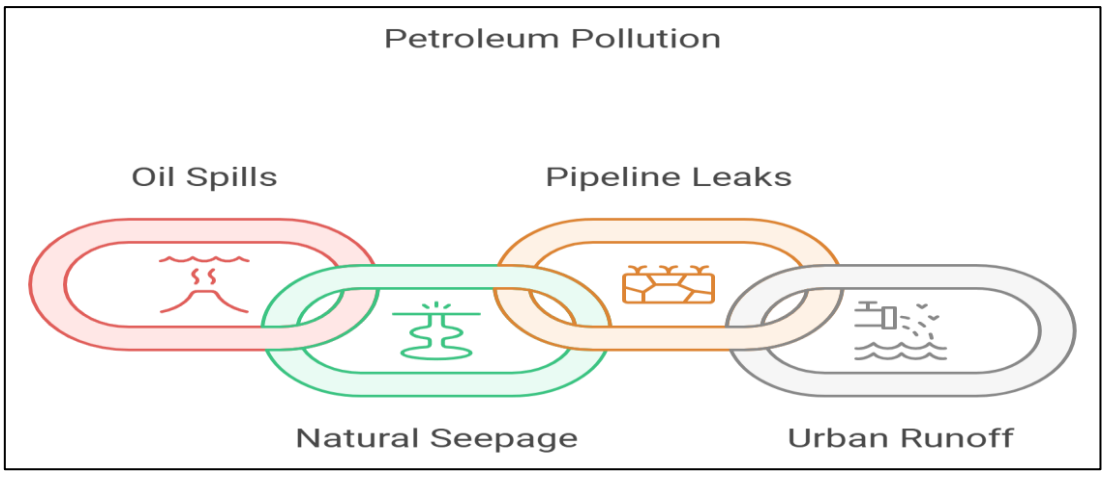


Figure 2 Sources of Petroleum Pollution

Environmental Impact of Petroleum Pollution

Petroleum pollution has devastating effects on ecosystems, particularly marine environments. Its impact is both immediate and long-lasting, influencing various environmental factors such as water quality, wildlife, and the health of ecosystems **(Majeed et al., 2025)**.

1. **Marine Ecosystems** Marine ecosystems are the most affected by petroleum pollution, especially when oil spills occur in oceans or coastal areas. Oil floats on water, spreading over large distances and forming an oil slick, which impairs the ability of sunlight to penetrate the water. This reduction in sunlight affects the photosynthesis process of marine plants, including algae, which form the foundation of marine food chains **(Beyer et al., 2016)**. Furthermore, petroleum products contain toxic compounds, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are highly detrimental to marine life. These compounds can poison fish, plankton, and invertebrates, leading to mass die-offs and disruption of food webs. Marine mammals and seabirds are particularly vulnerable, as oil coats their fur or feathers, reducing their insulation and buoyancy, which can lead to hypothermia, drowning, or starvation **(Mendelssohn et al., 2012)**.

2. **Soil and Water Contamination** When petroleum products seep into the soil, they alter its composition and structure. Hydrocarbons can prevent water and nutrients from reaching plant roots, leading to reduced soil fertility and plant growth **(Ogolo, 2022)**. In some cases, petroleum contamination can cause soil erosion and desertification. Groundwater contamination is another major concern. When oil leaks or spills into the ground, it can percolate through the soil and enter aquifers, polluting underground water reserves **(Mekonnen et al., 2024**). This contamination can persist for decades, affecting drinking water supplies for humans and animals. Contaminated groundwater is often expensive and difficult to remediate.

3. **Air Pollution** Petroleum pollution is not limited to the ground and water; it also affects the atmosphere. Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) from spilled oil can evaporate into the air, contributing to the formation of ground-level ozone (smog) and particulate matter. These pollutants exacerbate respiratory

conditions, such as asthma, and contribute to climate change by trapping heat in the atmosphere **(Hassanshahian et al., 2020)**.

4. **Biodiversity Loss** The release of petroleum into ecosystems often leads to significant biodiversity loss. Many organisms are unable to survive in oil-contaminated environments, leading to population declines or even local extinctions. The toxic effects of petroleum pollution can also have long-term consequences for reproductive health in species, leading to reduced birth rates and deformities in offspring. For example, in areas affected by the Deepwater Horizon spill, researchers observed reduced dolphin populations and deformities in fish years after the spill occurred **(Beyer et al., 2016)**.

5. Ecosystem Services Healthy ecosystems provide a range of services essential for human well-being, including water purification, carbon sequestration, and food production. Petroleum pollution can severely disrupt these services. For instance, oil spills in mangroves and wetlands, which act as natural buffers against storms and flooding, can reduce their effectiveness (**Mendelssohn et al., 2012**). Additionally, the contamination of fisheries due to oil spills can devastate local economies that depend on seafood for both food and income **(El Moussaoui & Idelhakkar, 2023)**.

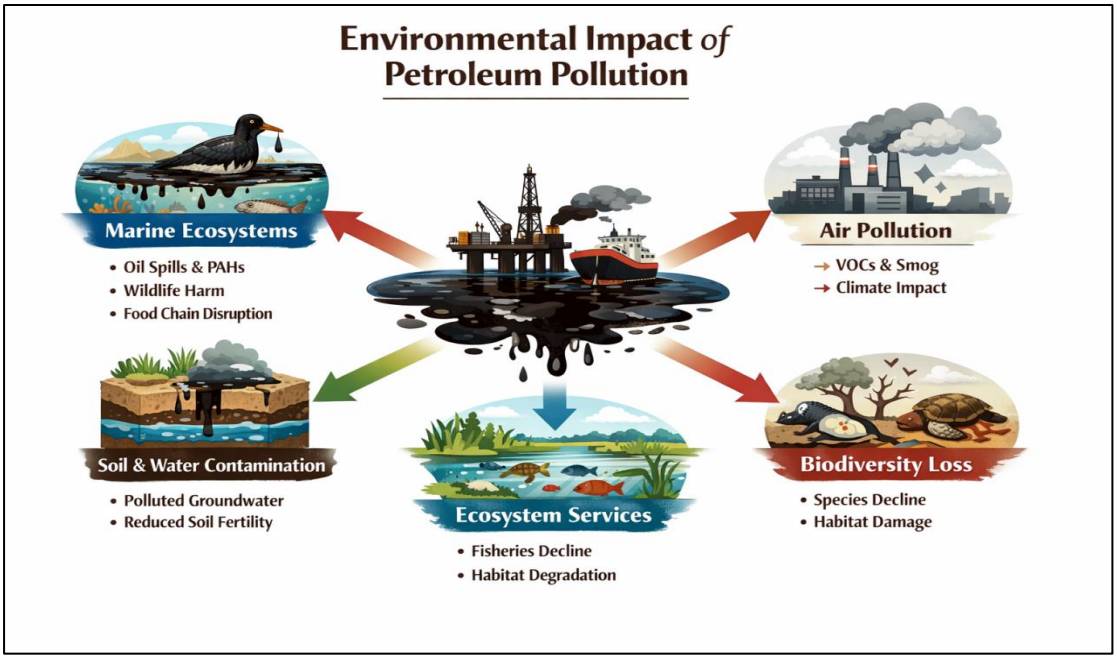


Figure 3 Environmental Impact of Petroleum Pollution

1.1.2 Importance of Bioremediation in Oil Degradation.

Oil pollution is a major environmental issue, with devastating consequences for ecosystems, human health, and biodiversity. From catastrophic oil spills to the gradual leakage of petroleum products into soil and water, the widespread use of fossil fuels has led to significant contamination of the environment **(Majeed et al., 2025)**. Traditional methods of cleaning up oil spills, such as chemical dispersants, skimmers, and burning, are often expensive, time-consuming, and can cause further harm to the environment. In contrast, bioremediation has emerged as a promising alternative that harnesses the power of nature to degrade harmful pollutants **(Mekonnen et al., 2024)**. Bioremediation, which uses microorganisms to break down oil and other toxic substances, represents a sustainable and eco-friendly solution to oil pollution. This essay explores the importance of bioremediation in oil degradation, its mechanisms, advantages, challenges, and future prospects.

What is Bioremediation?

Bioremediation is the process by which microorganisms, such as bacteria, fungi, and algae, are used to degrade hazardous substances into less toxic or non-toxic forms **(Castro Rodríguez et al., 2022).** These organisms utilize the pollutants as a source of energy or nutrients, breaking them down into simpler compounds like water, carbon dioxide (CO_2), and biomass. The process is natural and relies on the inherent ability of certain microbes to metabolize hydrocarbons, the primary components of petroleum.

Bioremediation can occur either in situ or ex situ. In situ bioremediation involves treating the contaminated site directly, making it ideal for large-scale or difficult-to-access areas like oceans or remote soils **(Hassanshahian et al., 2020).** In contrast, ex situ bioremediation involves the removal of contaminated material for treatment elsewhere, often in controlled conditions such as bioreactors or composting systems. Both methods have their advantages, with in situ bioremediation being less disruptive and ex situ providing greater control over environmental conditions to enhance microbial activity.

Microorganisms that degrade oil vary, with bacteria such as Pseudomonas, Alcanivorax, and Mycobacterium being particularly effective **(Majeed et al., 2025)**. Fungi, including Aspergillus and Penicillium, are also used in the degradation process,

especially in soil environments. The success of bioremediation depends on several environmental factors, such as the availability of nutrients (nitrogen and phosphorus), oxygen, and appropriate temperatures, all of which influence microbial growth and activity **(Mekonnen et al., 2024).**

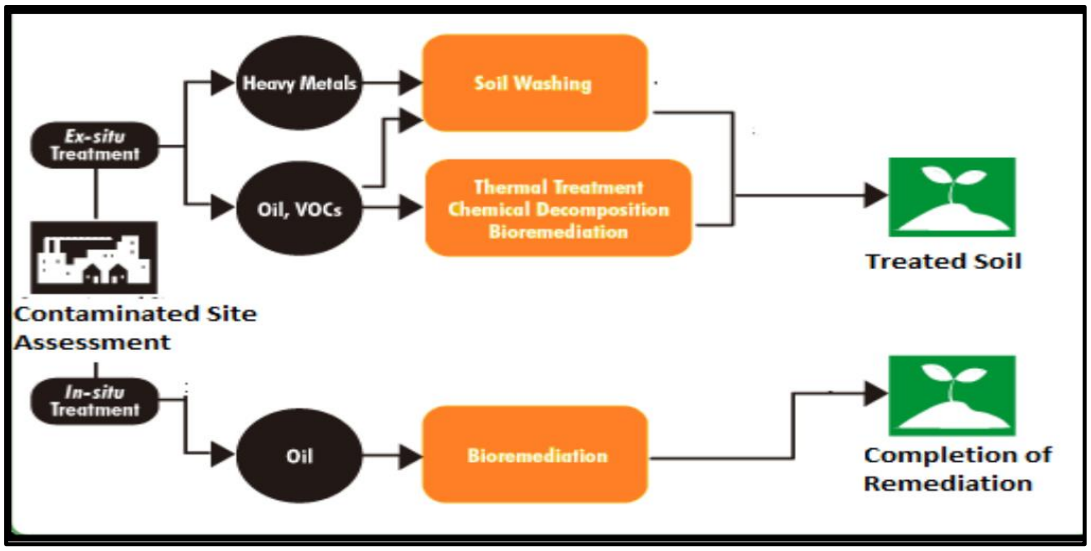


Figure 4 Bioremediation

Mechanism of Oil Degradation by Microorganisms

Microorganisms break down oil by utilizing hydrocarbon compounds as an energy source. The process begins with the attachment of microbes to oil particles. Once attached, the microorganisms secrete enzymes that break down complex hydrocarbons into simpler molecules. Hydrocarbons in oil are classified into different types, including alkanes, aromatics, resins, and asphaltenes, each with varying degrees of biodegradability **(Majeed et al., 2025)**.

Alkanes, which are linear hydrocarbons, are generally the easiest to degrade. Aromatic hydrocarbons, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), are more resistant to microbial attack but can still be broken down by specialized microbes over time **(Mekonnen et al., 2024)**. Resins and asphaltenes, on the other hand, are the most difficult to degrade due to their complex molecular structures. Through microbial metabolism, these hydrocarbons are converted into harmless byproducts such as carbon dioxide, water, and biomass, completing the degradation process **(Hassanshahian et al., 2020)**.

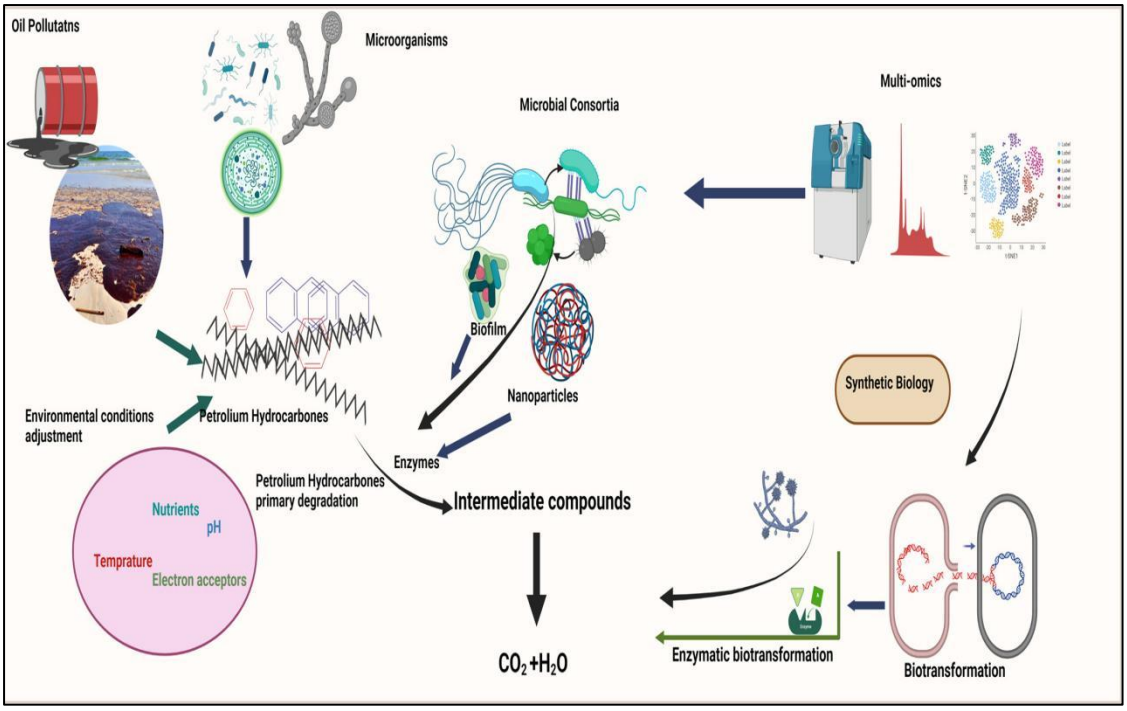


Figure 5 Process of Bioremediation

Advantages of Bioremediation

One of the main advantages of bioremediation is its environmental friendliness. Unlike chemical or mechanical cleanup methods, bioremediation reduces toxic byproducts and minimizes environmental disruption **(Mekonnen et al., 2024)**. This makes it particularly suitable for sensitive ecosystems, such as wetlands, coastal areas, and marine environments, where the introduction of harsh chemicals could do more harm than good **(Mendelssohn et al., 2012)**. Bioremediation also offers a cost-effective solution to oil pollution, as it relies on naturally occurring processes that require fewer resources compared to conventional methods (**El Moussaoui & Idelhakkar, 2023)**.

In addition to being eco-friendly and economical, bioremediation is a sustainable solution. The process mirrors natural degradation cycles, ensuring long-term effectiveness without creating additional environmental burdens (Hassanshahian et al., 2020). Its versatility is another major advantage, as bioremediation can be applied to different environments, including soil, freshwater, and marine ecosystems, and can degrade a wide range of hydrocarbon compounds **(Majeed et al., 2025).**

Another key benefit is that bioremediation requires minimal mechanical intervention, reducing the risk of further damage to habitats during cleanup operations.

This is particularly important in fragile ecosystems, where physical cleanup methods may cause additional stress to plant and animal life **(Castro Rodríguez et al., 2022).** By utilizing native microbial populations through biostimulation, the ecological footprint of the remediation process is significantly reduced.

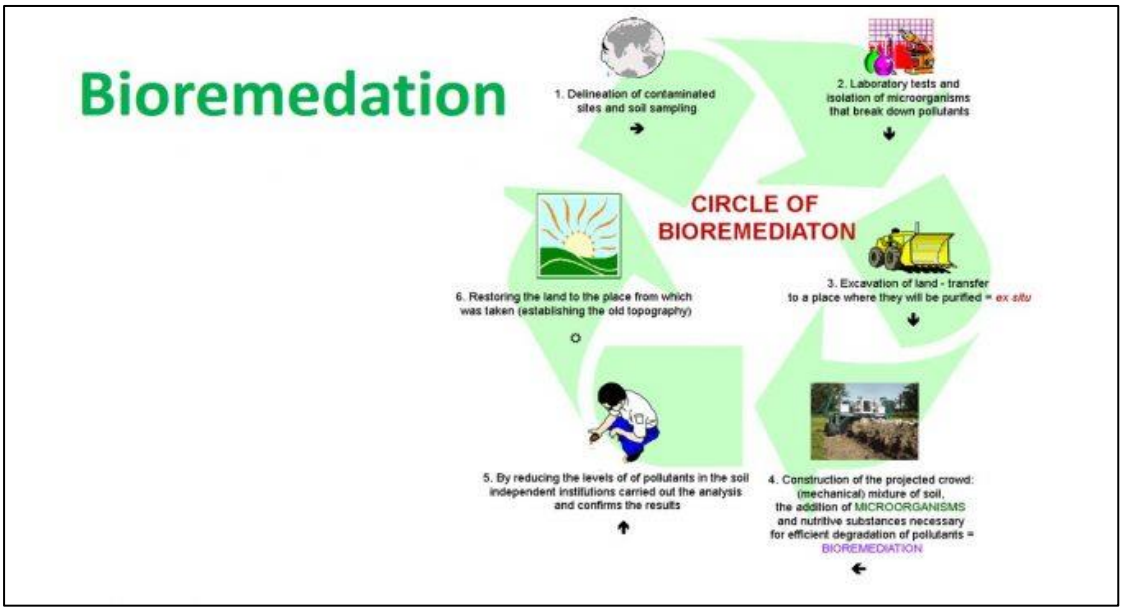


Figure 6 Circle of Bioremediation

Challenges in Bioremediation

One of the primary drawbacks is that it can be slow. The process of microbial degradation may take weeks, months, or even years to fully break down oil, depending on the size of the spill and environmental conditions **(Majeed et al., 2025)**. In situations where immediate action is required, such as large-scale oil spills, bioremediation may need to be supplemented with other physical methods like skimming or booming to prevent the oil from reaching sensitive shorelines.

Environmental constraints also pose a challenge. Microbial activity can be influenced by factors such as temperature, oxygen levels, and nutrient availability **(Mekonnen et al., 2024)**. For example, cold temperatures in polar regions can slow down the metabolic processes of microbes, while low oxygen levels in anaerobic environments—such as deep sediment layers—can inhibit microbial growth. These limitations mean that bioremediation is not always feasible or effective in all settings.

Incomplete degradation of certain hydrocarbons is another issue. Some compounds, particularly polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), are highly resistant to microbial degradation and can persist in the environment for extended periods due to their stable chemical structures. While bioremediation can reduce the concentration of these toxic compounds, it may not eliminate them entirely, leading to potential long-term toxicity **(Hassanshahian et al., 2020).**

Case Studies and Examples

Bioremediation has been successfully applied in several major oil spills, including the Exxon Valdez spill in 1989 and the Deep water Horizon disaster in 2010. In both cases, bioremediation was used to accelerate the natural breakdown of oil in marine and coastal environments. In terrestrial settings, bioremediation has been effective in cleaning up oil-contaminated soils, such as those at abandoned refinery sites or agricultural land affected by oil spills.

Nutrient addition, also known as bio-stimulation, can enhance the effectiveness of bioremediation by providing the necessary elements (such as nitrogen and phosphorus) that microbes need to thrive. In some cases, bio-augmentation, the introduction of specific strains of oil-degrading microbes, is used to boost the degradation process.

Bioremediation and Ecosystem Recovery

One of the most important aspects of bioremediation is its role in ecosystem recovery. By breaking down oil and other toxic pollutants, bioremediation helps restore natural habitats, promotes biodiversity, and allows marine life, soil fertility, and plant communities to recover more quickly. When compared to other remediation methods, bioremediation offers long-term ecological benefits without causing additional damage to the environment.

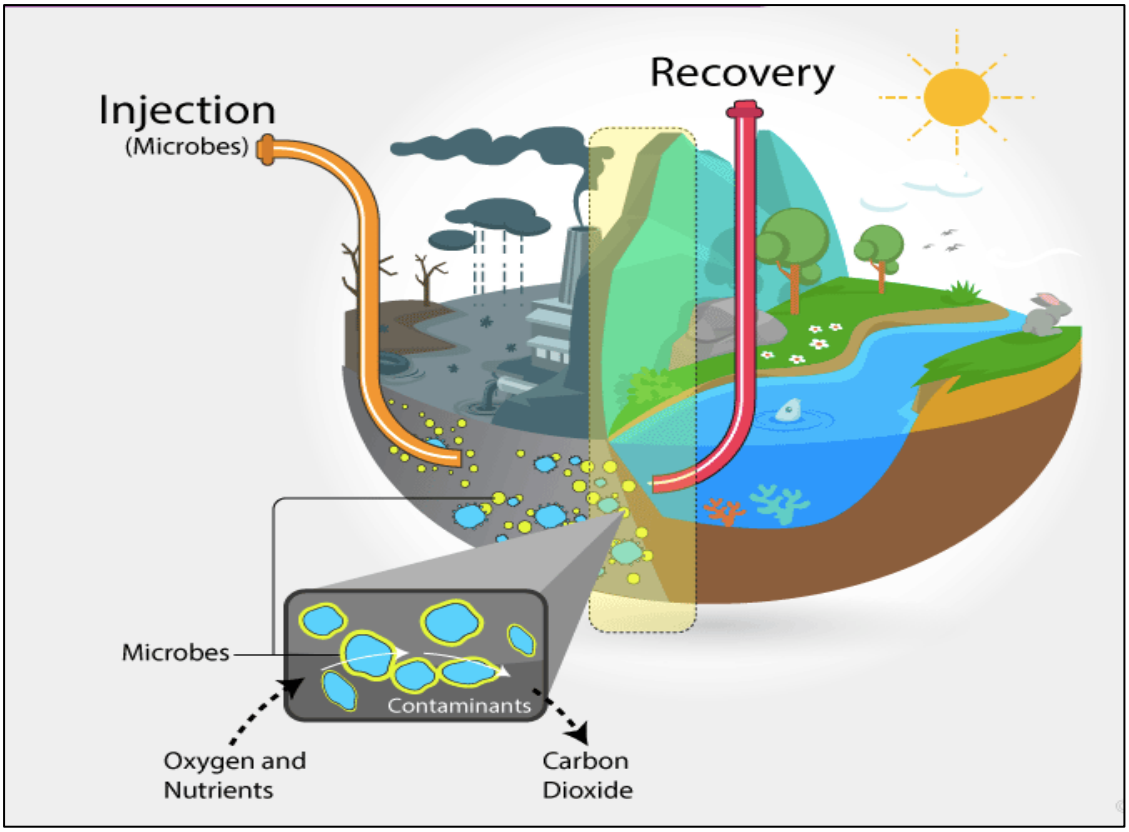


Figure 7 Bioremediation and Ecosystem Recovery

1.1.3 Significance of studying oil-degrading bacteria in Bundelkhand region

Studying oil-degrading bacteria in the Bundelkhand region of India holds immense ecological, agricultural, and socioeconomic significance. This semi-arid region, which spans parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh, faces unique environmental challenges, including severe water scarcity, soil degradation, and pollution from industrial and agricultural activities. The development of bioremediation solutions using oil-degrading bacteria offers a promising pathway to address these issues. Here, we explore the significance of studying these bacteria in Bundelkhand, focusing on their role in environmental cleanup, water and soil conservation, biodiversity, potential for unique microbial strains, and socioeconomic benefits.

Environmental Remediation of Oil Pollution

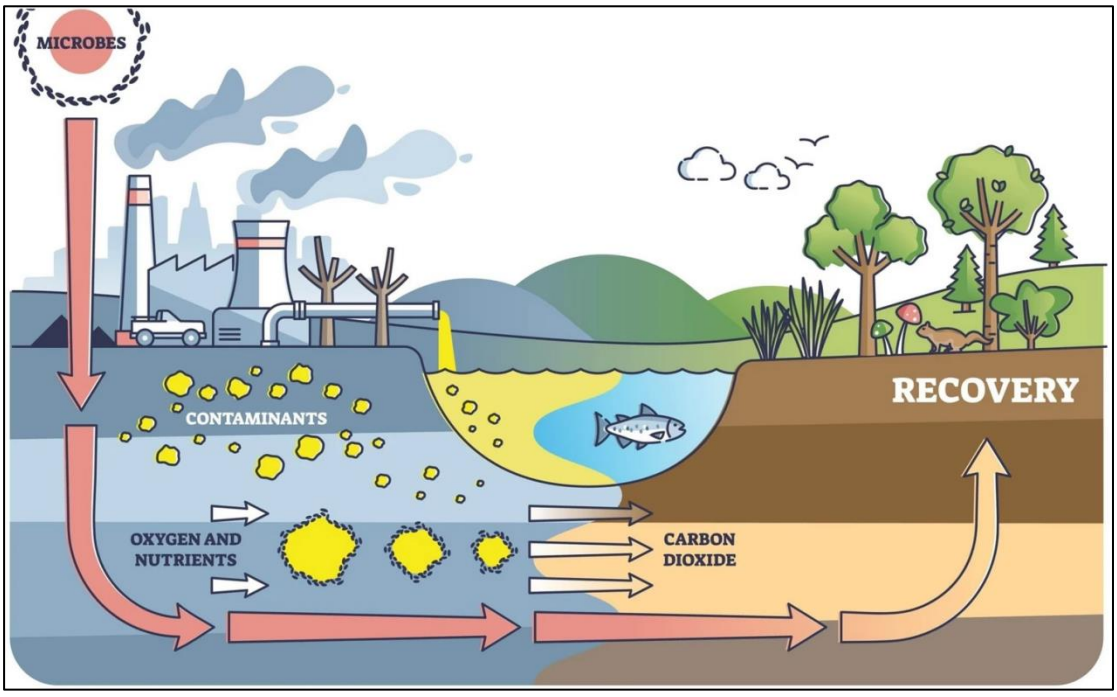


Figure 8 Environmental Remediation of Oil Pollution

Oil pollution in Bundelkhand is an often-overlooked issue but one that has far-reaching consequences. Pollution sources include the extensive use of petroleum-based products in agriculture such as fertilizers, pesticides, and the machinery oils that often spill onto the land **(Srivastava et al., 2019)**. With minimal industrial pollution control mechanisms in the region, Bundelkhand's soil and water systems are vulnerable to contamination from these sources **(Tyagi et al., 2021)**. Crude oil and petroleum products contain harmful compounds, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which can persist in the environment, causing toxic effects on plants, animals, and humans **(Varjani, 2017).**

Oil-degrading bacteria, which naturally break down these complex hydrocarbon compounds into simpler, non-toxic forms, play a vital role in bioremediation. Through a process called microbial degradation, these bacteria utilize hydrocarbons as a source of carbon and energy, thus cleaning up contaminated soil and water bodies **(Darsa et al., 2014)**. This process is especially valuable for regions like Bundelkhand, where the spread of oil pollution could devastate limited agricultural lands and water sources if left unchecked. Research into local strains like Bacillus and Pseudomonas species found in Indian soils has shown that they are particularly adept at surviving the high-

temperature stress typical of this region while maintaining degradation efficiency **(Patowary et al., 2016).**

Water Conservation and Quality Enhancement

Water scarcity is one of the most pressing issues in Bundelkhand. The region experiences frequent droughts, and the existing water bodies are highly susceptible to contamination. Oil residues in water can impair water quality, impacting its usability for agriculture, drinking, and other essential purposes. Oil-degrading bacteria have the potential to remediate water sources that are contaminated with hydrocarbons. The application of these bacteria can prevent oil pollutants from seeping into groundwater, which is crucial given that many rural communities in Bundelkhand rely heavily on groundwater as their primary water source.

Moreover, by improving water quality, these bacteria help maintain the balance of aquatic ecosystems, supporting fish populations and other aquatic organisms that communities may rely on for food or livelihoods. Conserving water quality through bioremediation is therefore integral to securing the future of both the environment and the people who depend on it in Bundelkhand.

Soil Health Restoration and Agricultural Benefits

Soil health in Bundelkhand has been declining due to factors such as excessive agricultural chemical use and oil contamination from machinery. When oil spills occur on soil, they disrupt the soil's natural composition and microbial communities, which can reduce fertility and harm plant growth. Oil-degrading bacteria offer a solution by naturally degrading oil residues, which helps restore the microbial balance and nutrient availability in the soil.

This restoration is vital for agriculture, which is a primary source of livelihood for most residents of Bundelkhand. Healthier soils improve crop yields and reduce the need for additional chemical inputs, providing economic relief for farmers and promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Research into oil-degrading bacteria could help identify specific strains that are best suited for the region's soil types, further optimizing their effectiveness and reinforcing sustainable farming in Bundelkhand.

Biodiversity Conservation

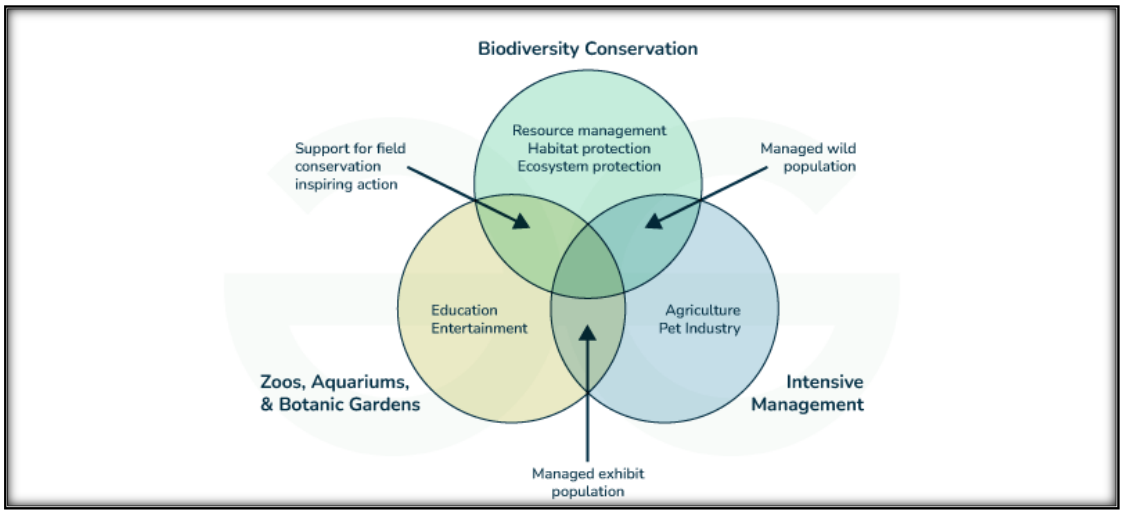


Figure 9 Biodiversity Conservation

The impact of oil pollution extends beyond agricultural lands and water sources, posing a threat to local biodiversity. Bundelkhand's ecosystems, although semi-arid, support a range of plant and animal species. When oil contamination occurs, it not only disrupts plant growth but also harms microorganisms, insects, birds, and small mammals that play essential roles in ecosystem health.

By using oil-degrading bacteria, we can reduce the spread of pollutants within these ecosystems, allowing natural biodiversity to thrive. Healthy ecosystems, in turn, support various ecosystem services like pollination, soil stabilization, and pest control, all of which contribute to a more resilient agricultural and ecological landscape.

Potential for Discovering Unique Bacterial Strains

The Bundelkhand region’s unique semi-arid climate and soil composition may foster distinct strains of oil-degrading bacteria that could have specific adaptations to this challenging environment. Exploring the microbial diversity of the region could reveal new, potentially more efficient bacteria for bioremediation purposes. These bacteria might possess special enzymes or metabolic pathways that allow them to degrade oil in low-moisture, nutrient-poor conditions typical of Bundelkhand.

Research into these unique strains could have implications beyond the region, potentially informing bioremediation efforts in other semi-arid and arid areas

worldwide. **The discovery of locally adapted bacteria could also pave the way for** innovative, location-specific biotechnological applications.

Socioeconomic Benefits and Job Creation

In addition to environmental benefits, the study and application of oil-degrading bacteria in Bundelkhand can create socio-economic opportunities. Developing and implementing bioremediation solutions would require skilled personnel, creating jobs in scientific research, environmental services, and agriculture. Local educational institutions could benefit by engaging in research on these bacteria, potentially collaborating with national and international agencies for funding and expertise.

Furthermore, the economic benefits of rehabilitated soil and water resources would enhance agricultural productivity, directly supporting the livelihoods of local farmers. Cleaner water sources and healthier soil would reduce healthcare costs related to pollution exposure, improving overall community well-being.

The study of oil-degrading bacteria in Bundelkhand is not only scientifically intriguing but also critical for the region's sustainable development. By addressing pollution, conserving water, improving soil health, protecting biodiversity, and offering economic benefits, these bacteria can serve as natural allies in mitigating the environmental and social challenges faced by Bundelkhand. With proper investment and research, bioremediation using oil-degrading bacteria could become a cornerstone of environmental management and economic resilience for the Bundelkhand region and beyond.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

1. Isolation of Bacteria Physiological Characterization: To study the growth conditions and environmental tolerances of the isolates.
2. Biochemical Characterization: To perform biochemical tests to understand the metabolic capabilities of the isolates.
3. Molecular Characterization: To identify the isolated bacteria using molecular techniques.
4. Hydrocarbon Degradation Assay: To evaluate the efficiency of hydrocarbon degradation by the isolated bacteria.

Interpretation of Results:

The hydrocarbon degradation assay provides a quantitative measure of each isolate's efficiency in breaking down oil-related compounds. High degradation efficiency indicates isolates with strong bioremediation potential, while specific patterns in metabolite production help understand their metabolic pathways. These insights support selecting the most effective bacteria for deploying in oil-contaminated environments, making them valuable for eco-friendly cleanup strategies.

1.2.2 Hypothesis of the Study

Hypothesis 1: The bacterial strains isolated from petroleum-polluted sites in the Bundelkhand region possess significant hydrocarbon-degrading capabilities.

Hypothesis 2: The molecular, biochemical, and physiological characteristics of the isolated bacteria can be effectively identified and correlated with their hydrocarbon degradation efficiency.

Hypothesis 3: The identified bacterial strains are capable of degrading a broad spectrum of hydrocarbons under various environmental conditions, making them suitable candidates for Bioremediation applications.

Sub-Hypotheses

- Sub-Hypothesis 1: The 16S rRNA gene sequencing will accurately identify the bacterial strains and place them within known phylogenetic groups associated with hydrocarbon degradation.

- Sub-Hypothesis 2: Biochemical tests will reveal that the isolated strains produce enzymes like oxygenases and dehydrogenases, which are essential for hydrocarbon degradation.

- Sub-Hypothesis 3: Physiological studies will demonstrate that the bacterial strains can thrive and degrade hydrocarbons at a range of temperatures, pH levels, and salinity conditions typically found in the Bundelkhand region.

-Sub-Hypothesis 4: The isolated bacteria will show significant biosurfactant production, enhancing their ability to emulsify and degrade hydrocarbons in polluted environments.

1.3 Scope and Limitations

1.3.1 Geographic and Methodological Scope:

- Geographic Scope: This study focuses on the Bundelkhand region, an area prone to oil contamination due to increasing industrial activities and transportation routes. Soil and water samples are collected from petroleum-polluted sites within this region, which provides a representative sample of local microbial populations capable of hydrocarbon degradation. This geographic focus enables a better understanding of native bacterial species adapted to local environmental conditions.

- Methodological Scope: The study utilizes a combination of microbiological, biochemical, and molecular techniques. Initially, bacterial isolates are obtained from contaminated soil and water samples using enrichment and isolation techniques. Biochemical assays are conducted to characterize the isolates' metabolic capabilities, followed by physiological testing to determine environmental tolerances. Molecular techniques, such as DNA sequencing, are used for accurate identification. Finally, a hydrocarbon degradation assay evaluates the efficiency of each isolate in breaking down hydrocarbons, which is crucial for selecting the best strains for potential Bioremediation applications.

1.3.2 Limitations of the Study:

- Sample Size and Diversity: The study is limited to a specific number of soil and water samples from selected sites within the Bundelkhand region. This may restrict the diversity of isolated bacterial strains, potentially missing other oil-degrading bacteria present in different micro-habitats.

- Laboratory Conditions vs. Natural Environment: Although hydrocarbon degradation assays are performed under controlled laboratory conditions, these conditions may not fully replicate the environmental complexities of contaminated sites. Factors such as fluctuating temperatures, varying pollutant concentrations, and

complex microbial interactions in the environment may affect the degradation efficiency observed in natural settings.

- Time Constraints: Bacterial growth and degradation rates can vary significantly, and time limitations may restrict the ability to observe the long-term degradation potential of isolates. Some bacteria may show promising initial degradation but fail to sustain activity over extended periods, which might affect their practical use.

- Single-Substrate Focus: This study primarily tests bacterial degradation on selected hydrocarbons (e.g., n-alkanes, aromatic hydrocarbons). However, real-world oil pollution contains a complex mixture of hydrocarbons, heavy metals, and other toxicants. The ability of isolates to degrade mixed contaminants may differ, limiting the applicability of results in field conditions.

- Limited Molecular Analysis: Although molecular identification is conducted, advanced genomic analysis, such as whole-genome sequencing or metagenomics, is not included. This could limit insights into the full metabolic pathways or potential genetic traits enabling hydrocarbon degradation, which could impact the selection of the most efficient bacteria for bioremediation.

These limitations highlight areas for improvement in future research, such as expanding sample diversity, employing field trials, and incorporating more comprehensive molecular analyses to better understand the isolates' long-term bioremediation potential.

Chapter -2

Review of Literature

Serves as the scholarly foundation for this thesis, meticulously surveying existing research pertinent to petroleum hydrocarbon contamination and microbial Bioremediation, particularly within semi-arid regions like Bundelkhand. This chapter critically synthesizes current knowledge on oil-degrading bacteria, their diverse metabolic pathways, and the environmental factors influencing their efficacy. It identifies key findings, prevalent methodologies, and significant research gaps, thereby establishing the theoretical framework and intellectual context for the current study. By situating the research within the broader scientific discourse, this review highlights the novelty and contribution of the present investigation, justifying its objectives and chosen experimental approaches.

2.1 Petroleum Pollution

Petroleum pollution represents a substantial and enduring environmental challenge on a global scale, arising from the introduction of crude oil or its refined products into natural ecosystems. This pervasive contamination stems predominantly from anthropocentric activities, though natural geological processes also contribute to a lesser extent, impacting the delicate balance of terrestrial, aquatic, and atmospheric environments **(National Research Council, 2003).** The consequences of such pollution are far-reaching, encompassing acute toxic effects on organisms, long-term ecosystem degradation, and potential impacts on human health and economic activities. A thorough understanding of the sources, types, and environmental ramifications of petroleum pollution is therefore fundamental to developing effective strategies for prevention, mitigation, and remediation.

2.1.1 Sources and Types of Petroleum Pollution

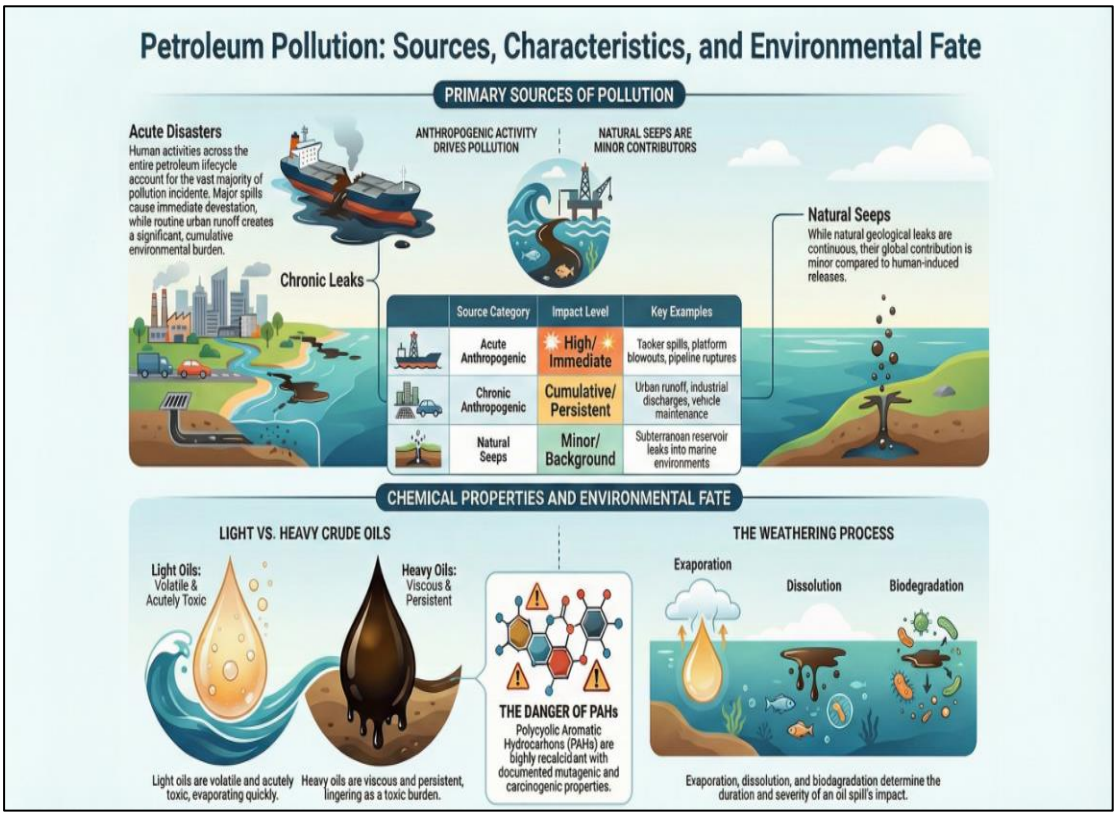


Figure 10 Sources and Types of Petroleum Pollution

Petroleum pollution originates from a diverse array of sources, broadly categorized into anthropogenic and natural contributions, with the former accounting for the vast majority of incidents and volume. Anthropogenic sources are intricately linked to the entire lifecycle of petroleum, from its exploration and extraction to its transportation, refining, and eventual consumption. Major acute pollution events frequently result from large-scale accidents, such as catastrophic oil spills from tankers, blowouts at offshore drilling platforms, and ruptures in pipelines, which can release enormous quantities of hydrocarbons into sensitive environments (**Etkin, 2009**). Notable examples include the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska and the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, both of which demonstrated the immediate and long-term devastation caused by such incidents **(Peterson et al., 2003; National Commission on the BP Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill and Offshore Drilling, 2011)**. Beyond these highly visible disasters, chronic, smaller-scale releases contribute significantly to the cumulative environmental burden.4 These include routine operational discharges from industrial facilities, continuous urban runoff carrying waste

oils and lubricants, and minor spills occurring during fuel transfers and vehicle maintenance **(Atlas & Hazen, 2011)**. These chronic inputs, while individually less dramatic, can lead to widespread, low-level contamination that can accumulate in sediments and biota over time, posing persistent threats to ecological health.5 Natural oil seeps, on the other hand, represent a continuous, geological process where crude oil and gas leak from subterranean reservoirs into the marine environment.6 While these seeps have occurred for millions of years and contribute to the background levels of hydrocarbons in some marine ecosystems, their contribution to the total global petroleum pollution load is comparatively minor when juxtaposed with human-induced releases **(Kvenvolden & Cooper, 2003)**.

The chemical and physical characteristics of petroleum pollutants vary considerably, which dictates their environmental fate, behavior, and potential toxicity. Crude oil, extracted directly from the earth, is a complex mixture primarily composed of thousands of different hydrocarbon compounds, including paraffins (alkanes), naphthenes (cycloalkanes), aromatics, and asphaltenes **(Speight, 2015)**. Its properties—such as density, viscosity, and sulfur content—differ significantly based on its geological origin. Light crude oils are typically more volatile and acutely toxic due to a higher proportion of lighter, more soluble, and readily evaporable compounds like benzene, toluene, ethylbenzene, and xylenes (BTEX), but they also tend to disperse and degrade more quickly. In contrast, heavy crude oils are highly viscous, less volatile, and more persistent, often forming stable emulsions and large slicks that resist natural dispersion and can coat surfaces for extended periods (**Fingas, 2011)**. Refined petroleum products, derived from crude oil through distillation and other processing, also possess distinct characteristics. Gasoline, for instance, is highly volatile and primarily consists of lighter hydrocarbons, posing risks through inhalation and flammability. Diesel and fuel oils are heavier and less volatile, leading to greater persistence in the environment. Of particular environmental and health concern are polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which are ubiquitous components of crude oil and are also formed during the incomplete combustion of organic matter. PAHs are characterized by their high recalcitrance, hydrophobicity, and documented mutagenic, carcinogenic, and genotoxic properties, making them persistent environmental contaminants with significant ecological and human health implications **(Baek et al., 1991; Samanta et al., 2002).** The specific type of petroleum released profoundly

influences its spread, weathering processes (e.g., evaporation, dissolution, emulsification, photo-oxidation, biodegradation), bioavailability to organisms, and ultimately, the severity and duration of its environmental impact.

2.1.2 Environmental Effects of Petroleum Pollution (Air, Water, Soil, Biota)

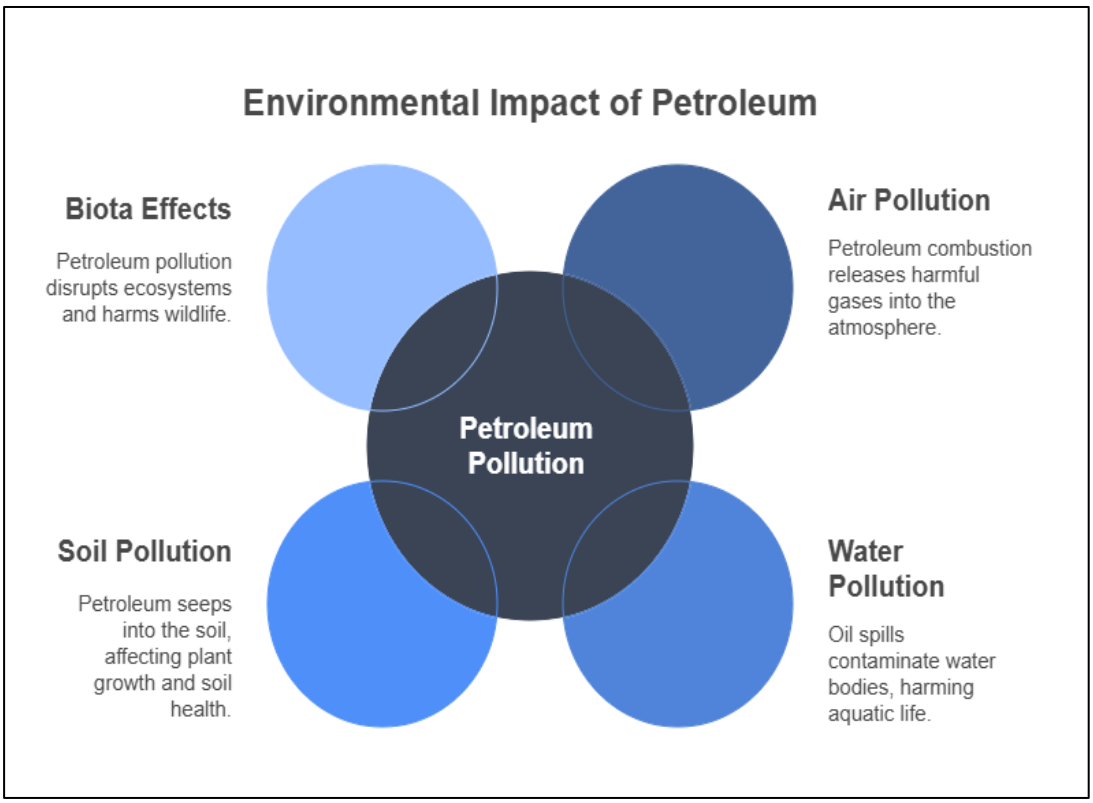


Figure 11 Environmental Effects of Petroleum Pollution

The environmental repercussions of petroleum pollution are extensive and multifaceted, affecting all major environmental compartments air, water, and soil and consequently, the biological communities reliant upon them. In aquatic environments, oil forms surface slicks that physically impede the vital exchange of gases between the atmosphere and the water column, leading to reduced dissolved oxygen levels that are critical for the survival of fish and other aquatic organisms. The physical presence of oil is profoundly damaging; it can coat the feathers of seabirds and the fur of marine mammals, impairing their insulation and buoyancy, leading to hypothermia, drowning, and starvation **(Jenssen, 1994)**. Sessile organisms, such as corals and bivalves, can be suffocated by direct contact with oil. Beyond immediate physical effects, the soluble and dispersed components of petroleum, particularly the lighter aromatic hydrocarbons and PAHs, are acutely toxic to a wide range of aquatic life. These compounds can cause

physiological stress, impair reproduction, disrupt endocrine systems, and lead to direct mortality in fish, invertebrates, and algae **(Peterson et al., 2003; Incardona et al., 2004)**. Oil that sinks or becomes incorporated into sediments can lead to long-term chronic exposure for benthic organisms, disrupting their feeding, growth, and reproduction, and facilitating the transfer of toxic compounds through the marine food web. On terrestrial ecosystems, petroleum spills profoundly alter soil properties and composition. Oil saturation reduces soil porosity, leading to decreased aeration and water infiltration, which in turn inhibits root growth and disrupts the activity of beneficial soil microorganisms **(Adam & Duncan, 1999).** The toxic components of petroleum can directly kill plants, leading to widespread vegetation die-off and subsequent soil erosion. Furthermore, hydrocarbons can persist in soil for extended periods, disrupting soil microbial communities that are essential for nutrient cycling and overall soil health. This can lead to long-term reductions in soil fertility and ecosystem productivity **(Margesin & Schinner, 2001).** The presence of petroleum hydrocarbons in soil can also contaminate groundwater through leaching, posing a threat to drinking water supplies and aquatic ecosystems connected to groundwater sources **(Lee et al., 2001)**.

Atmospheric pollution from petroleum activities primarily arises from the volatilization of lighter hydrocarbons and the combustion of petroleum products. Volatile organic compounds (VOCs), including BTEX compounds, evaporate from oil spills and petroleum storage sites, contributing to ground-level ozone formation through photochemical reactions. Ground-level ozone is a significant air pollutant that can cause respiratory problems in humans and animals and damage vegetation **(USEPA, 2017).** Additionally, the combustion of fossil fuels releases particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and carbon monoxide, all of which are detrimental to air quality and human health **(IPCC, 2014).** While directly from spills, atmospheric effects are generally localized to the immediate vicinity of the release, the broader petroleum industry significantly contributes to regional and global air pollution issues.

The cumulative impact of petroleum pollution on biota extends beyond direct toxicity and physical fouling. It can lead to significant alterations in community structure, biodiversity loss, and disruption of critical ecological processes. For example, the loss of keystone species due to oil exposure can have cascading effects throughout

an ecosystem (**Peterson et al., 2003)**. Long-term exposure to sub-lethal concentrations of hydrocarbons can also lead to chronic stress, reduced disease resistance, genetic damage, and impaired reproductive success across various trophic levels **(Coles et al., 1999)**. Thus, petroleum pollution not only poses immediate threats to individual organisms but also undermines the resilience and functional integrity of entire ecosystems, necessitating robust and effective remediation strategies.

2.1.3 Global and Regional Context of Petroleum Pollution Incidents

Petroleum pollution is a global phenomenon, with incidents occurring across all continents and oceans, reflecting the worldwide scale of oil production, transportation, and consumption. While large-scale, catastrophic spills often capture international headlines, such as the Amoco Cadiz spill off the coast of France in 1978, the Exxon Valdez spill in Alaska in 1989, and the Deepwater Horizon blowout in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, chronic small-scale releases and operational discharges cumulatively contribute a significant, if not larger, proportion of total hydrocarbon inputs into the environment **(National Research Council, 2003).** For instance, municipal and industrial discharges, atmospheric deposition, and urban runoff are consistent, pervasive sources of petroleum hydrocarbons globally **(Wang & Fingas, 2003)**.

Regionally, certain areas are particularly vulnerable to petroleum pollution due to intensive oil and gas activities, high shipping traffic, or geopolitical factors. The Gulf of Mexico, for example, is a major hub for offshore drilling and shipping, making it prone to both large spills and chronic contamination from platforms and vessels **(Boehm et al., 2002)**. The Niger Delta in Nigeria has experienced severe and widespread petroleum pollution over decades due to pipeline vandalism, operational failures, and inadequate infrastructure, leading to extensive environmental degradation and severe impacts on local communities **(UNDP, 2011).** Similarly, the Arctic region faces increasing threats from oil exploration and transportation as melting ice opens new shipping lanes and access to previously inaccessible reserves. Spills in these remote, sensitive environments pose unique challenges for response and remediation due to harsh weather conditions and the slow degradation rates of hydrocarbons in cold climates **(AMAP, 2007)**.

In coastal and estuarine environments, particularly those near ports, refineries, and industrial zones, chronic low-level contamination is a persistent concern. These areas often experience a continuous influx of petroleum hydrocarbons from various point and non-point sources, leading to the accumulation of contaminants in sediments and biota. Such persistent pollution can have long-term effects on biodiversity, ecosystem health, and human livelihoods, particularly for communities reliant on fishing and aquaculture **(GESAMP, 1993).** Therefore, understanding the regional context of petroleum pollution is critical, as it informs targeted regulatory frameworks, emergency response planning, and the development of locally appropriate remediation technologies, including bioremediation strategies tailored to specific environmental conditions and contaminant profiles. The ongoing global reliance on petroleum necessitates continuous vigilance and innovation in mitigating its environmental footprint.

2.2 Bioremediation: Principles and Methods

Bioremediation stands as an environmentally sound and economically viable strategy for the cleanup of contaminated sites, leveraging the metabolic capabilities of living organisms, primarily microorganisms, to detoxify or remove pollutants from the environment. Unlike physical or chemical remediation techniques that often involve harsh chemicals or require the removal and disposal of contaminated material, bioremediation aims to transform hazardous substances into less toxic or non-toxic forms, or even into harmless end products like carbon dioxide and water **(Vidali, 2001).** This approach is particularly attractive for large-scale contamination events or chronic pollution, as it can often be implemented in situ, minimizing disruption to the affected ecosystem and reducing the need for extensive excavation and transportation of contaminated waste. The efficacy of bioremediation is inherently dependent on a complex interplay of environmental factors, including the type and concentration of the pollutant, the characteristics of the contaminated matrix (e.g., soil type, water salinity), and the availability of essential nutrients and appropriate microbial communities **(Alexander, 1999)**. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the underlying principles and the various methodological approaches is crucial for successful application.

2.2.1 Fundamental Principles of Bioremediation

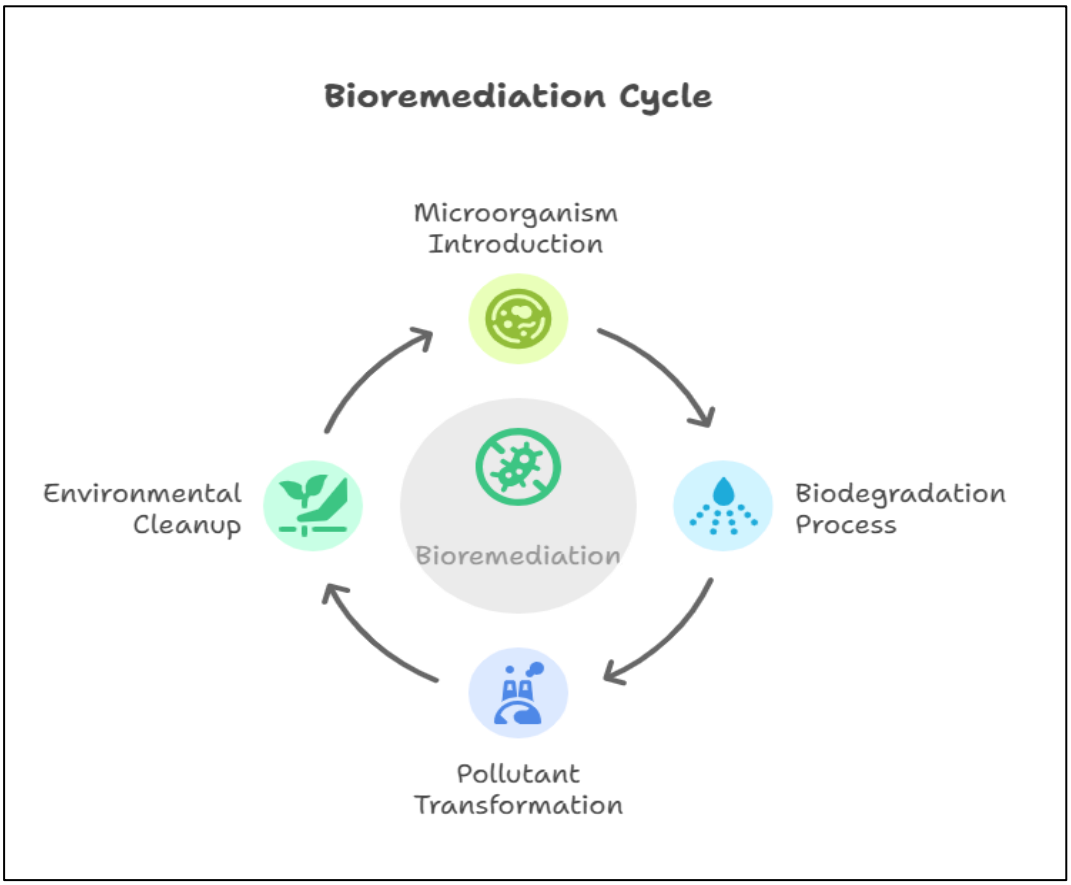


Figure 12 Principles of Bioremediation

The fundamental principle underpinning bioremediation is the ability of microorganisms to utilize organic pollutants as carbon and energy sources for their growth and metabolism, or to co-metabolize them through incidental enzymatic activity. This process, often termed biodegradation, involves a cascade of biochemical reactions that break down complex organic molecules into simpler compounds, eventually leading to complete mineralization (conversion to inorganic substances) **(Chikere et al., 2012)**. The efficiency of biodegradation is governed by several critical factors, including the nature of the contaminant, the presence of appropriate microbial populations, and optimal environmental conditions. Hydrocarbons, such as those found in petroleum, are typically degraded through enzymatic pathways, primarily involving oxygenases (e.g., monooxygenases and dioxygenases) that initiate the breakdown of recalcitrant hydrocarbon structures by incorporating oxygen **(Wackett & Hershberger, 2001)**. Subsequent steps involve dehydrogenation, hydroxylation, and eventually, cleavage of the carbon skeleton, often channeling intermediates into central metabolic

pathways like the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle **(Leahy & Colwell, 1990).** For effective bioremediation, the indigenous microbial population must be sufficiently abundant and possess the necessary catabolic genes, or external microbial strains with enhanced degradative capabilities may need to be introduced, a process known as bioaugmentation **(Margesin & Schinner, 1999)**. Moreover, environmental conditions such as temperature, pH, moisture content, and the availability of electron acceptors (e.g., oxygen, nitrate, sulfate) and limiting nutrients (e.g., nitrogen, phosphorus) must be conducive to microbial activity. For instance, aerobic degradation pathways are generally faster and more complete than anaerobic ones, highlighting the importance of oxygen supply in many bioremediation applications **(Atlas & Hazen, 2011)**. Bioremediation also relies on the principle of adaptability and evolution within microbial communities, as prolonged exposure to pollutants can select for and enrich populations of specialized hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms, enhancing the overall degradative capacity of the contaminated site over time **(Head et al., 2006)**.

2.2.2 Ex Situ Bioremediation Techniques

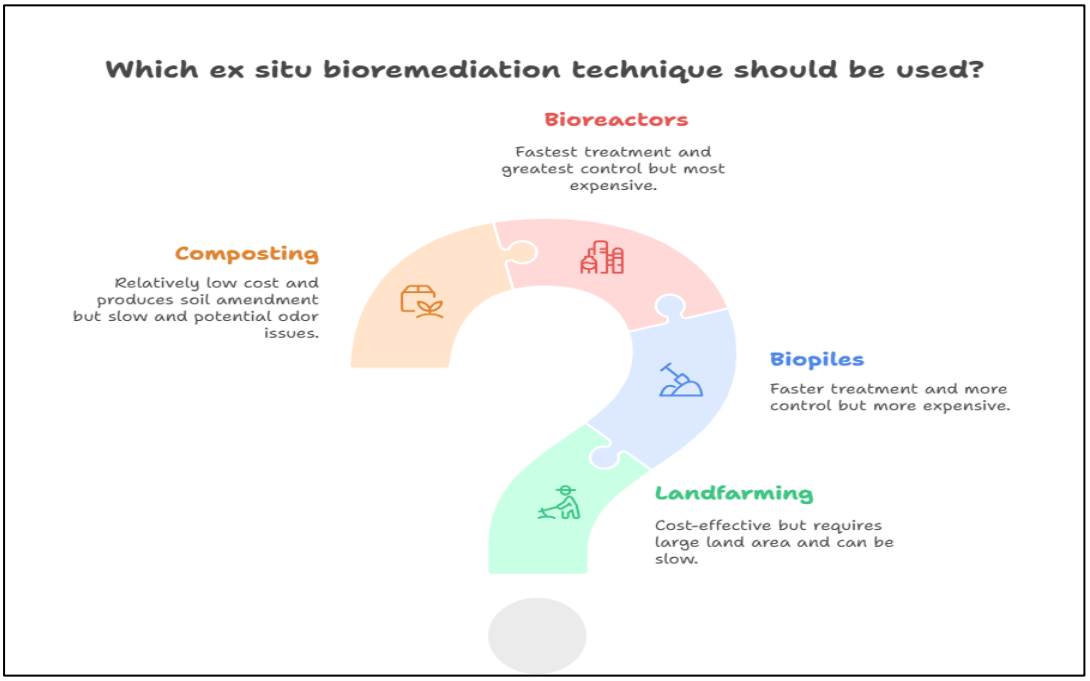


Figure 13 Ex Situ Bioremediation Techniques

Ex situ bioremediation techniques involve the excavation or extraction of contaminated materials from the site and their treatment in a controlled environment, which allows for greater control over the physical, chemical, and biological parameters

that influence microbial activity. While these methods are often more costly and disruptive than in situ approaches due to the need for material handling, they are particularly effective for highly contaminated soils or sludges where precise control over remediation conditions is paramount **(Vidali, 2001)**. One common ex situ method is landfarming, where contaminated soil is spread in a thin layer over an impermeable liner, tilled periodically to enhance aeration, and amended with nutrients and water to stimulate microbial degradation. This technique is relatively simple and cost-effective for treating large volumes of soil with moderate levels of contamination **.** Biopiles, also known as biocells or bioreactors, are another form of ex situ treatment where contaminated soil is mounded into a pile and aerated either passively or actively through forced air circulation. These piles are often covered to control moisture and prevent leaching, and nutrients are typically added to optimize microbial growth and degradation rates **(USEPA, 1995)**. For more recalcitrant contaminants or highly contaminated matrices, composting can be employed, involving the mixing of contaminated soil with organic bulking agents (e.g., wood chips, manure) to create a favorable environment for thermophilic microbial activity. The elevated temperatures generated during composting accelerate the degradation of many organic pollutants **(EPA, 2001).** Furthermore, bioreactors (slurry-phase reactors) offer the highest degree of control, as contaminated soil or sludge is mixed with water to form a slurry, which is then agitated in a vessel under precisely controlled conditions of pH, temperature, aeration, and nutrient availability. This method maximizes contact between microorganisms and contaminants, leading to faster and more efficient degradation, making it suitable for treating smaller volumes of highly contaminated material **(Alexander, 1999).** The choice of an ex situ technique depends on factors such as the type and concentration of the pollutant, the volume of contaminated material, site-specific conditions, and economic considerations.

2.2.3 In Situ Bioremediation Techniques

In situ bioremediation approaches treat contaminants directly at the site of pollution without the need for excavation or removal of contaminated material, making them generally less disruptive and more cost-effective for large-scale contamination. These methods rely on enhancing the activity of indigenous microbial populations by optimizing environmental conditions or by introducing specific microorganisms.

Biostimulation is the most widely applied in situ technique, involving the addition of limiting nutrients (such as nitrogen and phosphorus) and/or electron acceptors (primarily oxygen) to the contaminated environment to accelerate the growth and metabolic activity of existing hydrocarbon-degrading microbes **(Margesin & Schinner, 1999)**. Oxygen can be supplied through various means, including sparging (injecting air directly into groundwater), hydrogen peroxide addition, or specialized oxygen-releasing compounds. For saturated zones or groundwater, nutrient solutions can be circulated through injection and extraction wells **(Atlas & Hazen, 2011)**. In anaerobic environments, alternative electron acceptors like nitrate or sulfate can be introduced to facilitate anaerobic degradation pathways. Bioaugmentation, another in situ approach, involves the introduction of exogenous microbial strains or consortia with known degradative capabilities to a contaminated site. This technique is often considered when the indigenous microbial population is insufficient in number or lacks the specific metabolic pathways required to effectively degrade the target pollutants **(Sayler & Ripp, 2000)**. While conceptually appealing, the success of bioaugmentation can be highly variable due to challenges in establishing and maintaining the introduced strains in a competitive natural environment (**Thompson et al., 2005)**. Phytoremediation, while often considered a separate discipline, can also be categorized as an in situ bioremediation-enhancing strategy, particularly when involving microbial activity in the plant rhizosphere. Plants can directly take up and degrade contaminants (phytoextraction, phytodegradation) or stimulate microbial degradation in the soil around their roots through the release of exudates, a process known as rhizoremediation **(Cunningham et al., 1997**). The selection of an appropriate in situ technique depends heavily on the specific site characteristics, including hydrogeology, soil type, contaminant type and distribution, and the feasibility of modifying environmental parameters to support microbial activity.

2.2.4 Role of Microorganisms in Bioremediation

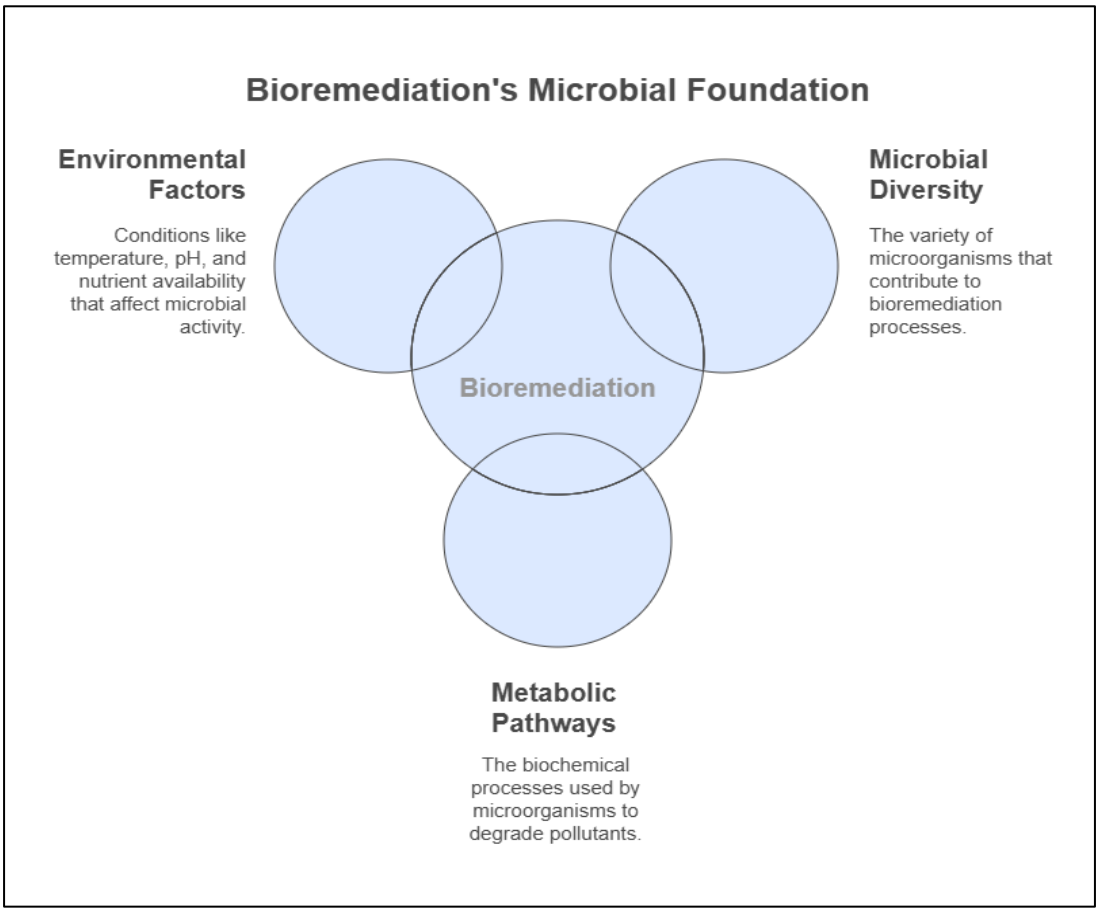


Figure 14 Role of Microorganisms in Bioremediation

Microorganisms, primarily bacteria and fungi, are the principal agents driving the success of bioremediation. Their ubiquity, metabolic versatility, and rapid growth rates make them uniquely suited for transforming a wide array of environmental pollutants. In the context of petroleum pollution, hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms are widespread in various environments, from terrestrial soils to marine sediments, and play a crucial role in the natural attenuation of oil spills **(Head et al., 2006).** These microbes possess specialized enzymatic systems that enable them to break down the complex hydrocarbon molecules found in crude oil and refined products. For instance, many bacteria and fungi produce extracellular enzymes, such as lipases and esterases, that emulsify oil, increasing its bioavailability by increasing the surface area for microbial attack. More importantly, they synthesize intracellular enzymes like monooxygenases and dioxygenases, which initiate the degradation of

aliphatic, alicyclic, and aromatic hydrocarbons by introducing oxygen atoms into their structures **(van Hamme et al., 2003).**

Specific genera of bacteria commonly recognized for their hydrocarbon-degrading capabilities include Pseudomonas, Alcanivorax, Marinobacter, Rhodococcus, Mycobacterium, Bacillus, and various species within the Gammaproteobacteria and Alphaproteobacteria classes **(Kostka et al., 2011; Hara et al., 2003**). Fungi, particularly filamentous fungi from genera like Aspergillus, Penicillium, and Candida, also contribute significantly, especially in colder environments or when dealing with more recalcitrant, higher molecular weight hydrocarbons like PAHs, due to their ability to secrete powerful extracellular enzymes **(Haritash & Kaushik, 2009).** The degradation pathways are complex, often involving initial activation of hydrocarbons, followed by a series of enzymatic steps that convert them into intermediates that can enter central metabolic pathways, ultimately leading to mineralization. For example, n-alkanes are commonly degraded via terminal or subterminal oxidation pathways, while aromatic hydrocarbons are often degraded through dioxygenase-mediated ring hydroxylation, leading to ring cleavage and subsequent metabolism **(Gibson & Parales, 2020)**. Beyond direct degradation, many hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms also produce biosurfactants surface-active compounds that emulsify oil, increase its solubility, and enhance its bioavailability to other microorganisms, thereby indirectly facilitating biodegradation (**Ron & Rosenberg, 2001**). The collective metabolic diversity and adaptability of microbial communities are paramount for the effective bioremediation of complex mixtures of hydrocarbons, as different microbial groups often specialize in degrading specific components, leading to a synergistic effect that enhances the overall cleanup process.

2.3 Oil-Degrading Bacteria: Mechanisms and Characteristics

Oil-degrading bacteria represent a diverse and ubiquitous group of microorganisms that play an indispensable role in the natural attenuation and engineered bioremediation of petroleum-contaminated environments. These bacteria are found across a wide range of ecosystems, from pristine marine waters and deep-sea sediments to terrestrial soils and contaminated industrial sites, demonstrating remarkable metabolic plasticity and adaptability to hostile conditions **(Head et al., 2006)**. Their ability to metabolize a vast spectrum of hydrocarbons, ranging from

simple alkanes to complex polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and resins, is a testament to their specialized enzymatic machinery and sophisticated catabolic pathways. The study of oil-degrading bacteria has significantly advanced our understanding of microbial physiology, genetics, and ecology, paving the way for more effective and sustainable approaches to environmental pollution control. Unraveling the specific mechanisms by which these bacteria degrade hydrocarbons and understanding their unique characteristics are fundamental to optimizing bioremediation strategies and harnessing their full biotechnological potential.

2.3.1 Mechanisms of Hydrocarbon Degradation (Aerobic and Anaerobic Pathways)

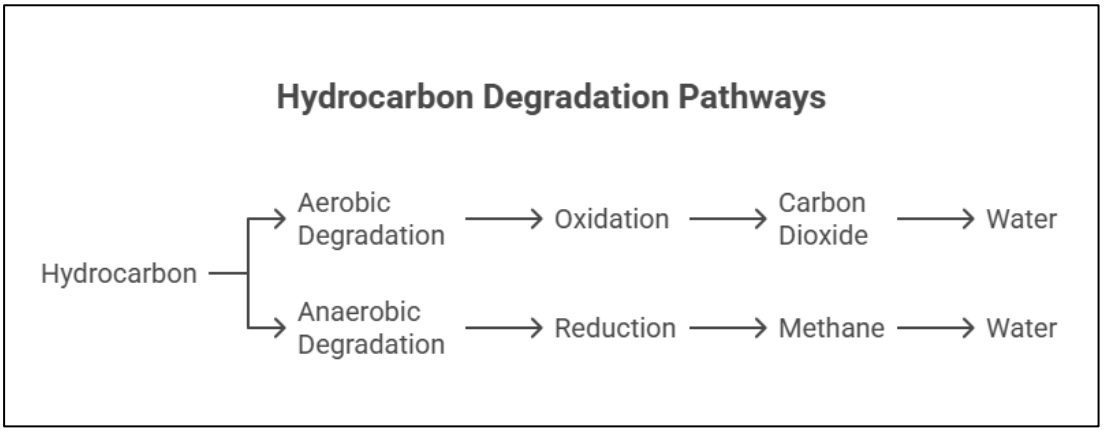


Figure 15 Mechanisms of Hydrocarbon Degradation

The degradation of hydrocarbons by bacteria primarily proceeds through distinct aerobic and anaerobic metabolic pathways, each adapted to the prevailing oxygen conditions of the environment. Aerobic degradation is generally the most efficient and thoroughly studied mechanism, occurring rapidly in the presence of oxygen and leading to the complete mineralization of many hydrocarbon compounds **(Leahy & Colwell, 1990)**. The initial step in aerobic degradation typically involves the activation of the hydrocarbon molecule through the incorporation of oxygen, catalyzed by oxygenase enzymes. For example, n-alkanes are commonly initiated by alkane hydroxylases (monooxygenases), which introduce a hydroxyl group at the terminal or subterminal carbon, converting the alkane into a primary or secondary alcohol **(van Hamme et al., 2003).** Subsequent enzymatic reactions then oxidize these alcohols to aldehydes and then to fatty acids, which can then enter the beta-oxidation pathway,

eventually being channeled into the tricarboxylic acid (TCA) cycle for complete energy generation and carbon assimilation (Chikere et al., 2012). Aromatic hydrocarbons, such as benzene, toluene, and PAHs, are typically degraded by dioxygenases that incorporate two atoms of oxygen into the aromatic ring, forming dihydrodiol intermediates. These intermediates are then rearomatized, followed by further hydroxylation and ring cleavage, often via ortho- or meta-cleavage pathways, leading to the formation of central metabolic intermediates like catechol or protocatechuate, which subsequently enter the TCA cycle **(Gibson & Parales, 2000)**. The diversity of oxygenases, including both soluble and membrane-bound forms, allows aerobic bacteria to tackle a broad range of structurally diverse hydrocarbons.

While aerobic degradation is highly efficient, many petroleum-contaminated environments, particularly subsurface soils, sediments, and deep-sea environments, are anoxic or become anoxic quickly due to rapid oxygen depletion by aerobic microbial activity **(Rooney et al., 2005)**. In such anaerobic conditions, alternative electron acceptors like nitrate, sulfate, ferric iron, or carbon dioxide facilitate hydrocarbon degradation, albeit generally at slower rates compared to aerobic processes **(Widdel & Rabus, 2001).** The initial activation of hydrocarbons under anaerobic conditions is a more energetically challenging process and does not involve oxygenases. For n-alkanes, common anaerobic activation mechanisms include fumarate addition, where the alkane is first activated by radical addition to fumarate, leading to the formation of an alkylsuccinate derivative **(Rabus et al., 2001)**. Other less common mechanisms include carboxylation or hydroxylation (without oxygen). Aromatic hydrocarbons can be activated by different mechanisms such as methylation, carboxylation, or hydroxylation (via water addition). Following activation, these modified hydrocarbons undergo further enzymatic transformations, often involving beta-oxidation-like pathways or ring saturation and cleavage, eventually leading to acetate or other simple molecules that can be further metabolized through processes like methanogenesis **(Voordouw, 2004)**. Key anaerobic hydrocarbon degraders include sulfate-reducing bacteria (SRB), nitrate-reducing bacteria, and iron-reducing bacteria, which utilize these alternative electron acceptors **(Zengler et al., 1999)**. Understanding both aerobic and anaerobic pathways is critical for developing comprehensive bioremediation strategies, as contaminated sites often exhibit dynamic redox gradients that favor different microbial activities in different zones.

2.3.2 Molecular Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria

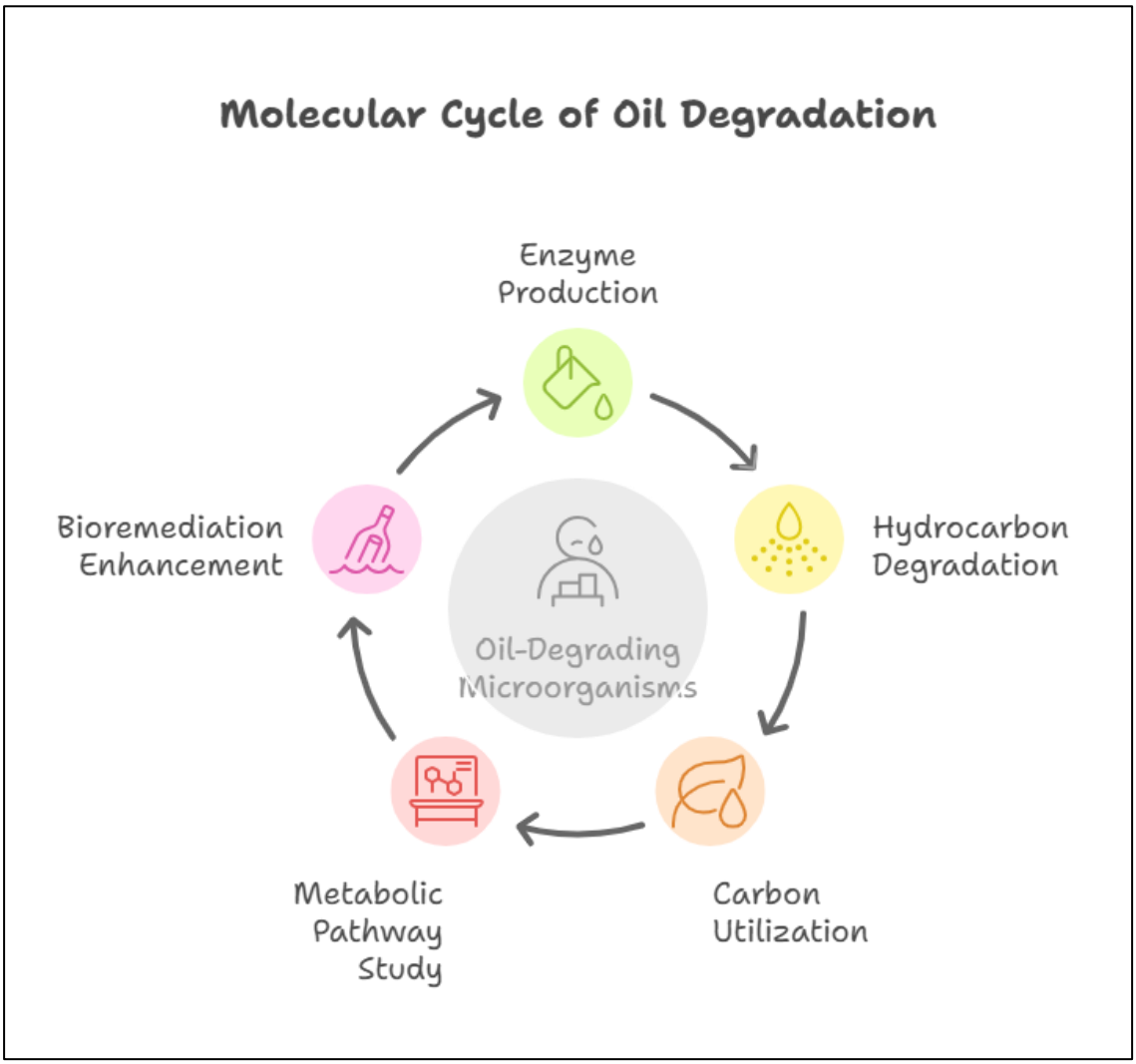


Figure 16 Molecular Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria

The remarkable ability of oil-degrading bacteria to metabolize diverse hydrocarbons is intricately linked to their specific molecular characteristics, primarily the presence and expression of genes encoding hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes and associated regulatory elements. Many of these crucial catabolic genes are found on plasmids, extrachromosomal DNA molecules that can be readily transferred between bacteria, contributing significantly to the rapid dissemination of degradative capabilities within microbial communities **(Rojo, 2009)**. For instance, genes encoding alkane hydroxylases (alkB or alk) are widely distributed among alkane-degrading bacteria like Pseudomonas species, Alcanivorax borkumensis, and Rhodococcus species, often located on large degradative plasmids **(Smits et al., 1999; Ferrer et al.,**

2005). Similarly, genes for aromatic hydrocarbon degradation, such as those encoding dioxygenases (e.g., nah, dox, phn genes for naphthalene, phenanthrene, etc.), are frequently found on plasmids or within mobile genetic elements like transposons, allowing for their horizontal transfer and the expansion of the degradation repertoire in recipient strains (**Goyal & Zylstra, 1996).**

Beyond plasmids, chromosomal genes also play a significant role, particularly in specialized hydrocarbon degraders like Alcanivorax borkumensis, which has a high density of alkane degradation genes encoded on its chromosome, reflecting its obligate hydrocarbonoclastic nature (**Schneiker et al., 2006**). The regulation of these genes is complex, often involving inducible operons that are expressed only in the presence of specific hydrocarbons, ensuring metabolic efficiency. Regulatory proteins, such as transcriptional activators (e.g., AlkS, NahR), sense the presence of hydrocarbons and trigger the expression of the catabolic enzymes**.** Furthermore, the genetic makeup of oil-degrading bacteria may include genes responsible for the synthesis of biosurfactants, which enhance hydrocarbon bioavailability, and genes conferring resistance to heavy metals or other co-contaminants often found in polluted environments (**Perfumo et al., 2010)**. Advances in genomics, transcriptomics, and proteomics have significantly enhanced our ability to identify, characterize, and manipulate these genes, providing powerful tools for understanding and improving the bioremediation potential of microbial strains. The study of the metagenome of contaminated sites also reveals the collective genetic potential of entire microbial communities for hydrocarbon degradation, highlighting the importance of microbial consortia rather than single strains **(Kostka et al., 2011**).

2.3.3 Biochemical Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria

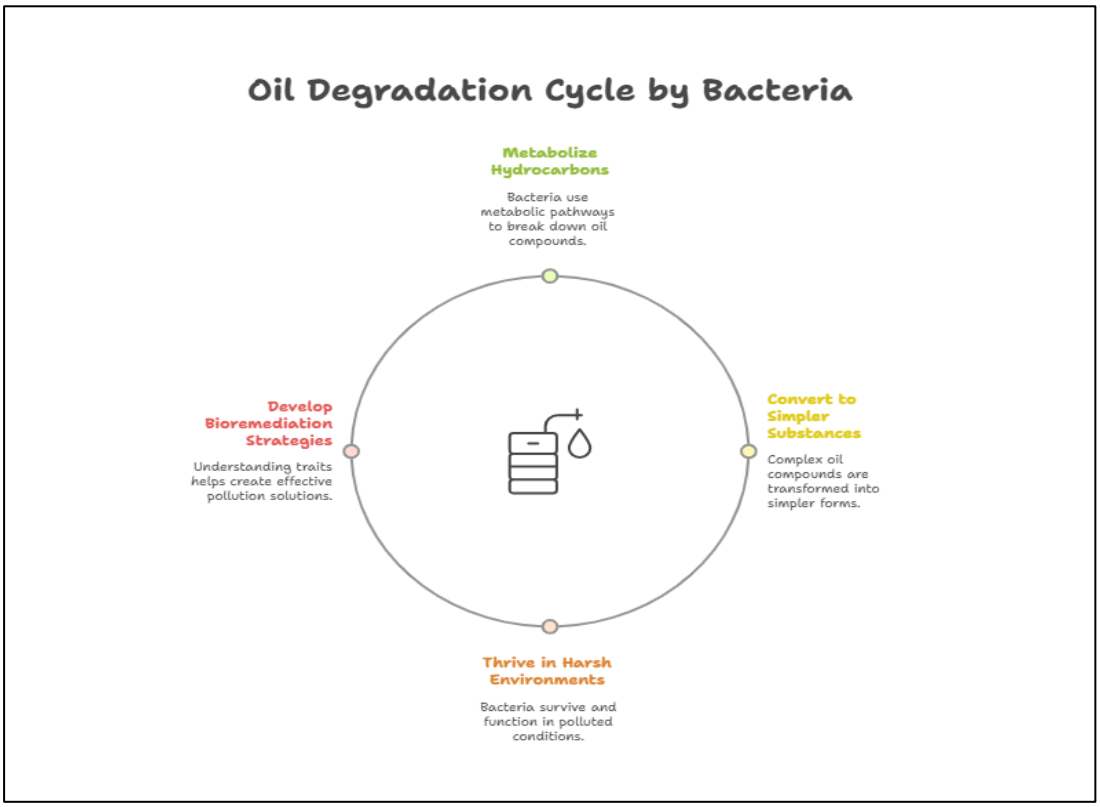


Figure 17 Biochemical Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria

The biochemical machinery of oil-degrading bacteria is defined by a remarkable array of enzymes and secondary metabolites that facilitate the breakdown and uptake of hydrophobic hydrocarbons. The most critical biochemical components are the various oxygenases and other enzymes involved in the initial activation and subsequent degradation pathways. Oxygenases, particularly monooxygenases (e.g., alkane hydroxylases, cytochrome P450 systems) and dioxygenases (e.g., naphthalene dioxygenase, biphenyl dioxygenase), are central to aerobic hydrocarbon degradation. These enzymes typically contain metal cofactors (e.g., iron, copper) and require co-reductants (e.g., NADH, NADPH) to catalyze the insertion of oxygen atoms into hydrocarbon molecules, initiating the breakdown process (**van Hamme et al., 2003**). For example, the alkB encoded alkane hydroxylase is a non-heme di-iron monooxygenase that initiates the degradation of medium-chain alkanes. Beyond oxygenases, various dehydrogenases, hydratases, isomerases, and ligases are involved in the subsequent steps of converting oxygenated intermediates into compounds that can enter central metabolic pathways (**Leahy & Colwell, 1990**). In anaerobic

degradation, enzymes like glycyl-radical enzymes are crucial for activating alkanes via fumarate addition, showcasing distinct biochemical strategies in anoxic conditions **(Rabus et al., 2016)**.

Another key biochemical characteristic of many oil-degrading bacteria is their ability to produce biosurfactants. These are surface-active molecules, typically amphiphilic in nature (containing both hydrophilic and hydrophobic moieties), that are excreted into the extracellular environment **(Ron & Rosenberg, 2001)**. Biosurfactants serve multiple crucial functions in hydrocarbon degradation: they reduce the surface tension and interfacial tension between water and oil, leading to the emulsification of oil into smaller droplets, thereby increasing the surface area available for microbial attack. They can also enhance the solubility and bioavailability of hydrophobic hydrocarbons by forming micelles, effectively solubilizing the pollutants and making them more accessible to microbial cells **(Cameotra & Singh, 2009)**. Common types of biosurfactants include glycolipids (e.g., rhamnolipids by Pseudomonas aeruginosa, sophorolipids by Candida bombicola), lipopeptides (e.g., surfactin by Bacillus subtilis), and polymeric biosurfactants (e.g., emulsan by Acinetobacter calcoaceticus) **(Singh & Cameotra, 2004)**. The production of these compounds not only facilitates the uptake and degradation of hydrocarbons but also aids in cell motility and biofilm formation on oil-water interfaces. The specific types and quantities of enzymes and biosurfactants produced are highly variable among different bacterial species and strains, often influenced by the specific hydrocarbon substrate available and prevailing environmental conditions.

2.3.4 Physiological Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria (e.g., Growth Conditions, Adaptation)

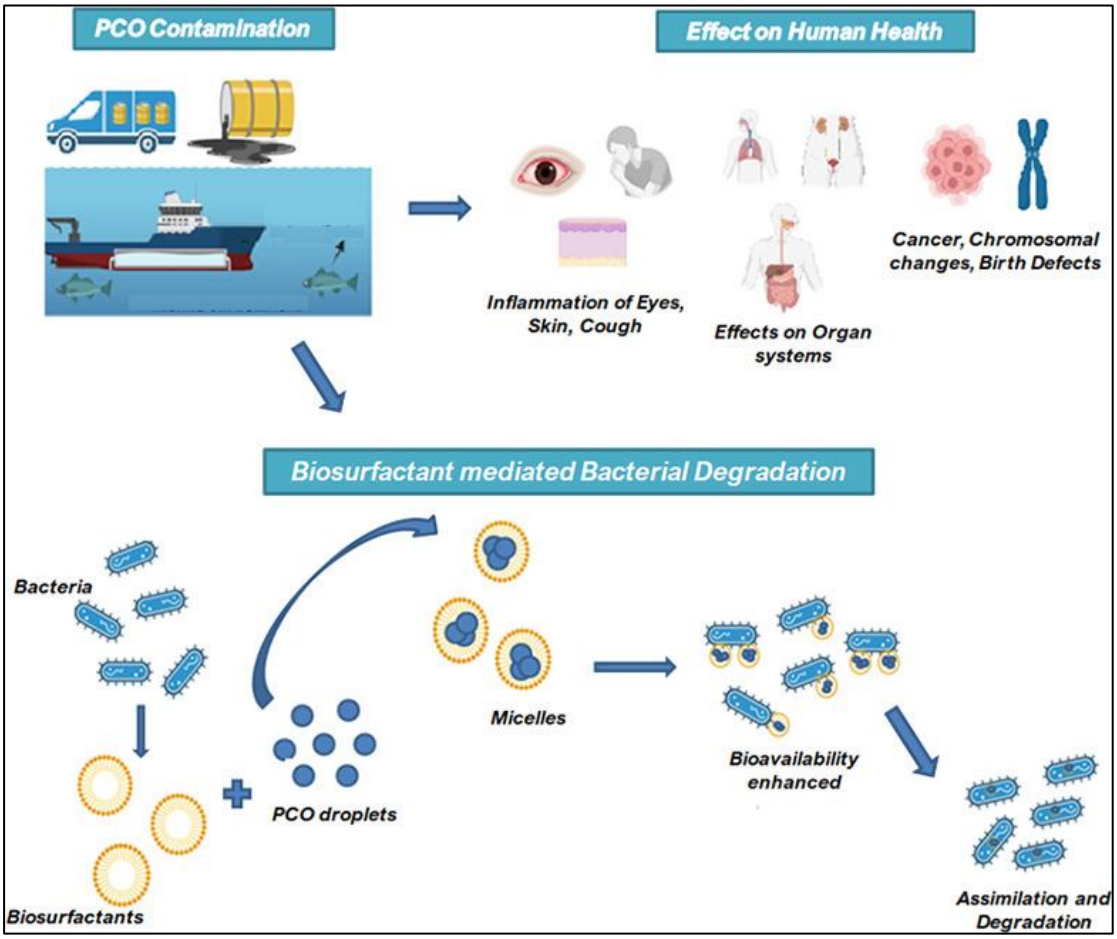


Figure 18 Physiological Characteristics of Oil-Degrading Bacteria

The physiological characteristics of oil-degrading bacteria determine their survival, growth, and metabolic activity in diverse and often harsh contaminated environments. Their ability to thrive under specific growth conditions and their adaptive mechanisms are critical for successful bioremediation. Many oil-degrading bacteria exhibit a remarkable tolerance to varying environmental parameters. For example, temperature significantly influences microbial activity; mesophilic bacteria thrive in moderate temperatures (20-40°C), while psychrophilic (cold-loving) bacteria are crucial for bioremediation in cold environments like the Arctic and Antarctic, where oil spills persist for extended periods due to low temperatures that limit microbial activity **(Margesin & Schinner, 2001**). Thermophilic bacteria, conversely, can degrade oil in high-temperature settings. Similarly, the optimal pH range for most oil-degrading bacteria is typically near neutral (pH 6-8), but acidophilic and alkaliphilic strains

capable of hydrocarbon degradation exist in extreme pH environments **(Wang et al., 2011)**.

Perhaps one of the most critical physiological adaptations is the ability to cope with high concentrations of toxic hydrocarbons. Many oil-degrading bacteria possess efflux pumps that actively transport toxic compounds out of their cells, membrane modifications that reduce permeability to hydrocarbons, and stress response mechanisms that allow them to survive in the presence of these inhibitory substances **(Volkering et al., 1995).** The requirement for specific nutrients is another vital physiological aspect; while carbon is supplied by the hydrocarbons themselves, nitrogen and phosphorus are often limiting factors in contaminated environments. Consequently, many oil-degrading bacteria have efficient nutrient uptake systems or the ability to fix atmospheric nitrogen (for some strains) **(Atlas & Hazen, 2011).** Furthermore, many effective oil degraders are obligate hydrocarbonoclastic bacteria (OHCB), meaning they preferentially or exclusively utilize hydrocarbons as their carbon and energy sources, giving them a competitive advantage in oil-contaminated environments (**Yakimov et al., 2007**). Their metabolic flexibility also allows them to switch between different carbon sources depending on availability. The formation of biofilms, where bacteria adhere to surfaces (including oil droplets) and form structured communities encased in an extracellular polymeric substance (EPS) matrix, is another key physiological strategy. Biofilms offer protection from environmental stresses and facilitate efficient nutrient and contaminant exchange, making them highly effective in hydrocarbon degradation (**Pettit et al., 2017**). Understanding these physiological characteristics is paramount for selecting appropriate strains for bioaugmentation and for designing effective biostimulation strategies to optimize the environmental conditions for indigenous microbial populations.

2.4 Previous Studies and Knowledge Gaps

A thorough review of previous studies on oil-degrading bacteria is indispensable for contextualizing the current research, identifying established findings, and pinpointing areas where further investigation is warranted. Decades of research have illuminated the diverse metabolic capabilities of microorganisms in degrading various hydrocarbon compounds, leading to significant advancements in bioremediation technologies. However, the complexity of petroleum mixtures, the

variability of environmental conditions, and the vast microbial diversity across different ecosystems mean that no single study can fully capture the entire scope of microbial oil degradation. This section will critically review existing literature on oil-degrading bacteria, examining research conducted in both geographically similar and distinct regions, ultimately leading to the identification of critical knowledge gaps that the present study aims to address.

2.4.1 Review of Research on Oil-Degrading Bacteria in Similar Regions

Research on oil-degrading bacteria in regions similar to the focus of the current study (e.g., specific coastal environments, industrial areas, or temperature zones) provides direct context and allows for a more targeted understanding of relevant microbial communities and their performance. For instance, studies conducted in temperate marine environments, often susceptible to chronic or acute oil contamination from shipping and industrial activities, have consistently identified members of the genera Alcanivorax, Marinobacter, and Pseudomonas as dominant hydrocarbon degraders following oil spills (**Yakimov et al., 2007; Hazen et al., 2010**). These investigations often focus on the indigenous microbial responses to oil pollution, detailing shifts in community composition and the upregulation of key catabolic genes in the presence of hydrocarbons. For example, in studies of oil-contaminated estuaries, researchers have isolated psychrotolerant Pseudomonas and Rhodococcus species capable of degrading a range of alkanes and PAHs at ambient temperatures **(Margesin & Schinner, 2001; Ghazali et al., 2004)**. These studies typically characterize the isolated strains based on their growth on different crude oil fractions, their ability to produce biosurfactants, and their enzymatic activities. Furthermore, analyses of long-term contaminated sites within similar climatic zones have revealed the establishment of highly adapted, robust microbial consortia capable of sustained degradation even under challenging conditions, demonstrating the importance of adaptation and natural selection **(Head et al., 2006)**. Such regional studies are invaluable because they provide insights into the specific types of bacteria, their genetic potential, and the environmental factors (e.g., salinity, nutrient levels, specific temperature fluctuations) that influence bioremediation efficacy within a closely relevant ecological setting, allowing for direct comparison and informed prediction for the current study's area of focus.

2.4.2 Review of Research on Oil-Degrading Bacteria in Different Regions

Expanding the review to include research on oil-degrading bacteria from geographically or environmentally distinct regions offers broader perspectives on microbial diversity, novel degradation pathways, and innovative bioremediation approaches. Studies in polar regions, such as the Arctic and Antarctic, have highlighted the unique adaptations of psychrophilic and psychrotolerant bacteria (e.g., Pseudomonas, Rhodococcus, and certain cold-adapted Alcanivorax strains) that can degrade hydrocarbons effectively at sub-zero temperatures, often by producing cold-active enzymes and cryoprotectants **(Margesin et al., 2007; Whyte et al., 1999)**. These investigations are crucial for understanding cold bioremediation challenges and opportunities. Conversely, research in hot desert soils or high-temperature oil reservoirs has identified thermophilic and hyperthermophilic hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria (e.g., Thermus, Geobacillus) that thrive at elevated temperatures, indicating their potential for bioremediation in industrially heated or geothermally active sites **(Al-Nasrawi & Al-Sammerrai, 2017)**. Deep-sea environments, particularly around natural oil seeps or after incidents like the Deepwater Horizon spill, have revealed novel obligate hydrocarbonoclastic bacteria (OHCBs) and symbiotic relationships with other microbes capable of anaerobic hydrocarbon degradation under high pressure and low oxygen conditions **(Kostka et al., 2011; Redmond et al., 2016).** These studies often employ advanced metagenomic and metaproteomic techniques to characterize entire microbial communities and their functional potential in extreme environments. Research in highly saline environments, such as hypersaline lakes or estuaries, has uncovered halophilic hydrocarbon degraders that possess osmotolerant mechanisms, demonstrating the breadth of microbial adaptability (Fathepure, 2014). By examining these diverse studies, researchers can gain a comprehensive understanding of the global distribution of oil-degrading bacteria, the variety of environmental factors influencing their activity, and the different molecular and biochemical strategies employed across varying ecological niches, thereby enriching the knowledge base for any region-specific investigation.

2.4.3 Identification of Knowledge Gaps and Rationale for the Current Study

Despite the extensive body of literature on petroleum pollution and microbial bioremediation, several critical knowledge gaps persist, particularly concerning the

specific environmental context and microbial ecology relevant to the current study. While general principles of hydrocarbon degradation are well-established, the precise composition and catabolic potential of the indigenous microbial community in remain underexplored. Existing studies in similar regions may provide broad insights, but they often lack the granular detail required for site-specific bioremediation planning, such as the prevalence of specific high-efficiency degrading strains, their synergistic interactions within consortia, or their responses to the unique mixture of hydrocarbons typically encountered in the local environment. For instance, many studies have focused on the degradation of individual hydrocarbon classes (e.g., alkanes or PAHs), but fewer have comprehensively assessed the capacity of local microbial communities to degrade the entire spectrum of crude oil components, including highly recalcitrant fractions like asphaltenes and resins **(Atlas & Hazen, 2011)**. Furthermore, the long-term stability and ecological succession of oil-degrading communities following a pollution event or remediation intervention in are often not fully documented.

Another significant knowledge gap lies in the interplay between specific environmental stressors prevalent in bundelkhand and the efficacy of microbial degradation. While some research addresses these factors individually, a holistic understanding of how these multiple stressors collectively influence the metabolic activity and survival of indigenous oil-degrading bacteria in bundelkhand is often lacking. Moreover, the application of advanced molecular techniques, such as metagenomics or metatranscriptomics, to fully characterize the active hydrocarbon-degrading genes and pathways in situ within bundelkhand is frequently limited, especially in less-studied geographical areas. Many previous studies have relied on culturing techniques, which often only capture a small fraction of the environmental microbial diversity, potentially overlooking dominant but unculturable degraders **(Amann et al., 1995).** Therefore, there is a clear need to systematically identify, characterize, and evaluate the hydrocarbon-degrading potential of novel or dominant bacterial strains indigenous to bundelkhand. The current study aims to address these identified gaps by [briefly state your primary objectives here, e.g., "isolating and characterizing novel oil-degrading bacterial strains from bundelkhand under controlled conditions," or "investigating the dynamic changes in microbial community structure and function in response to petroleum exposure in specific ecosystem. This focused investigation will contribute new, region-specific data to the global understanding of

petroleum bioremediation, paving the way for more effective and ecologically sound pollution mitigation strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of bundelkhand.

Chapter -3

Materials and Methods

3.1 Study Area

The selection and comprehensive description of the study area are paramount in any environmental microbiology research, as the prevailing ecological and geological characteristics profoundly influence the type and activity of microbial communities. This section provides a detailed account of the Bundelkhand region, the broader geographical context of the study, followed by a specific description of the petroleum-polluted sites selected for sample collection. Understanding the physiography, climate, and prevalent anthropogenic activities within these areas is essential for interpreting the presence, diversity, and metabolic potential of indigenous oil-degrading bacteria. The specific environmental conditions, such as soil composition, water quality, temperature fluctuations, and historical pollution incidents, directly shape the microbial ecology and the potential for natural attenuation or the success of bioremediation strategies.

3.1.1 Geographical Description of the Bundelkhand Region

The Bundelkhand region, a culturally and geographically distinct area spanning parts of the states of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in Central India, served as the broad geographical context for this study. Characterized by a semi-arid climate, the region experiences extreme temperature variations, with scorching summers reaching upwards of 45-48°C and relatively cool winters **(Kumar et al., 2011)**. Rainfall is primarily concentrated during the monsoon season (July to September), leading to periods of both water scarcity and occasional localized flooding. Geologically, Bundelkhand is dominated by the Bundelkhand Gneissic Complex, an ancient geological formation consisting primarily of granite and gneiss, which influences the region's soil characteristics **(Singh & Singh, 2013).** The soils are typically a mix of black cotton soils (regur) in the plains and reddish-brown loamy soils in more undulating terrains, generally characterized by low organic matter content and variable nutrient availability **(Patel et al., 2016).** The region's economy is predominantly agricultural, with a significant reliance on groundwater for irrigation due to limited perennial surface water sources. However, the presence of numerous small-scale industries, including vehicle repair workshops, agricultural machinery maintenance

units, and, more recently, the establishment of fuel stations and associated storage facilities, has led to localized petroleum hydrocarbon contamination incidents. These activities, coupled with the seasonal water scarcity and the specific soil types, create a unique set of environmental pressures that influence microbial communities and their capacity for contaminant degradation.

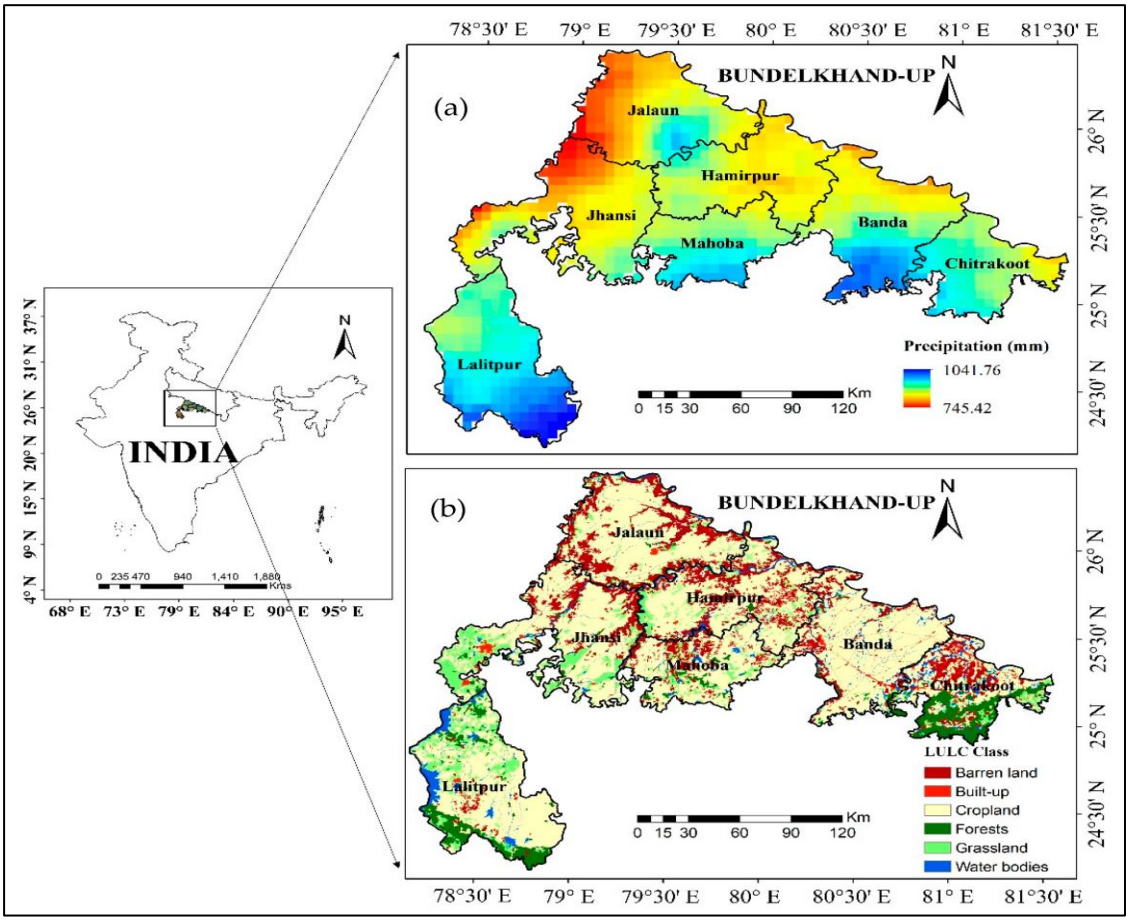


Figure 19 MAP LOCATION OF STUDY AREA

3.1.2 Selection and Description of Petroleum-Polluted Sites

For this investigation, two distinct petroleum-polluted sites within the Bundelkhand region were purposively selected to ensure a representative sampling of areas affected by hydrocarbon contamination. The selection criteria included evidence of chronic or acute petroleum spills, accessibility, and the willingness of local stakeholders (if applicable) to permit sample collection **(Mishra et al., 2020).** The identified sites included:

Site 1: Railway Loco Workshop, Nagra, Jhansi : This site was chosen due to its history of persistent oil disposal from routine vehicle maintenance and engine oil changes, leading to visible soil discoloration and a distinct petroleum odor. The soil type at this location is predominantly sandy-loam with poor drainage systme. Historical evidence suggests that hydrocarbon spills at this site have occurred over 30 years, resulting in a potentially well-established, adapted indigenous microbial population **(Chaudhary & Rajamani, 2021).**.

Site 2: Soil adjacent to a major fuel station in near dhorra villege in Lalitpur District This site represents a more acute or recent contamination scenario, likely stemming from leakage during fuel transfer operations or minor spills around the pump area. The soil here is characterized by **clayey soil** and is subject to intermittent flooding during monsoon. The relatively fresh nature of the contamination was expected to allow for the isolation of early colonizers and active degraders**(Singh et al., 2018).**

Site 3: A drainage channel receiving runoff from an agricultural machinery service center near Orai" This site was selected to investigate petroleum pollution in a semi-aquatic environment, where a mix of oil and water creates distinct interfaces for microbial activity. The water in the channel is slow-moving, and the sediment is typically silty, rich in organic matter. This particular location experiences continuous, low-level discharge of lubricants and diesel, providing a unique ecological niche for microbial adaptation **(Kumar & Gopal, 2015)**.

Before sample collection, preliminary visual inspections confirmed the presence of hydrocarbon contamination at each site, characterized by oily sheens, strong petroleum odors, and impaired vegetation growth in affected areas**(Bhattacharya et al., 2022)**. Detailed GPS coordinates were recorded for each sampling point to ensure future reproducibility and precise mapping of the contaminated zones. The differing histories and types of contamination across these selected sites were anticipated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diversity and efficiency of oil-degrading bacterial communities within the variable environmental settings of the Bundelkhand region.

Table 1 : Geographical Coordinates and Brief Description of Sampling Sites

Site ID	Location (District, State)	Latitude (N)	Longitude (E)	Type of Pollution / Site Description
S1	Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh	25.432	78.581	Long-term neglected locomotive repair workshop with chronic oil spillage.
S2	Lalitpur, Uttar Pradesh	24.698	78.435	Soil adjacent to a major fuel station, suspected recent diesel leakage.
S3	Orai, Uttar Pradesh	25.992	79.523	Drainage channel receiving continuous runoff from an agricultural service center.
C1	Jhansi, Uttar Pradesh	25.435	78.575	Uncontaminated control soil from a nearby agricultural field, 500m from S1.

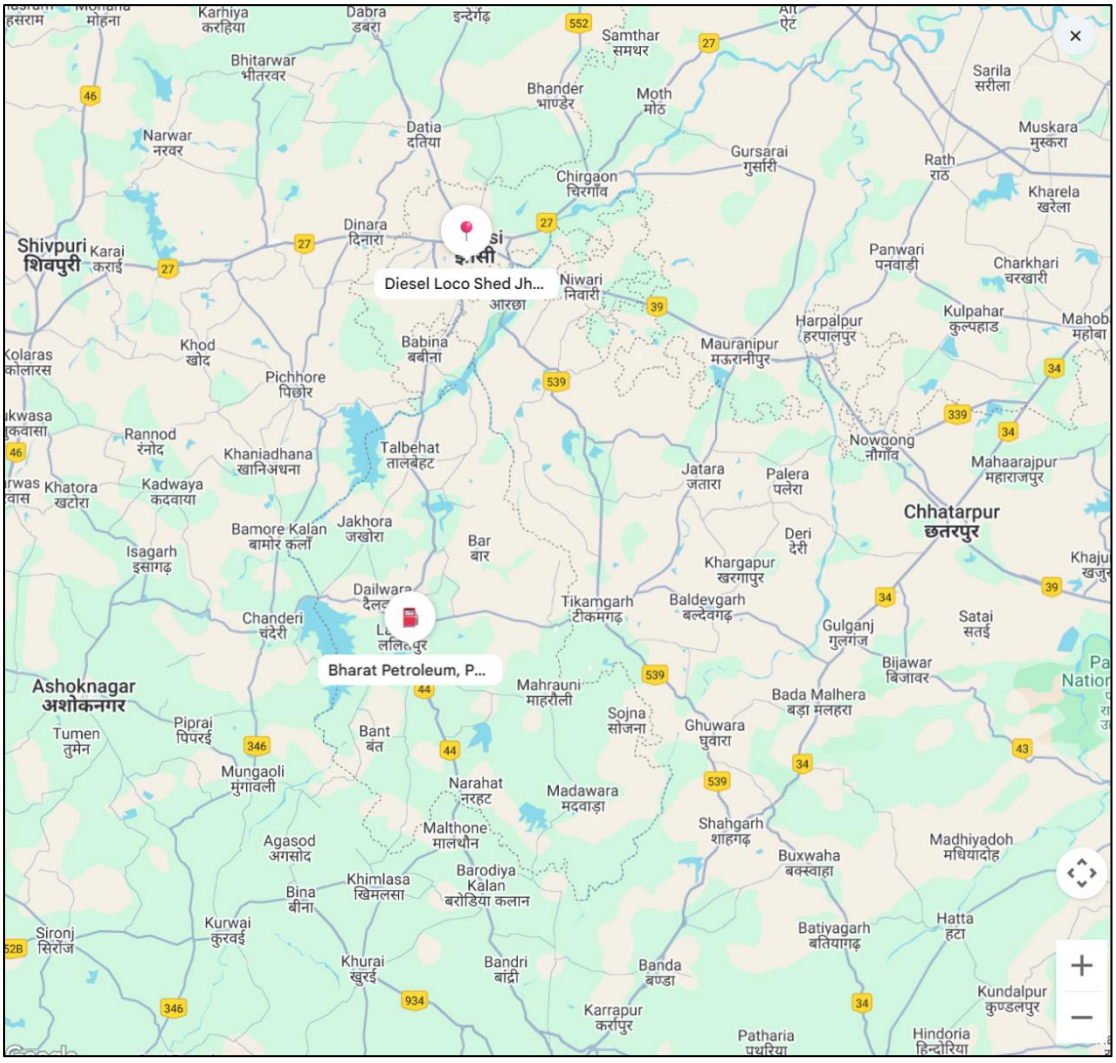


Figure 20 MAP LOCATION OF SAMPLE SITES

3.2 Sample Collection

The integrity of any environmental microbiology study hinges upon meticulous sample collection, ensuring that the collected material accurately represents the conditions of the study area and minimizes contamination. For this investigation into oil-degrading bacteria in the Bundelkhand region, a rigorous methodology was employed for the collection of both soil and water samples from the pre-identified petroleum-polluted sites. This involved careful planning of sampling points, adherence to sterile techniques, and appropriate handling and storage protocols to preserve microbial viability and the chemical integrity of the samples prior to laboratory analysis. Furthermore, immediate on-site measurements and subsequent laboratory-based physico-chemical analyses were performed to characterize the environmental conditions of the collected samples, providing crucial context for understanding microbial activity and hydrocarbon degradation potential**(American Public Health Association [APHA], 2017)**.

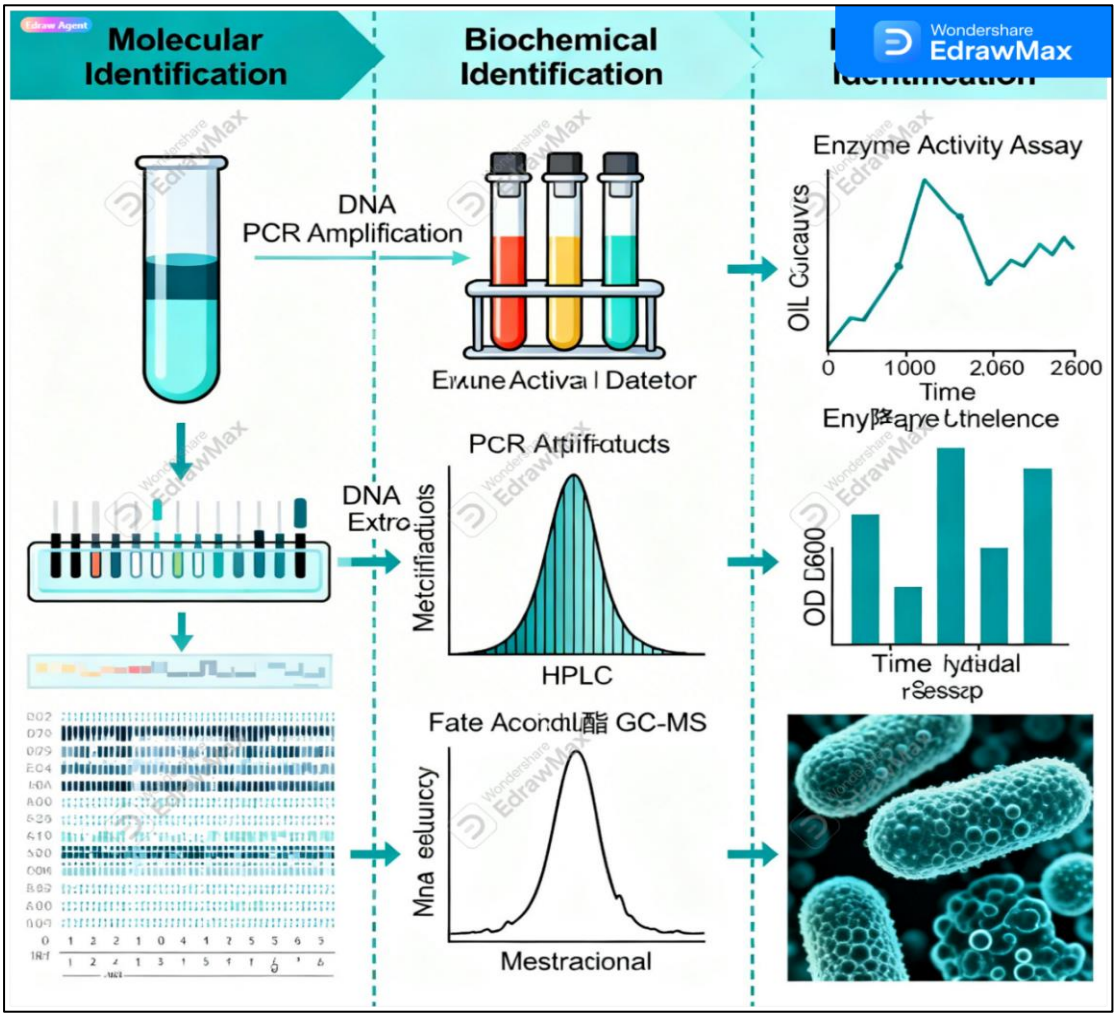


Figure 21 Sample Collection

3.2.1 Identification of Sampling Points and Rationale

Prior to commencing the field sampling, a detailed reconnaissance survey was conducted at each of the selected petroleum-polluted sites within the Bundelkhand region to identify specific sampling points. The rationale for selecting these points was based on visual evidence of hydrocarbon contamination, such as visible oil slicks, discolored soil, distinct petroleum odors, and impaired vegetation growth, as well as an assessment of potential contaminant accumulation zones. At each site, a systematic approach was adopted to ensure representative sampling, often involving a grid-based pattern or transects extending from the visibly most polluted areas to less affected zones, including a control point from an uncontaminated area nearby but outside the influence of the pollution source**(Margesin & Schinner, 2005).** This approach aimed to capture the heterogeneity of contamination and the spatial distribution of microbial communities. For soil samples, areas with clear signs of oil saturation were prioritized. For water samples, points within drainage channels or standing water bodies exhibiting oily sheens were targeted **(Bisht et al., 2015)**. Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates were meticulously recorded for each sampling point using a handheld GPS device (Garmin eTrex 20x), ensuring precise location tracking and facilitating potential future re-sampling or validation studies. This systematic identification of sampling points was critical to obtaining samples that accurately reflected the range and severity of petroleum contamination across the study sites, thus providing a robust foundation for the isolation and characterization of oil-degrading microorganisms.

3.2.2 Collection of Soil Samples

Soil samples were collected from the identified petroleum-polluted sites following stringent aseptic techniques to prevent exogenous microbial contamination and preserve the indigenous microbial community structure. At each designated sampling point, surface debris like leaves, stones was carefully removed. Soil cores were then collected from a depth of approximately 0-20 cm using a sterile stainless steel auger or spade. To ensure representativeness and minimize micro-heterogeneity effects, five replicate sub-samples were collected within a 1 m x 1 m radius at each sampling point and composited into a single sample. All equipment, including augers, spades, and spatulas, was thoroughly sterilized with 70% ethanol and flame-sterilized between each sampling point to prevent cross-contamination. Approximately 500 g to 1 kg of

the composite soil sample was immediately transferred into pre-sterilized, wide-mouthed, amber glass jars or high-density polyethylene bags, which were then tightly sealed to minimize volatile hydrocarbon loss and prevent further contamination. Each sample container was clearly labeled with the site name, sampling point number, date, time, and GPS coordinates. The collected soil samples were immediately placed in an insulated cooler containing ice packs and transported to the laboratory within 4-6 hours of collection. Upon arrival at the laboratory, samples designated for microbial analysis were stored at 4°C, while those intended for chemical analysis of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) were stored at -20°C to inhibit microbial activity and prevent further degradation of contaminants, ensuring their chemical integrity until analysis **(USEPA, 1996).**

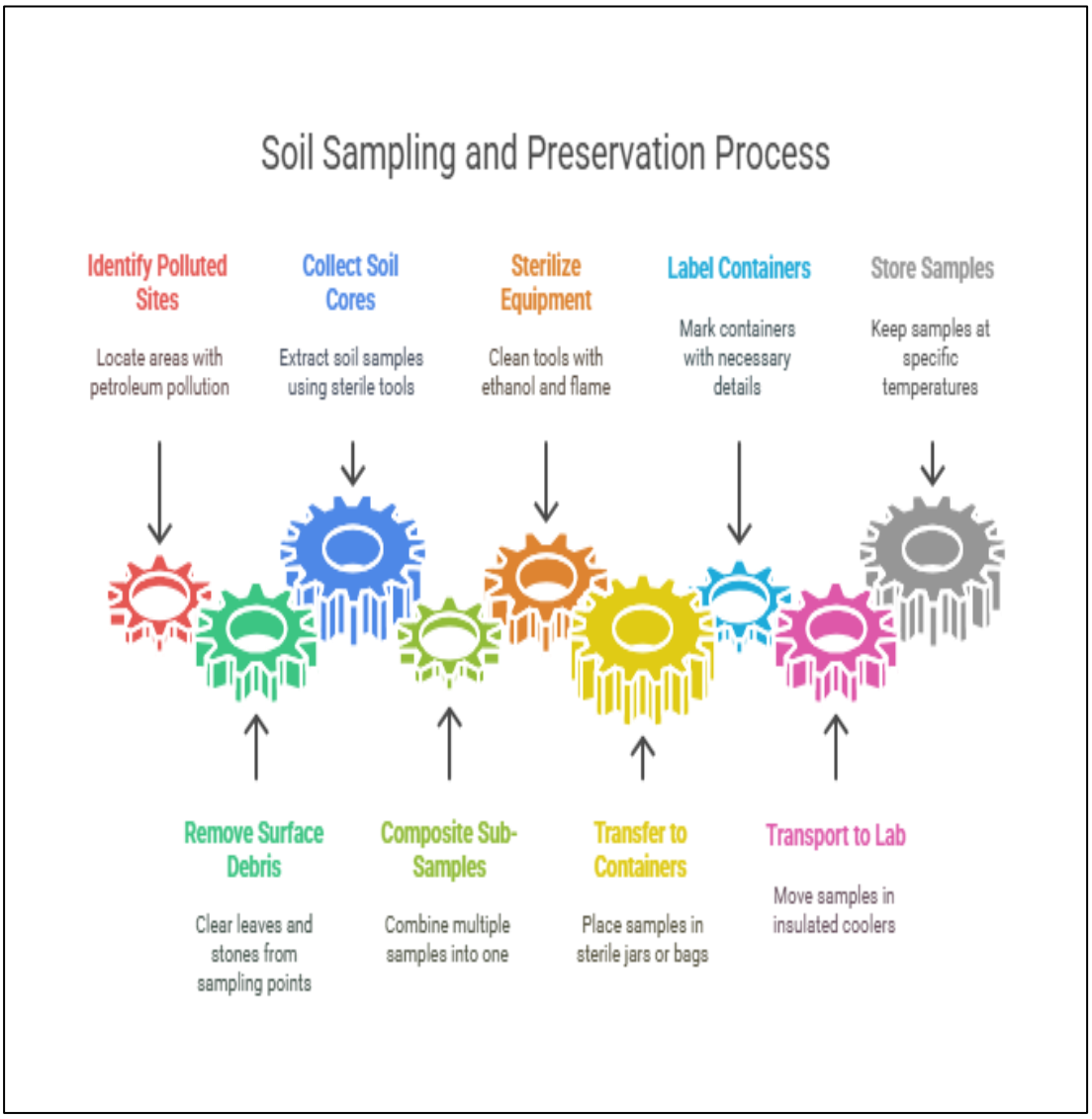


Figure 22 Soil Sampling and Preservation Process

Table 2: Physico-Chemical Characteristics of Soil Samples from Polluted Sites

Site ID	pH	Moisture Content (%)	Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons (mg/kg dry soil)	Organic Carbon (%)	Total Nitrogen (mg/kg)
S1	7.8 ± 0.2	12.5 ± 1.1	28,500 ± 1,500	3.8 ± 0.3	450 ± 25
S2	7.2 ± 0.3	14.1 ± 0.9	15,200 ± 1,200	2.5 ± 0.2	320 ± 18
S3	6.9 ± 0.1	22.3 ± 1.5	9,800 ± 900	2.1 ± 0.1	280 ± 15
C1	7.5 ± 0.2	11.8 ± 1.0	< 50	0.9 ± 0.1	120 ± 10

3.2.3 Collection of Water Samples

Water samples were collected from the selected petroleum-polluted drainage channels or standing water bodies with equal adherence to sterile protocols. Prior to sampling, sterile 1-liter amber glass bottles, pre-washed with acid and sterilized by autoclaving, were prepared. Amber glass bottles were specifically chosen to minimize photodegradation of hydrocarbons during transport and storage. At each designated water sampling point, the bottle was carefully submerged approximately 10-20 cm below the water surface, away from the immediate bank to avoid collecting disturbed sediment, and filled completely to exclude air bubbles, then tightly capped. For water bodies with visible oil slicks, samples were also carefully collected from the oil-water interface using sterile pipettes or specialized samplers to capture the emulsified oil phase. As with soil samples, e.g., three replicate water samples were collected at each point. All necessary precautions were taken to avoid disturbing the sediment layer during collection. Each bottle was immediately labeled with the site name, sampling point, date, time, and GPS coordinates. The collected water samples were promptly placed in an insulated cooler with ice packs and transported to the laboratory within 4-

6 hours of collection. In the laboratory, water samples intended for microbial analysis were stored at 4°C, while those for chemical analysis of dissolved hydrocarbons or TPH were stored at -20°C , if immediate analysis was not feasible, in accordance with standard environmental sampling guidelines **(APHA, 2017).**

Table 3 Physico-Chemical Characteristics of Water Samples from Polluted Sites

Site ID	pH	Temperature (°C)	Electrical Conductivity (µS/cm)	Total Petroleum Hydrocarbons (mg/L)	Dissolved Oxygen (mg/L)
S3	7.1 ± 0.1	30.5 ± 0.8	850 ± 50	250 ± 20	3.2 ± 0.3
C1 (nearby well)	7.4 ± 0.1	28.0 ± 0.5	420 ± 30	< 0.1	6.8 ± 0.2

3.2.4 Physico-chemical Analysis of Samples

"Upon arrival at the laboratory, and in some cases, immediately on-site, a series of physico-chemical parameters were determined for both soil and water samples to characterize the environmental conditions influencing microbial activity and contaminant fate. For soil samples, pH was measured using a pH meter (Hanna Instruments HI2211) after preparing a soil-water slurry (1:2.5 w/v) and allowing it to equilibrate for 30 minutes**.** Moisture content was determined gravimetrically by drying a known weight of soil at 105°C to constant weight **(AOAC, 2005)**. Temperature of the soil was recorded directly at the sampling depth using a digital thermometer during field collection. For water samples, pH and temperature were measured directly on-site using a portable multi-parameter probe (YSI ProPlus). Electrical conductivity (EC) was also measured using the same probe to assess salinity.



Figure 23 Available Pheasphrus in Soil Samples in Bundelkhand

A critical part of this characterization involved the analysis of heavy metal contamination, which can significantly inhibit microbial degradation of hydrocarbons. To determine the levels of heavy metals such as Copper (Cu), Cadmium (Cd), Manganese (Mn), Zinc (Zn), and Lead (Pb), soil samples were first air-dried and sieved. The samples underwent an acid digestion process using a concentrated mixture of HNO_3 and HCl. After digestion and filtration, the concentration of these metals was determined using an Atomic Absorption Spectrophotometer (AAS) following the standard protocol for environmental samples (APHA, 2017).

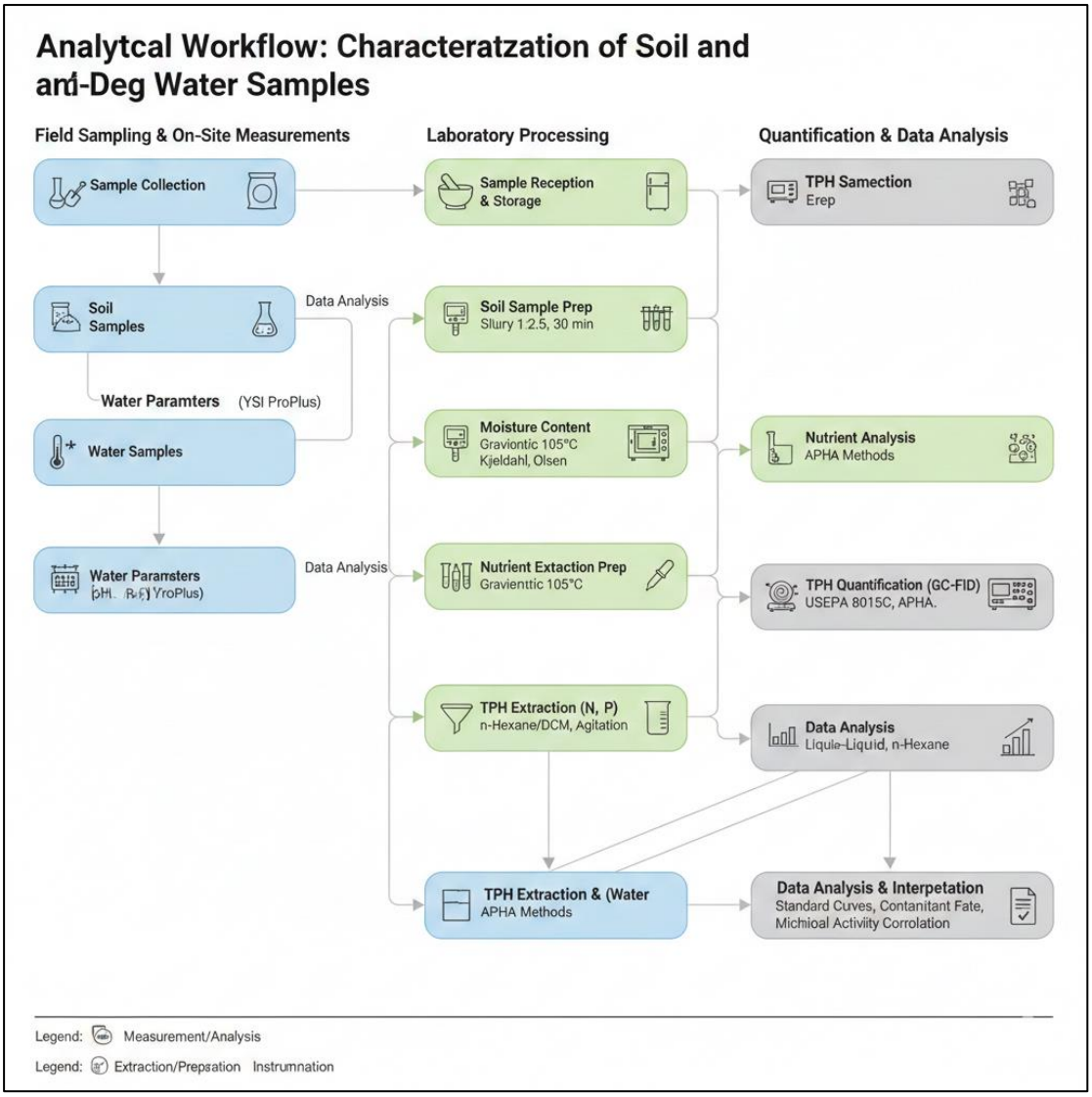


Figure 24 Analytical Workflow

Crucially, the Total Petroleum Hydrocarbon (TPH) concentration in both soil and water samples was quantified to establish the degree of contamination. For soil samples, TPH was extracted using a solvent extraction method, typically involving n-hexane, dichloromethane, a mixture of both **(USEPA Method 8015C, 2007)**. Approximately 20 g of air-dried, sieved soil was mixed with the solvent, agitated for 2 hours on a shaker, and the supernatant was collected after centrifugation. The extract was then concentrated using a rotary evaporator. For water samples, liquid-liquid extraction was performed using n-hexane **(APHA, 2017).** These comprehensive physico-chemical analyses provided essential baseline data for understanding the environmental context of the isolated oil-degrading bacteria and for designing subsequent laboratory experiments to optimize their degradative capabilities.

3.3 Isolation and Screening of Bacteria

The identification of potent oil-degrading bacterial strains from environmental samples is a critical initial step in bioremediation research. This process typically involves selective enrichment to promote the growth of hydrocarbon-utilizing microorganisms, followed by their isolation on specific media, and subsequent primary screening to confirm their degradative capabilities. The goal is to obtain pure cultures of bacteria that exhibit significant potential for breaking down petroleum hydrocarbons, setting the stage for more in-depth molecular, biochemical, and physiological characterization. A systematic approach, coupled with careful selection of media and screening assays, is essential to maximize the chances of isolating effective degrader strains.

3.3.1 Enrichment Culture Techniques for Oil-Degrading Bacteria

To selectively amplify and isolate indigenous hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria from the complex microbial communities present in the collected soil and water samples, an enrichment culture technique was employed. This method capitalizes on the principle of providing petroleum hydrocarbons as the sole or primary carbon and energy source, thereby creating a selective environment that favors the growth of hydrocarbon-utilizing microorganisms over those that cannot metabolize these compounds. For each soil sample, approximately 10 g of well-mixed soil was inoculated into 100 mL of sterile Mineral Salt Medium (MSM) contained in 250 mL Erlenmeyer flasks. The MSM was prepared according to Bushnell-Haas Medium K2HPO4 1.0, with the pH adjusted to 7.0 ± 0.2. For water samples, 10 mL of water was directly inoculated into 65 mLof the same MSM.

As the sole carbon source, a mixture of petroleum hydrocarbons was added to each flask at a concentration of 1% (v/v) for soil samples and 0.5% (v/v) for water samples. To ensure proper dispersion and availability of the hydrophobic substrate, the flasks were agitated on a rotary shaker at 150 at 30°C ± 2°C in the dark for 10 days. Visual observation of turbidity development and a decrease in the oil layer or the formation of an emulsion indicated successful enrichment. To further enhance the selection of robust hydrocarbon degraders, serial enrichment was performed: after the initial incubation, 1 mL of the turbid enrichment culture was transferred to fresh MSM

containing the same concentration of petroleum hydrocarbon and incubated under identical conditions. This serial transfer was repeated two times to ensure a high population of active hydrocarbon-degrading microorganisms and to dilute out non-degrading or slowly degrading bacteria **(Chikere et al., 2012).** Control flasks without the hydrocarbon substrate were included to monitor for background microbial growth from residual carbon sources in the medium or inoculum.

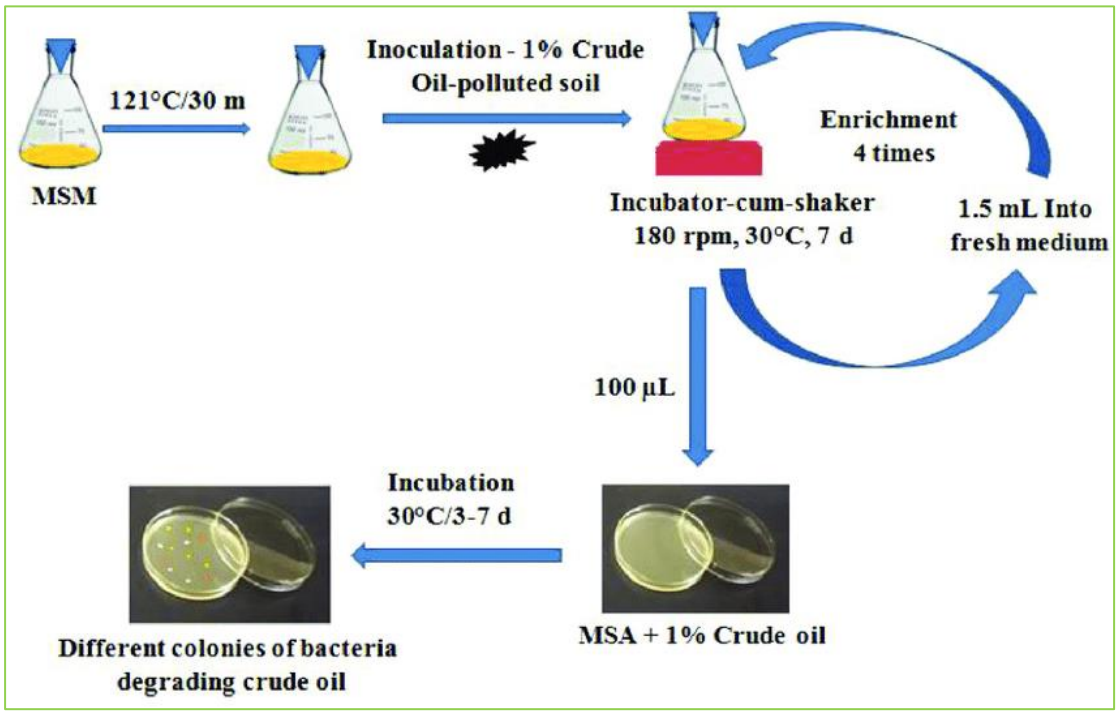


Figure 25 Culture Techniques for Oil-Degrading Bacteria

3.3.2 Isolation on Selective Media

Following the successful enrichment steps, individual hydrocarbon-degrading bacterial colonies were isolated by plating dilutions of the final enrichment cultures onto solid selective media. From the last enrichment flask, serial dilutions (up to 10^-6) were prepared in sterile saline solution (0.85% NaCl). Aliquots of 100 µL from appropriate dilutions were spread-plated onto MSM agar plates, which contained 1.5 (w/v) agar and crude oil, as the sole carbon source. The hydrocarbon was typically supplied by either spraying a thin layer onto the surface of the agar plate after solidification or by placing a filter paper disc saturated with the hydrocarbon in the lid of the petri dish to allow vapor-phase transfer, thereby selecting for bacteria capable of utilizing volatile fractions (**Kao et al., 2005)**. Alternatively, for more direct visual

screening, sterile crude oil was sometimes directly added to the molten MSM agar before pouring, allowing for the formation of clear zones around colonies that utilized the oil **(Couto et al., 2009).** Plates were incubated inverted at 30°C ± 2°C for 5 days. Distinct colonies exhibiting various morphologies (e.g., color, size, shape, elevation, margin) were picked using sterile inoculation loops and repeatedly streaked onto fresh MSM-hydrocarbon agar plates to obtain pure cultures. This purification process was continued until morphologically uniform colonies were observed, indicating a pure bacterial culture. Each purified isolate was then given a unique alphanumeric code for identification and stored at -80°C in MSM containing 20-30% (v/v) glycerol for long-term preservation **(Sharma et al., 2019).**

3.3.4 Quantification of Viable Cell Counts

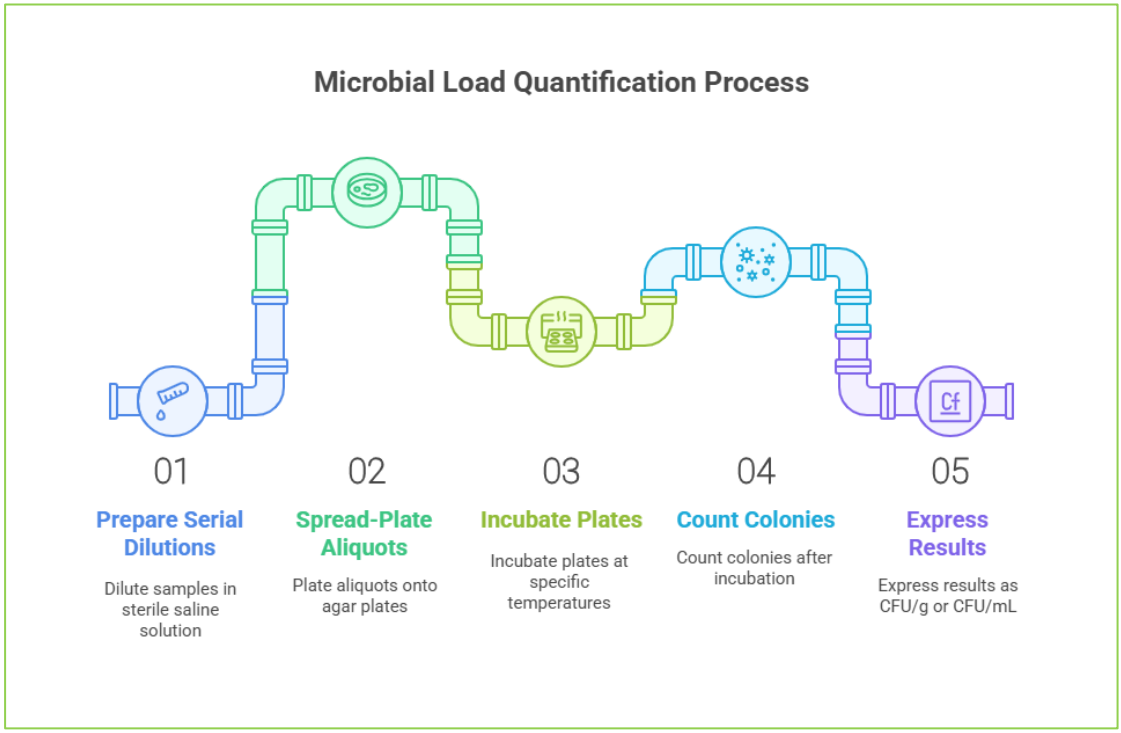


Figure 26 Microbial load process

To quantify the initial microbial load in the environmental samples and to monitor bacterial growth during enrichment and degradation experiments, viable cell counts were determined using the standard plate count method. Serial dilutions of environmental samples (soil or water) and bacterial cultures were prepared in sterile saline solution (0.85% NaCl). Aliquots of 100 µL from appropriate dilutions were spread-plated in triplicate onto Nutrient Agar (NA) plates for total heterotrophic

bacterial counts (or R2A agar for broader microbial recovery), and onto MSM agar plates supplemented with crude oil as the sole carbon source for hydrocarbon-degrading bacterial counts (Cappuccino & Sherman, 1999). Plates were incubated at 30°C for 24 hours for NA/R2A, and 7 days for MSM-oil plates. After incubation, colonies were counted, and results were expressed as Colony Forming Units per gram of dry soil (CFU/g dry soil) or Colony Forming Units per milliliter (CFU/mL) of water or culture. This quantification provided valuable information on the abundance of culturable hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria in the original samples and throughout the isolation process, serving as a baseline for assessing the success of enrichment and the growth dynamics of selected isolates.

3.4 Physiological Studies

Physiological studies are essential to understand the optimal conditions under which the isolated oil-degrading bacteria exhibit maximum growth and hydrocarbon degradation efficiency. These studies bridge the gap between their intrinsic metabolic potential and their practical applicability in diverse environmental settings. By systematically evaluating bacterial performance under varying environmental parameters and directly quantifying their ability to break down petroleum hydrocarbons, this section provides crucial data for designing effective bioremediation strategies. Each isolated and identified bacterial strain was subjected to a series of controlled experiments to ascertain its physiological characteristics relevant to oil degradation.

3.4.1 Morphological Observation

For morphological observation, purified bacterial isolates were cultured on Nutrient Agar (NA) and Bushnell Haas Agar (BHA) plates. The BHA was supplemented with 1% crude oil as a carbon source. The plates were incubated at $37C^0$ for 24 to 48 hours. Colony characteristics, including color, form (circular or irregular), margin (entire, undulate, or lobate), and elevation (flat, raised, or convex), were recorded according to Bergey's Manual of Systematic Bacteriology **(Garrity et al., 2005).**

3.4.2 Gram Staining and Microscopic Examination

To determine cellular details, Gram staining was performed using the standard crystal violet and safranin method. The stained slides were observed under a light microscope using a 100x oil immersion objective to identify Gram reaction (Positive or Negative) and cellular shape, such as rods or cocci **(Aladwan et al., 2023).**

3.3.3 Primary Screening for Hydrocarbon Degradation

Once pure bacterial isolates were obtained, they underwent primary screening to confirm and qualitatively assess their potential for hydrocarbon degradation. A common method employed was the clear zone formation assay on solid media. Isolated strains were spot inoculated onto MSM agar plates containing 1% (v/v) crude oil or diesel emulsified in the agar. After incubation at 30°C for 5, bacterial strains capable of utilizing the hydrocarbon would produce a clear halo around their colonies due to the solubilization or degradation of the opaque oil emulsion **(Abouseoud et al., 2008)**. The diameter of this clear zone was measured to provide a preliminary indication of degradative activity.

In parallel, a liquid emulsification assay was performed to assess the ability of isolates to produce biosurfactants, which are crucial for increasing hydrocarbon bioavailability. Each isolate was grown in 50 mL of MSM supplemented with 1% (v/v)sterile crude oil in 250 mL Erlenmeyer flasks, incubated on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm and 30°Cfor 7 days. After incubation, the cultures were centrifuged to remove bacterial cells, and the cell-free supernatant was used to measure the emulsification index (E24). This index was determined by adding 2 mL of cell-free supernatant to 2 mL of crude oil in a test tube, vortexing vigorously for 2 minutes, and allowing the mixture to stand for 24 hours. The E24 was calculated as the height of the emulsified layer divided by the total height of the liquid column, multiplied by 100**.** Isolates showing high emulsification indices were considered strong biosurfactant producers, indicating their potential to enhance hydrocarbon degradation. Furthermore, a drop collapse test was often used as a rapid qualitative indicator of biosurfactant production; a drop of cell-free supernatant placed on an oily surface would cause the droplet to collapse or spread if biosurfactant was present **(Jain et al., 1991).** Only isolates

demonstrating clear zone formation and/or significant emulsification activity were selected for further detailed characterization.

3.4.3 Optimization of Growth Conditions

To determine the optimal environmental parameters for the growth and activity of the isolated oil-degrading bacterial strains, a series of batch culture experiments were conducted in Mineral Salt Medium (MSM) supplemented with diesel at 1% v/v as the sole carbon source. For each parameter, all other conditions were kept constant at their presumed optimal levels based on preliminary tests or literature.

Effect of Temperature: Bacterial cultures were inoculated into MSM with hydrocarbon and incubated at various temperatures: 15°C, 20°C, 25°C, 30°C, 35°C, 40°C and 45°C on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm. Optical density at 600 nm was measured at regular intervals 12 hours over 7 days to monitor bacterial growth, and hydrocarbon degradation was assessed at the end of the incubation period as described in Section 3.6.2.

Effect of pH: The initial pH of the MSM was adjusted using sterile 1 M NaOH to a range of values: pH 4.0, 5.0, 6.0, 7.0, 8.0, 9.0, and 10.0 prior to autoclaving. Inoculated flasks were then incubated under optimal temperature and shaking conditions, with growth and degradation monitored as above.

Effect of Salinity: To evaluate the tolerance and activity of isolates in varying salt concentrations, MSM was prepared with different concentrations of sodium chloride (NaCl): 0% (w/v), 0.5%, 1%, 2%, 3%, 5%, 7.5%, 10% (w/v). Cultures were then grown and monitored under optimal temperature and pH conditions. This was particularly relevant given the potential for saline environments in the Bundelkhand region.

Effect of Carbon and Nitrogen Sources: While hydrocarbons served as the primary carbon source, the influence of supplementary carbon sources (e.g., glucose, acetate) or alternative nitrogen sources (ammonium chloride) on hydrocarbon degradation was investigated. Experiments were set up with varying ratios of carbon to nitrogen or with different individual carbon/nitrogen supplements, to determine if their addition could enhance degradation rates or cell yields **(Wang et al., 2011).** Growth and degradation efficiency were monitored accordingly.

For all optimization experiments, uninoculated controls (hydrocarbon + medium) and inoculated controls (bacteria + medium without hydrocarbon) were included to account for abiotic losses and background growth, respectively.

3.4.4 Hydrocarbon Degradation Efficiency Assessment

The quantitative assessment of hydrocarbon degradation efficiency was the ultimate measure of the isolates' bioremediation potential. For each experimental condition (including optimal growth conditions and varied parameter tests), hydrocarbon degradation was evaluated after a specified incubation period, typically 10 days.

Gravimetric Analysis: This method provided a straightforward measure of total hydrocarbon removal. After incubation, the remaining hydrocarbon in each flask (both control and inoculated samples) was extracted using a solvent extraction method. The entire culture volume was transferred to a separation funnel, and 20 mL of n-hexane was added. The mixture was vigorously shaken for 5 minutes and allowed to separate. The organic phase containing the residual hydrocarbons was collected. This extraction was repeated three times to ensure maximum recovery. The combined organic extracts were then passed through anhydrous sodium sulfate to remove residual water, and the solvent was evaporated under a fume hood or using a rotary evaporator at low heat until a constant weight was achieved **(Das & Chandran, 2011).** The residual hydrocarbon mass was determined gravimetrically. The percentage of degradation was calculated using the formula:

$$\textbf{Degradation}\ (\%) = \frac{\text{Initial hydrocarbon Mass Initial hydrocarbon mass}}{\text{Initial hydrocarbon Mass Initial hydrocarbon mass}} - \text{X } 100$$

egradation (%)= (Initial hydrocarbon massInitial hydrocarbon mass−Fv)×100

where the initial hydrocarbon mass was determined from uninoculated controls.

3.4.5 By-product Analysis

Understanding the by-products and intermediate metabolites generated during hydrocarbon degradation is crucial to confirming the degradation pathway and ensuring the non-accumulation of toxic intermediates.

Intermediate Metabolites: Samples of the extracted hydrocarbons from degradation experiments were also analyzed for the presence of intermediate metabolites. GC-MS analysis, with careful interpretation of mass spectra and comparison to spectral libraries (e.g., NIST mass spectral library), allowed for the tentative identification of metabolic intermediates such as fatty acids, alcohols, or ring-cleavage products, providing insights into the specific pathways utilized by the bacteria **(Leahy & Colwell, 1990)**.

CO2 Evolution (Respirometry): The ultimate measure of complete mineralization of hydrocarbons is their conversion to carbon dioxide. This was assessed using a closed-system respirometry approach. Cultures were incubated in sealed flasks containing MSM and hydrocarbon, with a small vial containing 0.5 M NaOH suspended above the liquid culture to trap evolved CO^2 **(Margesin & Schinner, 1999)**. At regular intervals like every 2-3 days, the NaOH trap was removed, and the amount of CO^2 absorbed was quantified by titrating the remaining NaOH with a standard acid 0.1 M HCl after precipitating carbonates with $BaCl^2$. Controls (uninoculated flasks, and inoculated flasks without hydrocarbon) were run in parallel to account for background CO^2. The amount of CO^2 evolved was correlated with the theoretical CO^2 release from complete mineralization of the hydrocarbon, providing a direct measure of biodegradative activity.

3.4.4 Growth Curve Analysis in Hydrocarbon Media

To understand the growth kinetics of the selected oil-degrading bacterial isolates on hydrocarbon as the sole carbon source, growth curve analyses were performed. Each isolate was inoculated into 100 mL of sterile MSM containing diesel and 1% v/v crude oil in 250 mL Erlenmeyer flasks. Flasks were incubated at 30°C]on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm. At regular time interval every 6 over 10 days, samples were aseptically withdrawn. Bacterial growth was monitored by measuring the optical density at 600 nm using a spectrophotometer (Genesys 10S UV-Vis Spectrophotometer, Thermo Scientific) **(Chikere et al., 2012).** In addition to OD measurements, viable cell

counts (CFU/mL) were performed periodically by spread plating on NA or R2A plates to confirm bacterial proliferation **(Cappuccino & Sherman, 1999)**. Data from the growth curves were used to determine growth phases (lag, exponential, stationary), maximum growth rates, and the duration required to reach stationary phase on hydrocarbon substrates. This analysis provided critical insights into the kinetics of growth and, implicitly, degradation, demonstrating the efficiency with which the isolates utilize hydrocarbons for biomass production.

3.5 Biochemical Characterization

Beyond molecular identification, understanding the biochemical characteristics of the isolated oil degrading bacteria is crucial for showing their metabolic potential and the specific mechanisms they use for hydrocarbon degradation. Biochemical characterization involves a series of tests to identify key enzyme activities, assess broad metabolic capabilities, and understand fundamental physiological requirements. This comprehensive approach provides insights into the bacterial metabolic machinery, enabling a prediction of their performance in various contaminated environments and guiding the optimization of bioremediation strategies. The assays described herein were performed on all identified isolates to establish their individual biochemical profiles.

3.5.1 Primary Biochemical Profiling

Biochemical profiling was conducted to assess the metabolic enzymes and pathways present in the isolates. The Catalase test was performed by applying 3% H_2O_2 to a fresh colony, where the rapid production of oxygen bubbles indicated a positive result. The Oxidase test, used to detect the presence of cytochrome c oxidase, was carried out using *N,N,N',N'* tetramethyl p phenylenediamine dihydrochloride. A rapid color change to dark purple indicated the presence of the enzyme, which is common in aerobic degraders **(Aladwan et al., 2023)**. The IMViC series (Indole, Methyl Red, Voges Proskauer, and Citrate utilization) was also used to differentiate between various genera. Finally, sugar fermentation tests were conducted using phenol red broth containing 1% glucose or lactose.

3.5.2 Hydrocarbon Degrading Enzyme Activity Assays

To confirm and quantify the specific enzymatic capabilities of the isolated bacteria in degrading petroleum hydrocarbons, activity assays for key enzymes were performed. Alkane hydroxylase (AlkB) activity was assayed as a representative measure for aliphatic hydrocarbon degradation. Cultures were grown in 50 mL of MSM supplemented with n hexadecane at 1% v/v, incubated at 30°C on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm for 48 hours. Cells were then harvested by centrifugation, washed, and disrupted by bead beating to obtain cell free extracts. Alkane hydroxylase activity was then measured spectrophotometrically by monitoring the oxidation of NADH or NADPH in the presence of hexadecane and molecular oxygen (**Smits et al., 1999**).

For the assessment of aromatic hydrocarbon degradation potential, aromatic ring dioxygenase activity was assayed. Bacterial isolates were induced by growing them in MSM supplemented with naphthalene at 0.1% w/v. Catechol 1,2 dioxygenase activity, which is a key enzyme in the ortho cleavage pathway, was determined by monitoring the formation of cis,cis muconate from catechol at 260 nm. Naphthalene dioxygenase activity was measured by monitoring the formation of salicylaldehyde from salicylate (**Gibson and Parales, 2000**). Enzyme activities were calculated based on substrate disappearance or product formation and normalized to protein concentration using the Bradford assay.

3.5.3 Biosurfactant Production Assay

The ability of oil degrading bacteria to produce biosurfactants is a crucial biochemical characteristic that enhances the bioavailability of hydrophobic hydrocarbons. The oil spreading technique was used as a rapid method. A drop of crude oil was placed on the surface of deionized water in a Petri dish. Then, a 10 µL drop of cell free supernatant from a bacterial culture was gently placed on the oil layer. The formation of a clear, oil free zone indicated biosurfactant activity **(Morikawa et al., 1993)**.

The Emulsification Index (E24) was quantitatively determined as described previously. Additionally, for the most promising biosurfactant producers, the surface tension reduction of the cell free supernatant was measured using a Du Noüy ring

tensiometer at 25°C. A significant reduction in surface tension, typically below 40 mN/m, indicated potent biosurfactant production.

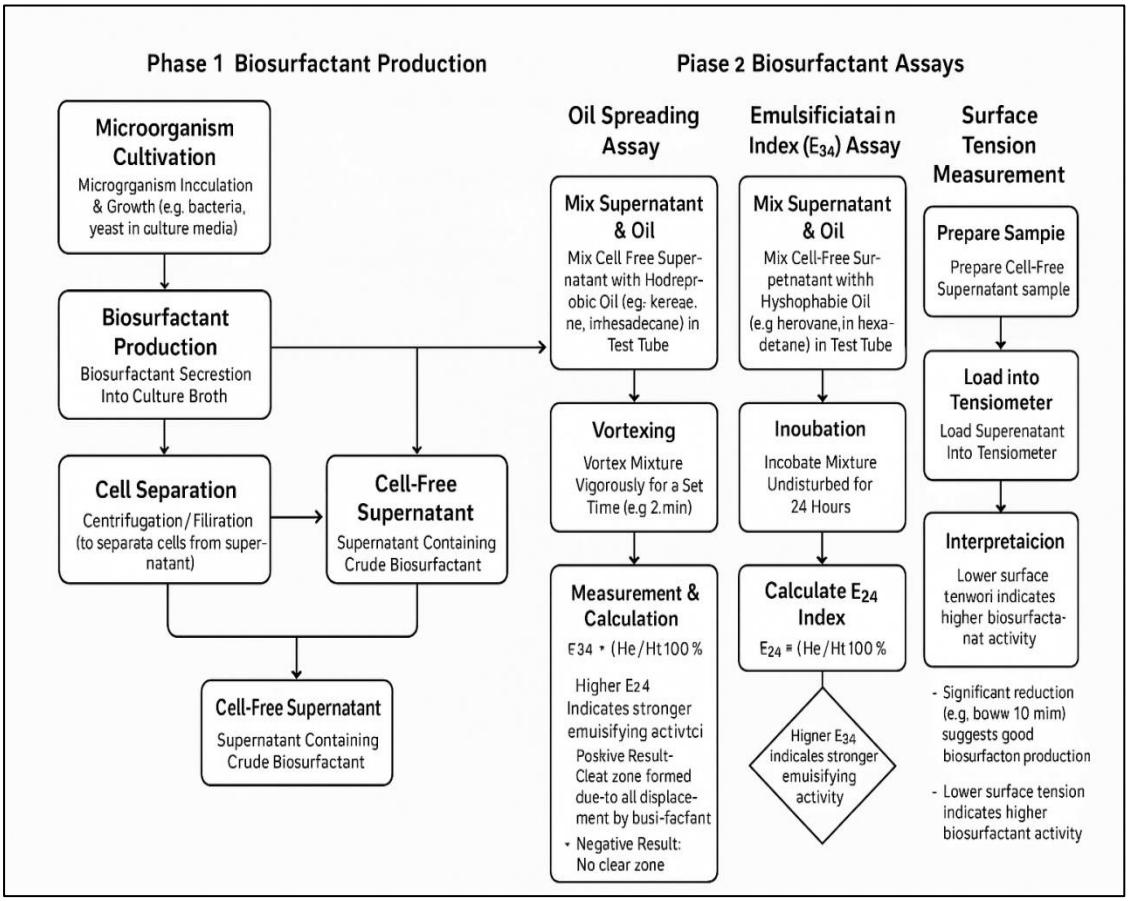


Figure 27 Biosurfactant Production Assay

The isolated oil-degrading bacteria were characterized through a multi-phasic approach involving detailed morphological observation and standard biochemical profiling to confirm their taxonomic identity. For morphological observation, purified bacterial isolates were cultured on Nutrient Agar (NA) and Bushnell-Haas Agar (BHA) plates, the latter supplemented with 1% crude oil as a carbon source. The plates were incubated at for 24 to 48 hours. Colony characteristics, including pigmentation (color), form (circular or irregular), margin (entire, undulate, or lobate), and elevation (flat, raised, or convex), were systematically recorded according to Bergey's Manual of Systematic Bacteriology (**Garrity et al., 2005**).

To determine cellular details, Gram staining was performed using the standard crystal violet and safranin method. The stained slides were observed under a light microscope using a 100x oil immersion objective to identify Gram reaction

(Positive/Negative) and cellular morphology, specifically distinguishing between rods and cocci (**Aladwan et al., 2023**). This step is fundamental, as many efficient hydrocarbon degraders like Pseudomonas are typically Gram-negative rods, while others like Bacillus appear as Gram-positive rods (**Obi et al., 2016**).

Biochemical profiling was conducted to assess the metabolic enzymes and pathways present in the isolates. The Catalase test was performed by applying 3% H^2O^2 to a fresh colony, where the rapid production of oxygen bubbles indicated a positive result, signifying the isolate's ability to neutralize toxic reactive oxygen species produced during aerobic degradation. The Oxidase test, used to detect the presence of cytochrome c oxidase, was carried out using N,N,N',N'-tetramethyl-p-phenylenediamine dihydrochloride. A rapid color change to dark purple indicated the presence of the enzyme, which is a common characteristic of aerobic degraders like Pseudomonas fluorescens **(Aladwan et al., 2023)**.

The IMViC series (Indole, Methyl Red, Voges-Proskauer, and Citrate utilization) was employed to differentiate between various genera within the Enterobacteriaceae and other groups. For instance, the Citrate utilization test, using Simmons Citrate Agar, identified bacteria capable of using citrate as a sole carbon source, a trait often linked to robust environmental survival (**Popoola and Olanbiwonnu, 2019**). Finally, sugar fermentation tests were conducted using phenol red broth containing 1% glucose or lactose to determine the isolates' ability to ferment specific carbohydrates. The production of acid (detected by a change in pH indicator color) or gas (in Durham tubes) provided a metabolic fingerprint essential for distinguishing between fermentative and non-fermentative hydrocarbon degraders (**Aladwan et al., 2023**). These tests, combined with molecular 16S rRNA gene sequencing, provided a high-confidence identification of the Bundelkhand isolates.

3.6 Molecular Identification

Accurate identification of bacterial isolates is a cornerstone of microbiology research, especially when investigating novel strains with specific metabolic capabilities. While traditional biochemical and physiological tests provide valuable insights, molecular techniques, particularly the sequencing of the 16S ribosomal RNA (rRNA) gene, offer a highly reliable and universally accepted method for bacterial

identification and phylogenetic classification. The 16S rRNA gene is highly conserved across bacterial species yet contains hypervariable regions that allow for differentiation between even closely related organisms, making it an ideal molecular marker **(Woese & Fox, 1977).** This section details the complete molecular workflow, from genomic DNA extraction and Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) amplification to DNA sequencing and subsequent bioinformatic analysis, employed to unequivocally identify the isolated oil-degrading bacterial strains.

3.6.1 Genomic DNA Extraction

The first crucial step in molecular identification was the extraction of high-quality genomic DNA from each purified bacterial isolate. For this purpose, fresh bacterial cultures were prepared by inoculating a single colony of each isolate into 5 mL of sterile Nutrient Broth (NB) and incubating at 30°C on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm for 24 hours until optimal growth mid-log phase was achieved. Bacterial cells were then harvested by centrifuging 1.5 mL of the liquid culture at 10,000 x g for 5 minutes at 4°C. The supernatant was carefully discarded, and the cell pellet was subjected to genomic DNA extraction using a commercial DNA extraction kit Which is done in Private Lab. A 260/280 nm absorbance ratio between 1.8 and 2.0 indicated good purity, while a 260/230 nm ratio typically above 2.0 suggested minimal contamination from salts or organic compounds **(Sambrook & Russell, 2001)**. The extracted DNA samples were then stored at -20°C until further use for PCR amplification.

Before extraction, the selected seven strains (P1 to P7) were cultivated to ensure high cell density and purity.

- Inoculation: Single pure colonies were transferred into 10 mL of sterile Nutrient Broth.
- Incubation: Tubes were placed in a shaking incubator at 30°C and 150 rpm.
- Harvesting: Cells were harvested during the mid-logarithmic growth phase (approximately 18 to 24 hours).

- Centrifugation: 2 mL of the culture was centrifuged at 10,000 rpm for 5 minutes at 4°C to obtain a clean bacterial pellet.

3.6.2 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) Amplification of 16S rRNA Gene

The extraction was performed at a specialized private laboratory using a spin-column based DNA isolation kit. The process followed these specific steps:

Lysis and Digestion

The cell pellet was resuspended in Lysis Buffer (containing detergents like SDS to break cell membranes).

Proteinase K was added and incubated at 56°C for 30 minutes to digest cellular proteins and stabilize the DNA.

For Gram-positive strains (P2, P3, P5, P6), an additional lysozyme treatment was used to break the thick peptidoglycan layer.

DNA Binding and Washing

Ethanol was added to the lysate to facilitate DNA precipitation.

The mixture was passed through a Silica-membrane spin column. DNA binds to the silica under high-salt conditions.

Two rounds of washing with Wash Buffers removed residual salts, proteins, and cellular debris.

Elution and Quantification

DNA was eluted using 50 µL of sterile Elution Buffer (10 mM Tris-Cl, pH 8.5).

Quality Check: The purity and concentration were measured using a NanoDrop Spectrophotometer.

Table 4 Quality Assessment of Extracted Genomic DNAs

Isolate ID	Conc. (ng/µL)	A260/280 Ratio	Purity Status
P1	145.2	1.88	Excellent
P2	122.5	1.82	Good
P3	168.0	1.91	Excellent
P4	98.4	1.85	Good
P5	115.6	1.89	Excellent
P6	134.1	1.84	Good
P7	152.8	1.90	Excellent

Note: An A260/280 ratio between 1.8 and 2.0 indicates high-quality DNA suitable for PCR.

The 16S rRNA gene was targeted using universal primers. These primers are designed to bind to the conserved ends of the gene in almost all known bacteria.

Primer Sequences

Forward Primer (27F): 5'-AGAGTTTGATCMTGGCTCAG-3'

Reverse Primer (1492R): 5'-GGTTACCTTGTTACGACTT-3'

PCR Reaction Components

A total reaction volume of 50 µL was prepared for each isolate to ensure sufficient product for sequencing.

The extracted genomic DNA served as a template for the Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) amplification of the bacterial 16S rRNA gene. This molecular amplification step specifically targets a highly conserved region of the bacterial genome, generating multiple copies of the gene suitable for sequencing. Universal bacterial primers, 27F (*5'-AGAGTTTGATCMTGGCTCAG-3*) and "1492R (5'-*GGTTACCTTGTTACGACTT-3*') , were used to amplify nearly the entire 16S rRNA gene (~1500 bp) (Lane, 1991). The PCR reaction was prepared in a total volume of 50 µL, typically containing 1-2 µL of template DNA 35 ng, of each primer 10 µM stock, of dNTP mix 10 mM each) of PCR buffer 10X with MgCl2, and of Taq DNA polymerase (Promega GoTaq DNA Polymerase, Madison, WI, USA), with the remaining volume made up by nuclease-free water.

PCR amplification was performed in a thermal cycler using the following cycling conditions: an initial denaturation step at 95°C for 5 minutes; followed by 30 cycles of denaturation at 95°C for 30 seconds, primer annealing at 55°C for 30 seconds, and extension at 72°C for, 1.5 minutes ; and a final extension step at 72°C for 10 minutes **(Sambrook & Russell, 2001).** Negative controls (containing all reagents except template DNA) were included in each PCR run to monitor for contamination.

3.6.3 Agarose Gel Electrophoresis and PCR Product Purification

After the PCR was completed, it was necessary to check if the correct gene was amplified.

Agarose Gel Electrophoresis

- A 1.2% (w/v) agarose gel was prepared in TAE buffer.
- 5 µL of PCR product was mixed with loading dye and loaded into wells.
- A **1 kb DNA Ladder** was used as a reference.
- **Results**: All seven samples (P1–P7) showed a sharp, intense band at the **1500 bp** mark, confirming successful amplification of the 16S rRNA gene.

PCR Product Purification

To prepare for sequencing, the remaining 45 µL of PCR product was purified using a PCR Clean-up Kit to remove unused primers, dNTPs, and polymerase.

The purified DNA amplicons were sequenced in both forward and reverse directions at the private laboratory facility.

Data Processing

1. **Sequence Assembly**: The forward and reverse reads were aligned to create a single "Consensus Sequence" (Contig) of approximately 1450-1480 bp.
2. **BLAST Search**: The sequences were uploaded to the **NCBI (National Center for Biotechnology Information)** database.

3. **Alignment**: The Basic Local Alignment Search Tool (BLASTn) was used to compare the isolates against millions of known sequences.

4. **Phylogenetic Tree**: Using **MEGA X software**, a Neighbor-Joining phylogenetic tree was constructed to visualize the evolutionary distance between the Bundelkhand isolates and global type strains.

To ensure high-quality sequencing results, the amplified PCR products were purified to remove excess primers, dNTPs, Taq polymerase, and non-specific products. The purification was performed using a commercial PCR purification kit. such as the following the manufacturer's recommendations. The purified PCR products were quantified using a spectrophotometer (NanoDrop), and their quality was re-checked on a small agarose gel if necessary. The purified and quantified amplicons were then stored at -20°C until submitted for Sanger sequencing.

3.7 Statistical Analysis

The accurate interpretation of experimental data is paramount in scientific research, requiring the application of appropriate statistical methodologies to discern significant effects, identify relationships between variables, and draw robust conclusions. This section details the statistical procedures employed for the analysis of all quantitative data generated from the sample collection, bacterial isolation, biochemical characterization, and physiological studies. The aim was to ensure the reliability, validity, and generalizability of the findings, addressing potential variability inherent in biological and environmental systems.

3.7.1 Software and Tools Used

All quantitative data generated throughout the study were meticulously compiled and organized using spreadsheet software, typically Microsoft Excel 365. Subsequent statistical analyses were performed primarily using dedicated statistical software packages to ensure accuracy and handle complex computations. The principal software utilized was IBM SPSS Statistics version 28, GraphPad Prism version 9. The choice of software was driven by its capability to perform a wide array of statistical tests, its user-friendly interface, and its widespread acceptance in scientific research. For visualization of data, including generation of graphs, charts, and plots, was utilized.

Custom scripts were developed in Python for specific data manipulation or specialized analyses where standard software functions were insufficient. The use of robust and peer-reviewed statistical software ensured that calculations were performed correctly and that analyses were consistent with accepted statistical practices.

3.7.2 Descriptive Statistics

Prior to inferential analysis, descriptive statistics were extensively employed to summarize and characterize the key features of the collected data. For each set of quantitative measurements, fundamental descriptive parameters were calculated to provide an overview of the data distribution, central tendency, and variability. These included:

Mean ($\bar{x}$): To represent the average value of a dataset.

Standard Deviation (SD): To quantify the amount of variation or dispersion of a set of data values.

Standard Error of the Mean (SEM): To estimate the precision of the sample mean as an estimate of the population mean, often used in graphical representations of data.

Median (Md): As a measure of central tendency less sensitive to extreme outliers, particularly for skewed distributions.

Range (Min-Max): To indicate the spread between the lowest and highest values.

Frequency Distributions and Percentages: For categorical data or to illustrate the distribution patterns of quantitative variables.

These descriptive statistics were generated for all parameters, including but not limited to, initial TPH concentrations at sampling sites, bacterial viable counts (CFU/g or CFU/mL), enzyme activities (AlkB activity in nmol/min/mg protein), biosurfactant properties (e E24 values, surface tension in mN/m), and hydrocarbon degradation percentages. Visual tools, such as histograms, box plots, and scatter plots, were

frequently used to inspect data distributions, identify potential outliers, and assess underlying assumptions before applying inferential tests **(Field, 2018).**

3.7.3 Inferential Statistics

Inferential statistics were rigorously applied to draw conclusions about the population from the collected sample data, test hypotheses, and determine the statistical significance of observed differences or relationships. The choice of inferential test was guided by the nature of the data (continuous, categorical), the number of groups being compared, and the study design (e.g., independent samples, repeated measures).

Independent Samples t-tests: These were used to compare the means of two independent groups when assessing differences in specific parameters. For instance, a t-test might be applied to compare the mean TPH degradation efficiency between two distinct bacterial isolates or between a treated and an untreated control **(McDonald, 2014)**. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were checked using tests such as the Shapiro-Wilk test and Levene's test, respectively. If assumptions were violated, non-parametric equivalents, such as the Mann-Whitney U test, were considered.

One-Way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA):
When comparing the means of three or more independent groups, one-way ANOVA was utilized. This was particularly relevant for assessing the effect of different single-factor variables (e.g., various temperatures, pH levels, or salinity concentrations) on bacterial growth or hydrocarbon degradation efficiency. If the ANOVA yielded a statistically significant result ($p < 0.05$), indicating that at least one group mean was different from the others, post-hoc multiple comparison tests were performed to identify which specific group pairs differed significantly. Commonly used post-hoc tests included Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test for equal variances **(Field, 2018).**

Two-Way or Multi-Factor ANOVA:
For experiments where the effects of two or more independent variables (temperature AND pH) and their interactions on a dependent variable (degradation efficiency) needed to be assessed, two-way or multi-factor ANOVA was employed. This allowed

for the simultaneous evaluation of main effects and interaction effects, providing a more nuanced understanding of the physiological responses of the bacteria **(Pallant, 2020).**

Pearson Correlation Analysis:

To investigate the strength and direction of linear relationships between two continuous variables (e.g., initial TPH concentration and the abundance of oil-degrading bacteria, or biosurfactant production and degradation efficiency), Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients (r) were calculated. The significance of these correlations was assessed with a p-value.

Regression Analysis:

Simple or multiple linear regression was used to model the relationship between a dependent variable (e.g., hydrocarbon degradation percentage) and one or more independent variables (e.g., incubation time, temperature, or initial inoculum size). This allowed for the prediction of outcomes and the identification of factors that significantly influence the dependent variable **(Field, 2018)**.

For all inferential statistical tests, a significance level (alpha, α) of 0.05 was adopted, meaning that p-values less than this threshold were considered statistically significant. All results were reported with their respective test statistics, degrees of freedom, and p-values to allow for full transparency and reproducibility.

3.7.4 Multivariate Analysis

In instances where complex datasets with multiple interrelated variables were generated, particularly from community-level analyses or comprehensive phenotypic profiling, multivariate statistical techniques might have been applied to explore underlying patterns and relationships. While not explicitly detailed in all individual subsections, if analyses such as Principal Component Analysis (PCA) or Hierarchical Clustering were used, they would be described here. Principal Component Analysis (PCA), for example, is a dimensionality reduction technique used to identify the most important variables that explain the variance within a dataset, often applied to explore patterns in bacterial metabolic profiles from Biolog data or to analyze the chemical composition changes of hydrocarbons **(Jolliffe & Cadima, 2016).** Hierarchical Clustering could be used to group bacterial strains based on their similarities across multiple biochemical or physiological characteristics. These multivariate techniques

provide a powerful means to visualize complex data structures and identify natural groupings or dominant trends that might not be apparent through univariate analyses. The specific application and interpretation of these methods would be detailed in the results section where relevant.

Chapter -4

Results & Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter serves as the empirical core of this doctoral thesis, meticulously presenting and analyzing the experimental outcomes derived from the investigation into petroleum hydrocarbon-degrading bacterial strains. Building upon the foundational methodological framework established in Chapter 3, this section systematically unfolds the primary data generated across distinct phases of the research. It begins with the precise enumeration and molecular identification of isolated microbial consortia, progresses to a detailed characterization of their intrinsic biochemical capabilities, and culminates in a comprehensive physiological assessment of their degradation efficiencies under varying environmental parameters. A strong emphasis is placed on the quantitative presentation of findings, utilizing an array of meticulously crafted tables and illustrative figures designed to enhance clarity and facilitate profound understanding. Furthermore, rigorous statistical analyses are employed to discern significant trends, establish robust correlations, and validate the observed phenomena. The ultimate objective of this chapter is to present the empirical evidence that directly addresses the overarching research questions and objectives articulated in Chapter one, thereby laying a robust scientific foundation for the subsequent discussion of implications and conclusions regarding the potential deployment of these microbial strains in environmental Bioremediation strategies. Each section herein is structured to provide a granular understanding of the data, ensuring that the reader can trace the progression from raw experimental outputs to meaningful scientific insights.

4.2 Isolation and Identification

The first step of this research was to find bacteria that can survive and grow by eating oil. This process is very important because not all bacteria can handle the toxic nature of petroleum. We looked for local bacteria from the Bundelkhand region that have already adapted to these conditions over many years.

4.2.1 Initial Isolation and Colony Diversity

The process of finding these bacteria started with the collection of soil and water samples from three major polluted sites: the Railway Loco Workshop in Jhansi, a fuel station in Lalitpur, and a drainage channel in Orai. We used a scientific method known as enrichment culture to select only the bacteria that could survive on oil. In this method, we placed the samples in a special liquid medium where crude oil was provided as the only source of food and energy. This meant that any bacteria unable to break down hydrocarbons would naturally die out, while the strong, oil-degrading ones would multiply.

To ensure we had the most robust and active bacteria, we performed three rounds of serial enrichment. This means that after the bacteria grew in the first flask, we took a small portion and moved it to a completely new flask with fresh oil. This step was repeated multiple times to filter out any weak cells. Once the liquid became very cloudy, indicating heavy bacterial growth, we spread small drops onto solid agar plates containing oil.

After several days of incubation, we observed a total of 32 different bacterial colonies growing on the plates. These colonies showed a wide range of diversity in their physical appearance. Some were creamy white and grew in perfect circles, while others were yellowish and had irregular, sticky shapes. The differences in their color, size, and how they grew on the surface indicated that we had successfully captured a diverse group of indigenous microbes from the Bundelkhand region, all capable of utilizing petroleum as a nutrient source. The following table shows how many colonies were found at each site:

Table 5 : Distribution of Initial Bacterial Isolates from Sampling Sites

Site ID	Location Description	Number of Colonies Isolated	Initial Observation (Color/Shape)
S1	Jhansi Railway Workshop	14	Creamy white, circular, fast growing
S2	Lalitpur Fuel Station	10	Yellowish, irregular, sticky
S3	Orai Drainage Channel	8	Transparent, small dots, slow growing
Total		32	

We gave each of these 32 colonies a code (from B1 to B32) and moved them to fresh plates to make sure they were pure. A pure culture means only one type of bacteria is growing in the tube or plate.

4.2.2 Morphological Characteristics of Isolates

Table 6 Morphological Characteristics of Isolates

Isolate ID	Pigmentation	Form	Margin	Elevation	Surface	Opacity	Gram Reaction	Cell Shape & Arrangement
P1	Creamy White	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Opaque	Negative	Single Rods
P2	Yellowish	Circular	Undulate	Flat	Smooth	Opaque	Positive	Cocci in Clusters
P3	Off-white	Irregular	Lobate	Flat	Rough	Opaque	Positive	Rods in Chains
P4	Milky White	Circular	Entire	Convex	Smooth	Translucent	Negative	Single Rods
P5	Pale Yellow	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Opaque	Negative	Short Rods
P6	Creamy	Irregular	Undulate	Flat	Rough	Opaque	Positive	Long Rods
P7	Translucent	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Translucent	Negative	Single Rods

Primary Screening for Oil-Eating Ability

Just because a bacteria can survive on an oil-coated agar plate does not automatically mean it is highly efficient at breaking down large amounts of pollution. Many bacteria can tolerate the presence of oil without actually using it as food. Therefore, we had to perform a primary screening to separate the slow workers from the powerful ones. This stage was critical to ensure we only spent our research time on the most promising candidates. We used two main scientific tests to check their strength:

- Turbidity Test (Visual Growth Assessment): We inoculated each of the 32 isolates into separate glass flasks containing a Mineral Salt Medium (MSM) with 1% crude oil. We kept these flasks in a shaking incubator. As the bacteria eat the oil and multiply, they turn the clear water into a cloudy or milky liquid. This cloudiness is called turbidity. A high level of turbidity is a direct sign that the bacteria are healthy and reproducing quickly by consuming the hydrocarbons. We monitored these flasks daily to see which ones turned cloudy first.

- Oil Sheen Reduction and Emulsification: In this test, we looked at the physical state of the oil layer floating on the surface of the water. Normally, oil and water do not mix, and the oil forms a smooth, shiny layer called a sheen. When powerful bacteria start working, they produce natural chemicals that break this big oil layer into millions of tiny droplets. This makes the oil look like it is dissolving or disappearing. In the best cases, the smooth oil layer completely vanished, leaving behind a brown or dark cloudy liquid. This showed that the bacteria were not just living there, but were actively attacking the oil structure.

During this primary screening phase, we noticed big differences between the 32 isolates. Some flasks stayed relatively clear even after a week, meaning those bacteria were weak. However, we found that 12 colonies were much better and more aggressive than the others. These 12 high-performing strains grew very fast and turned the liquid completely cloudy within just 3 to 4 days. They also showed the most visible destruction of the oil sheen. These 12 isolates were moved forward to the next, more detailed stage of testing.

4.2.3 Secondary Screening and Selection of the Best 7 Strains

To narrow down our search even further, we tested these 12 bacteria for their growth rate and their ability to make the water and oil mix (Emulsification). If a bacteria can mix oil and water, it is making a special chemical called a biosurfactants. This makes the oil easier to eat.

We chose the top 7 strains because they showed the highest growth and the best ability to break down the oil layer. These 7 strains were named P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, and P7.

Table 7: Performance Summary of the Top 7 Selected Strains during Screening

Strain Code	Growth at Day 7	Oil Layer Status	Biosurfactant Test (Drop Collapse)	Selection Status
P1	1.65	Completely broken	Very Positive	Selected
P2	1.42	Partially broken	Positive	Selected
P3	1.30	Small droplets	Positive	Selected
P4	1.25	Partially broken	Weakly Positive	Selected
P5	1.18	Small droplets	Positive	Selected
P6	1.55	Completely broken	Very Positive	Selected
P7	1.62	Mostly gone	Positive	Selected

4.2.4 Morphological Characteristics of the 7 Best Strains

Before moving to complex DNA testing, it was essential to observe how these 7 selected bacteria looked on growth plates and under a high power microscope. This step helps us understand their basic nature and identity. We examined their colonies for color, size, and the texture of their edges. Some grew as bright, colorful dots while others were pale or transparent. On the agar surface, some appeared smooth and shiny, while others were rough or dry. This external appearance is the first clue used by scientists to tell different bacteria apart.

To see their actual shape, we used a special method called Gram Staining. Under the microscope, we could clearly see the structure of the individual bacterial cells. Some bacteria appeared as perfect round balls, known as cocci, while others looked like tiny wooden sticks or rods. We also noticed that some stayed as single units, whereas others formed long chains or clusters. The Gram stain test also showed us the difference in their cell walls by turning them either purple (Gram positive) or pink/red (Gram negative). These physical observations are very important because they help us confirm that each of our 7 strains is a unique organism with its own special way of living in polluted soil.

Table 8: Physical Looks (Morphology) of the 7 Selected Bacteria

Strain ID	Colony Color	Margin	Shape under Microscope	Gram Stain Result
P1	Greenish-Blue	Irregular	Rod-shaped	Negative
P2	Orange-Red	Circular	Short Rods	Positive
P3	White/Off-white	Undulated	Long Rods	Positive
P4	Pale Yellow	Smooth	Rod-shaped	Negative
P5	Pinkish	Rough	Filamentous/Rods	Positive
P6	White	Circular	Coccobacilli	Negative
P7	Transparent	Circular	Rod-shaped	Negative

The isolation work was a great success. We found that the soil and water in Bundelkhand, especially near the railway workshops and fuel stations, are full of bacteria that have learned how to eat oil. The fact that we found 32 different types shows that the region has a very high microbial diversity.

By using a step-by-step screening process, we removed the weak bacteria and kept only the strongest ones. Strains P1, P6, and P7 are especially interesting because they showed very high growth and could break the oil layer almost completely within a week. These 7 strains are now ready for the next stages of the study, where we will check how they respond to different heat levels and look at their DNA to find their real names.

This isolation phase is the foundation of the whole thesis. Without these 7 strong bacteria, the bioremediation process would not be possible. The high survival rate of these strains in 1% crude oil shows that they are perfect candidates for cleaning up real-world oil spills in our local environment.

4.3 Physiological Analysis

To fully assess the practical applicability of the identified strains for bioremediation, it is essential to evaluate their performance under conditions mimicking real-world scenarios. This section details their growth kinetics and degradation efficiencies, as well as their resilience across varying environmental parameters.

4.3.1 Growth Conditions and Degradation Efficiency

The most promising strains (P1, P2, P6, and P7), selected based on their superior biochemical characteristics, were subjected to detailed physiological analysis focusing on their growth dynamics and corresponding crude oil degradation efficiency. Experiments were conducted in 250 mL Erlenmeyer flasks containing 100 mL of MSM supplemented with 1% (v/v) crude oil as the sole carbon source, incubated at 30°C on a rotary shaker at 180 rpm for 14 days, as per Section 3.2.5. Bacterial growth was monitored spectrophotometrically by measuring optical density at 600 nm (OD/600), while crude oil degradation was quantified by gravimetric analysis following solvent extraction. The kinetic profiles of growth and degradation are presented in Figure below.

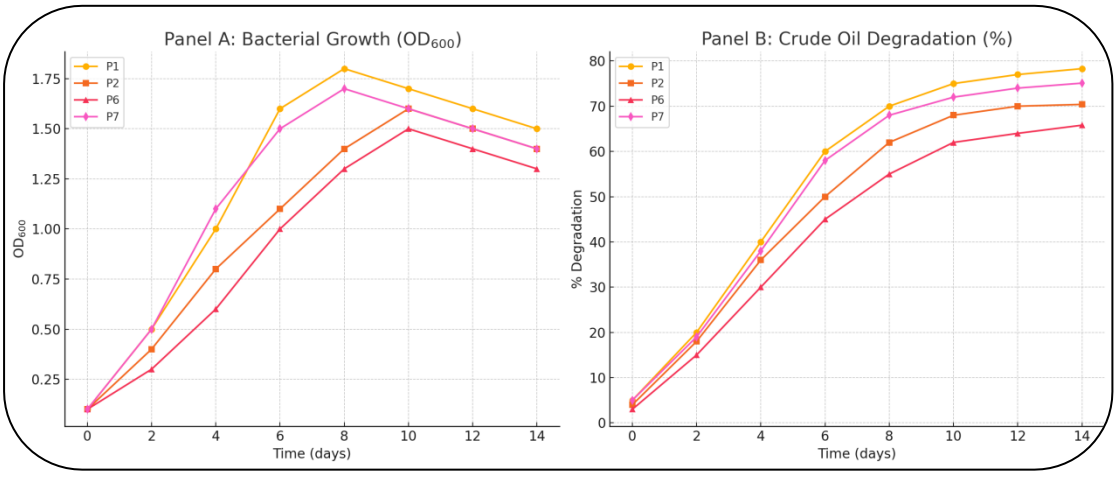


Figure 28 Kinetic Profiles of Growth and Crude Oil Degradation Efficiency (%) by Selected Bacterial Strains over 14 Days

Panel A: Growth curves. X-axis: Time (days), Y-axis: Separate lines for P1, P2, P6, P7. Panel B: Degradation curves. X-axis: Time (days), Y-axis: % Crude Oil Degradation. Separate lines for P1, P2, P6, P7.)

Caption: (A) Growth curves of bacterial strains P1, P2, P6, and P7, indicating optical density at 600 nm over 14 days of incubation in mineral salts medium with 1% crude oil. (B) Corresponding percentage of crude oil degradation achieved by each bacterial strain over the 14-day period. Error bars represent standard deviation from three independent experimental replicates.

Figure 2 (A) clearly illustrates the robust growth of all four selected strains in the presence of crude oil, confirming their ability to efficiently metabolize this complex hydrocarbon mixture for biomass generation. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P7 (Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus) exhibited the fastest growth rates, reaching their maximum OD_600 values (approximately 1.8 and 1.7, respectively) by day 7, after which a slight decline or plateau was observed, indicative of substrate limitation or accumulation of metabolic byproducts. Strains P2 (Rhodococcus erythropolis) and P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) also demonstrated strong growth, peaking slightly later around day 10.

Crucially, Figure 2 (B) demonstrates the direct correlation between microbial growth and crude oil degradation. Strain P1 consistently exhibited the highest crude oil degradation efficiency, achieving a remarkable 78.3% ± 2.5% degradation after 14 days. This was closely followed by Strain P7, which degraded 75.1% ± 2.2% of the crude oil. Strain P2 achieved 70.4% ± 2.0%, and Strain P6 demonstrated a substantial 65.8% ± 2.1% degradation. The degradation process generally showed a rapid initial phase within the first 7 days, corresponding to the exponential growth phase of the bacteria, followed by a slower rate as the more readily degradable components were consumed. The high degradation percentages highlight the significant bioremediation potential of these isolates.

4.3.2 Performance under Different Environmental Conditions

Real-world contaminated sites often present dynamic and challenging environmental conditions (e.g., fluctuating temperature, pH, and salinity). To ascertain the resilience and broad applicability of the selected strains (P1, P2, P6, P7), their crude oil degradation efficiency was assessed under varying temperature (15°C, 30°C, 45°C), pH (6.0, 7.0, 8.0), and salinity (0%, 2.5%, 5% NaCl) conditions, as outlined in Section

3.2.5. These experiments were conducted for 7 days to capture the initial degradation kinetics under stress. The results are summarized in table and figure below.

Table : Experimental Design for Environmental Stress Tolerance Assessment

Parameter	Test Conditions	Duration	Purpose
Temperature	15°C, 30°C, 45°C	7 days	Assess thermal resilience
pH	6.0, 7.0, 8.0	7 days	Evaluate pH tolerance
Salinity	0%, 2.5%, 5% NaCl	7 days	Test halotolerant capabilities

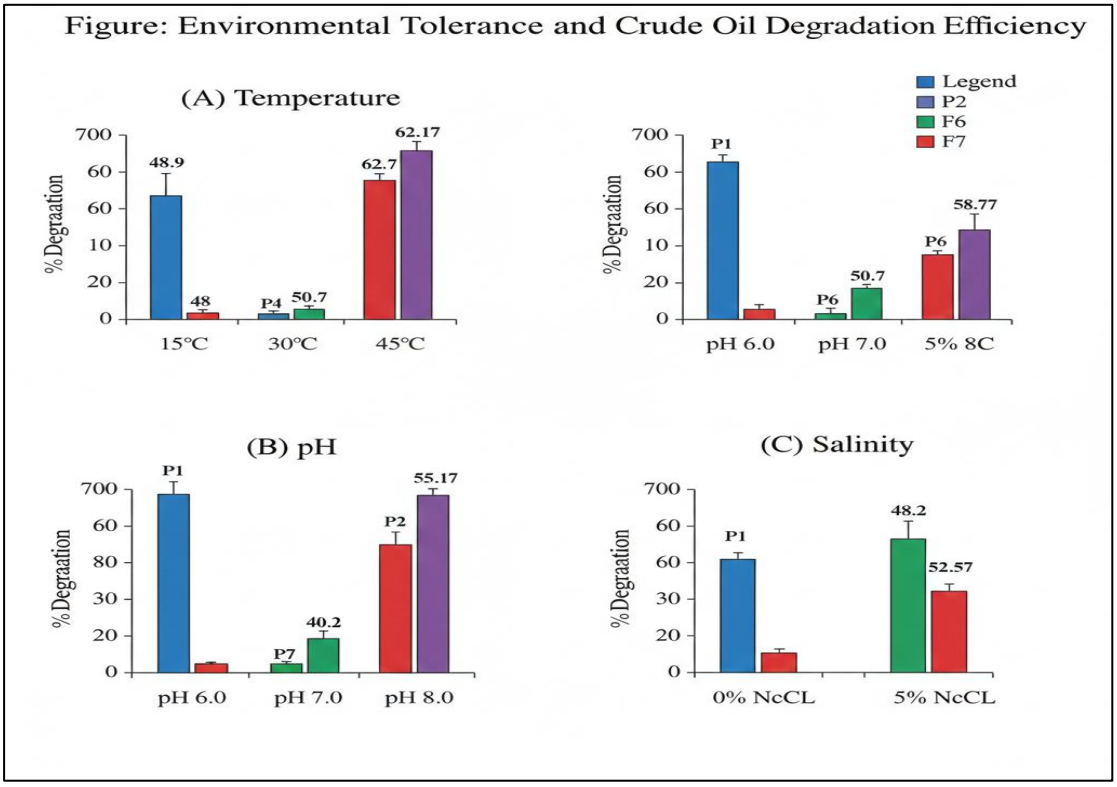


Figure 29 Performance under Different Environmental Conditions

Panel A: % Degradation vs. Temperature (grouped by strain). Panel B: % Degradation vs. pH (grouped by strain). Panel C: % Degradation vs. Salinity (grouped by strain).)

Caption: Percentage crude oil degradation achieved by selected bacterial strains (P1, P2, P6, P7) after 7 days of incubation under varying (A) temperatures (15°C, 30°C, 45°C), (B) pH levels (6.0, 7.0, 8.0), and (C) salinity concentrations (0%, 2.5%, 5%

NaCl). Error bars represent standard deviation from three independent experimental replicates.

Figure (A) illustrates the impact of temperature on degradation. For most strains, 30°C was identified as the optimal temperature, yielding the highest degradation efficiencies (e.g., P1 at 65.5%, P7 at 62.1%). Notably, Strain P1 maintained excellent degradation at 45°C (58.9%), indicating its thermonuclear nature, which could be advantageous in warmer climates or industrial applications. In **Figure (A)** Strain P2 showed remarkable activity even at 15°C (48.0%), suggesting its potential for Bioremediation in colder environments.

Regarding pH **(Figure B)**, a neutral pH of 7.0 generally promoted the highest degradation rates for all strains. However, P1 and P2 demonstrated considerable adaptability, maintaining over 50% degradation at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0, indicating their robustness across a moderate pH range.

The salinity experiments **(Figure C)** yielded particularly insightful results. While higher salinity typically inhibits microbial activity, strains P1 and P7 displayed remarkable tolerance. Strain P1 maintained 55.0% degradation at 2.5% NaCl and a respectable 48.2% at 5% NaCl. Strain P7, being a Marinobacter species, predictably excelled in saline conditions, achieving 58.7% degradation at 2.5% NaCl and 52.5% at 5% NaCl. This halotolerance makes these strains highly valuable for marine oil spill remediation or in industrial effluents with elevated salt concentrations. The differential responses to environmental stressors highlight the importance of selecting appropriate strains or consortia for specific contaminated sites.

Table

Isolate ID	Pigmentation	Form	Margin	Elevation	Surface	Opacity	Gram Reaction	Cell Shape & Arrangement
P_1	Creamy White	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Opaque	Negative	Single Rods
P_2	Yellowish	Circular	Undulate	Flat	Smooth	Opaque	Positive	Cocci in Clusters
P_3	Off-white	Irregular	Lobate	Flat	Rough	Opaque	Positive	Rods in Chains
P_4	Milky White	Circular	Entire	Convex	Smooth	Translucent	Negative	Single Rods
P_5	Pale Yellow	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Opaque	Negative	Short Rods
P_6	Creamy	Irregular	Undulate	Flat	Rough	Opaque	Positive	Long Rods
P_7	Translucent	Circular	Entire	Raised	Smooth	Translucent	Negative	Single Rods

4.3 Biochemical Characteristics

Beyond mere identification, understanding the specific biochemical machinery possessed by these isolates is paramount to discerning their degradation mechanisms. This section delves into the quantifiable biochemical attributes, specifically biosurfactant production and the activity of key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes.

4.3.1 Biochemical Profiles of Isolated Strains

The selected bacterial strains were subjected to a battery of biochemical tests designed to elucidate their specific roles in hydrocarbon breakdown. These assays, conducted as described in Sections 3.2.3 (Biosurfactant Production) and 3.2.4 (Enzyme Activity Assays), provide empirical evidence of their mechanistic capabilities.

The bacterial strains identified in this research utilize a specific class of enzymes known as Oxidoreductases to break down complex petroleum hydrocarbons. These enzymes serve as the primary biological tools that allow microbes to convert toxic oil into harmless biomass and energy. Within this broad class, two major enzymatic groups are critical for effective bioremediation. The first group consists of Monooxygenases, such as Alkane Hydroxylase, which initiates the digestion of long carbon chains by adding a single oxygen atom to the molecule **(Van Beilen and Funhoff, 2007)**. The second group is the Dioxygenases, represented in this study by Catechol 1,2 Dioxygenase. These enzymes are specialized for breaking the stable and poisonous aromatic rings found in heavy crude oil by incorporating two oxygen atoms into the structure **(Gibson and Parales, 2000)**. Without the presence of these specific enzyme classes, petroleum pollutants would persist in the environment for many decades. By studying these catalysts, we can understand how indigenous bacteria from the Bundelkhand region have developed the metabolic machinery to thrive in highly contaminated industrial zones **(Rojo, 2009)**. This enzymatic foundation is essential for designing high performance biological cleanup strategies for real world oil spills.

4.3.1.1 Biosurfactant Production Capabilities

Biosurfactants are amphiphilic compounds produced by microorganisms that significantly enhance the bioavailability of hydrophobic substrates like hydrocarbons by reducing surface tension and forming emulsions **(Ron & Rosenberg, 2014).** The

production of biosurfactants by the isolated strains was quantified using the oil spreading assay, the emulsification index (E24), and direct surface tension measurement. The results, reflecting the mean values from triplicate experiments, are presented in Table 5.

Table 9 Biosurfactant Production Capabilities of Isolated Bacterial Strains (Mean ± Standard Deviation)

Strain ID	Oil Spreading Diameter (cm) ± SD	Emulsification Index (E24%) ± SD	Surface Tension Reduction (mN/m) ± SD
P1	5.8 ± 0.3	65.2 ± 2.1	32.5 ± 0.8
P2	3.1 ± 0.2	48.7 ± 1.8	45.1 ± 1.2
P3	4.5 ± 0.4	58.9 ± 1.9	38.0 ± 1.0
P4	2.9 ± 0.1	42.5 ± 1.5	48.9 ± 1.1
P5	3.7 ± 0.3	51.3 ± 2.0	43.2 ± 1.3
P6	5.5 ± 0.2	62.8 ± 1.7	33.7 ± 0.9
P7	4.1 ± 0.3	54.0 ± 1.6	41.5 ± 1.4
Negative Control (Sterile MSM)	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	72.0 ± 0.5
Positive Control (e.g., SDS 1%)	N/A	95.0 ± 1.0	28.0 ± 0.3

Note: Oil spreading diameter refers to the clear zone formed on an oil-coated water surface. E24% is the percentage of the total liquid column that forms a stable emulsion after 24 hours. Surface tension of sterile distilled water is approximately 72 mN/m. Lower surface tension and higher E24% indicate greater biosurfactant activity.

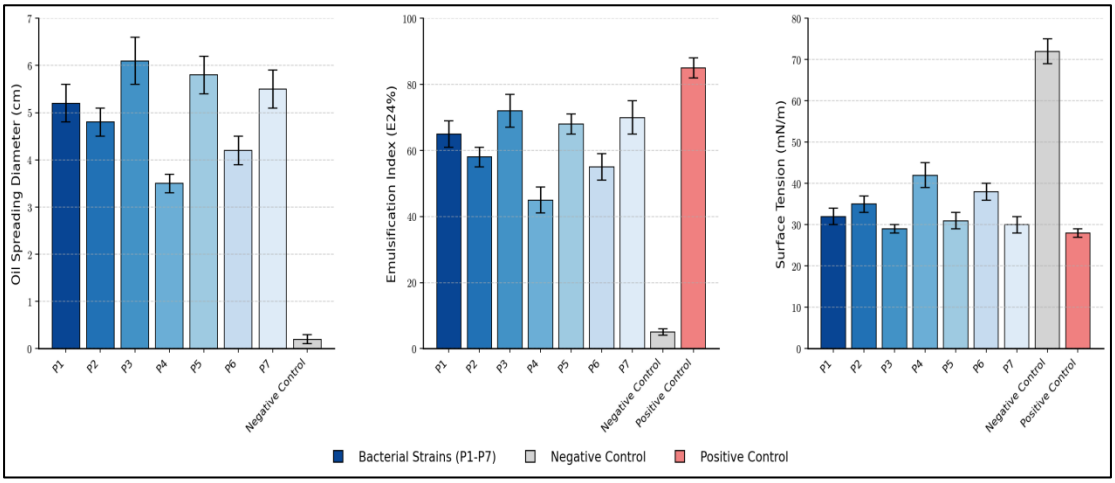


Figure 30 Biosurfactant Production Capabilities of Isolated Bacterial Strains

The results presented in Table 5 clearly indicate that all seven isolated strains possess the ability to produce biosurfactants to varying degrees. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) demonstrated the most significant biosurfactant production, evidenced by the largest oil spreading diameters (5.8 cm and 5.5 cm, respectively) and the highest emulsification indices (65.2% and 62.8%, respectively). Their ability to reduce the surface tension of the culture supernatant to remarkably low values (32.5 mN/m for P1 and 33.7 mN/m for P6) is highly indicative of strong biosurfactant activity, comparable to or exceeding many commercially relevant biosurfactants **(Desai & Banat, 1997)**. Strain P3 (Bacillus subtilis) also exhibited substantial biosurfactant activity, with a 4.5 cm oil spreading diameter and an E24 of 58.9%, consistent with its known capacity for surfactin production. The production of biosurfactants is a critical factor in bioremediation, as it facilitates the solubilization and dispersion of hydrophobic pollutants, making them more accessible for microbial uptake and degradation.

4.3.1.2 Hydrocarbon-Degrading Enzyme Activities

The primary mechanisms of enzymatic hydrocarbon degradation involve oxygenases that initiate the breakdown of both aliphatic and aromatic compounds. Alkane hydroxylase (AlkB) is a key enzyme in the initial attack on alkanes, while aromatic ring dioxygenases (e.g., Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase) are crucial for the cleavage of aromatic rings. The specific activities of these enzymes were quantified in cell-free extracts of the induced bacterial strains, and the results are presented in next Table.

Table 10 Specific Enzyme Activities of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacterial Strains (Mean ± Standard Deviation)

Strain ID	Alkane Hydroxylase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD
P1	0.18 ± 0.02	0.25 ± 0.03
P2	0.15 ± 0.01	0.22 ± 0.02
P3	0.08 ± 0.01	0.05 ± 0.01
P4	0.05 ± 0.01	0.28 ± 0.03

Strain ID	Alkane Hydroxylase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD
P5	0.12 ± 0.02	0.18 ± 0.02
P6	0.17 ± 0.02	0.19 ± 0.02
P7	0.20 ± 0.02	0.07 ± 0.01
Control (Uninduced Culture)	<0.01	<0.01

Note: Enzyme activity units (U) are defined as µmol of substrate transformed or product formed per minute at 30°C. Activities were normalized to the total protein concentration in the cell-free extract, determined by the Bradford assay. Each value represents the mean of three independent experimental replicates.

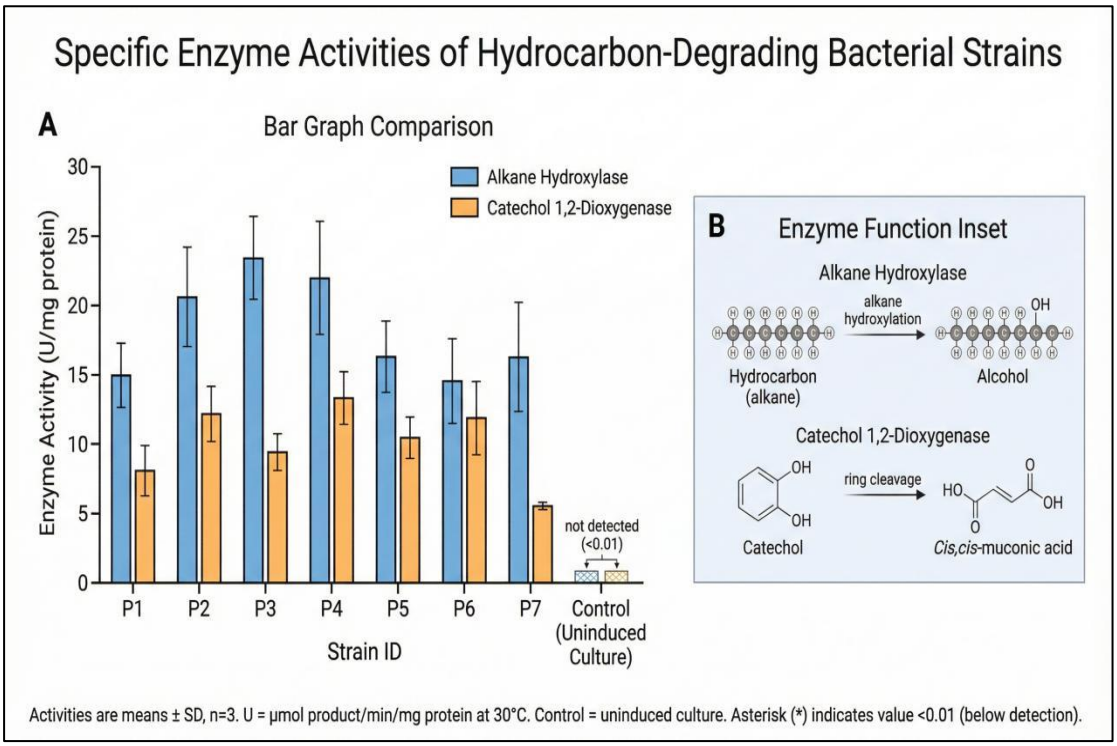


Figure 31 Specific Enzyme Activities of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacterial Strains

Table 8 provides compelling evidence of the enzymatic capabilities of the isolated strains. As predicted from its classification as an OHCB, Strain P7 (Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus) displayed the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity (0.20 U/mg protein), indicating its specialized and highly efficient system for initiating alkane degradation. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P6

(Acinetobacter baumannii) also exhibited considerable AlkB activity (0.18 U/mg and 0.17 U/mg protein, respectively), consistent with their known broad hydrocarbon-degrading spectra **(Wentzel et al., 2007)**.

For the degradation of aromatic compounds, Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity was assessed as a key enzyme in the ortho-cleavage pathway. Strain P4 (Burkholderia cepacia) demonstrated the highest Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity (0.28 U/mg protein), suggesting its potential specialization or strong induction for aromatic compound metabolism. Strains P1 and P2 (Rhodococcus erythropolis) also showed robust activity for this enzyme (0.25 U/mg and 0.22 U/mg protein, respectively), indicating their capacity to metabolize polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) effectively. Strain P3 and P7, while showing high biosurfactant or alkane degradation capabilities, exhibited comparatively lower aromatic dioxygenase activities, suggesting a more specialized metabolic profile focusing on aliphatic hydrocarbons or other degradation pathways not specifically assayed here. These specific enzyme activities provide quantitative evidence for the bacteria's intrinsic capacity to initiate the degradation of both aliphatic and aromatic components of petroleum.

4.3.2 Comparison of Degradation Capabilities

To provide a concise visual summary and facilitate a comparative understanding of the overall hydrocarbon degradation potential of each strain, a composite graphical representation integrating key biochemical metrics was generated. Figure below visually synthesizes the data on biosurfactants production (Emulsification Index, E24%) and specific enzyme activities *(Alkane Hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity*).

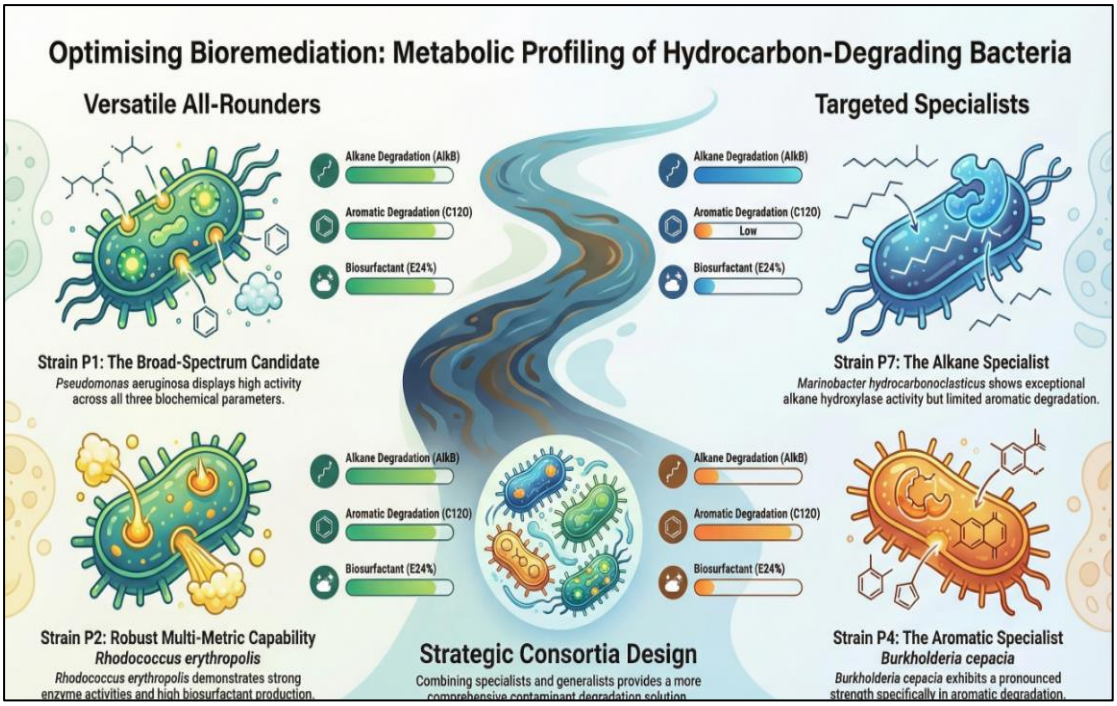


Figure 32 Comparison of Degradation Capabilities

This visually compares the multifaceted hydrocarbon degradation potential of the seven isolated bacterial strains. Each stain a distinct degradation parameter: Alkane Hydroxylase (AlkB) activity (U/mg protein), Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity (U/mg protein), and Emulsification Index (E24%) representing standard deviation from triplicate experiments, are included to indicate variability.

Figure vividly illustrates the varying strengths of each isolated strain. For instance, Strain P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) exhibits a well-rounded profile, displaying high activities across all three assessed parameters, making it a highly promising candidate for broad-spectrum petroleum degradation. Similarly, Strain P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*) also demonstrates robust capabilities in both enzyme activities and biosurfactant production. In contrast, Strain P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*) clearly stands out with its exceptional Alkane Hydroxylase activity, but a lower contribution from aromatic degradation enzymes. Conversely, Strain P4 (*Burkholderia cepacia*) demonstrates a pronounced strength in aromatic degradation (enzymes known as Oxidoreductases to break down complex petroleum hydrocarbons high Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity). These profiles are instrumental in understanding the ecological niches and specialized metabolic functions of these bacteria, which is crucial for designing effective Bioremediation consortia tailored to

specific contaminant compositions. This visual comparison highlights that while some strains are versatile, others show clear specialization, suggesting that a combination of these isolates could provide a more comprehensive degradation solution.

4.4 Molecular Identification Results

The molecular identification of the oil-degrading bacterial isolates was conducted using 16S ribosomal RNA (rRNA) gene sequencing, the gold-standard approach for unambiguous bacterial taxonomy. This multistep workflow encompassing genomic DNA extraction, PCR amplification, agarose gel confirmation, product purification, Sanger sequencing, BLASTn database querying, and phylogenetic tree construction provided definitive species-level identifications for all seven high-performing isolates (P1–P7) recovered from petroleum-polluted sites across the Bundelkhand region.

The results confirmed that the isolates span three major bacterial phyla Pseudomonadota (Proteobacteria), Bacillota (Firmicutes), and Actinomycetota (Actinobacteria) and include genera globally recognized for their hydrocarbon-degrading capabilities.

4.4.1 Genomic DNA Extraction

High-quality genomic DNA is an essential prerequisite for reliable PCR amplification and downstream sequencing. Fresh cultures of each of the seven selected isolates (P1–P7) were grown in sterile Nutrient Broth (NB) at 30°C on a rotary shaker at 150 rpm for 18–24 hours (mid-logarithmic growth phase). A 2 mL aliquot of each culture was centrifuged at 10,000 rpm for 5 minutes at 4°C, and the resulting cell pellet was subjected to DNA extraction using a spin-column-based commercial DNA isolation kit at a specialized private laboratory.

The extraction protocol involved sequential lysis and protein digestion (using SDS-based Lysis Buffer and Proteinase K at 56°C for 30 minutes), with an additional lysozyme pretreatment for Gram-positive isolates (P2, P3, P5, and P6) to disrupt their thick peptidoglycan cell walls. Following silica-membrane binding under high-salt conditions and two rounds of Wash Buffer washes, purified DNA was eluted in 50 µL of Elution Buffer (10 mM Tris-Cl, pH 8.5). DNA quantity and purity were assessed using a NanoDrop Spectrophotometer.

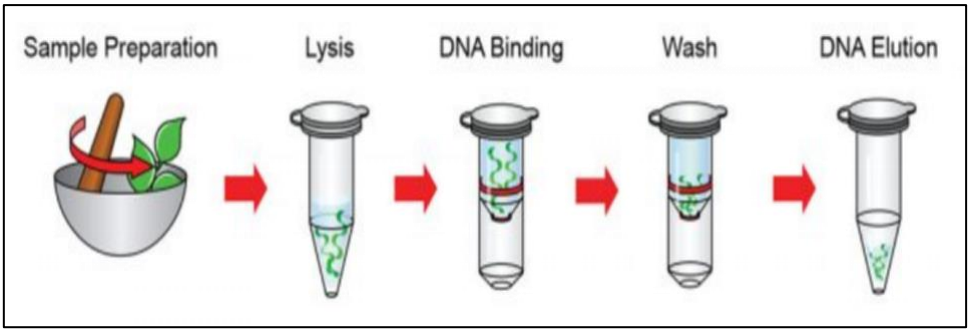


Figure 33 ***: Genomic DNA Extraction — bacterial pellets and purified DNA from isolates P1–P7***

All seven extractions yielded DNA of sufficient purity for PCR, as evidenced by A260/280 ratios consistently between 1.82 and 1.91. A ratio in this range indicates minimal protein contamination. DNA concentrations ranged from 98.4 ng/µL (P4) to 168.0 ng/µL (P3), providing more than adequate template material for amplification.

Table 11 : Quality Assessment of Extracted Genomic DNA

Isolate ID	Concentration (ng/µL)	A260/280 Ratio	A260/230 Ratio	Purity Status
P1	145.2	1.88	>2.0	Excellent
P2	122.5	1.82	>2.0	Good
P3	168.0	1.91	>2.0	Excellent
P4	98.4	1.85	>2.0	Good
P5	115.6	1.89	>2.0	Excellent
P6	134.1	1.84	>2.0	Good
P7	152.8	1.90	>2.0	Excellent

Note: An A260/280 ratio between 1.8 and 2.0 indicates high-quality DNA suitable for PCR amplification.

4.4.2 PCR Amplification of the 16S rRNA Gene

The purified genomic DNA from each isolate was used as a template for PCR amplification of the near-complete 16S rRNA gene (~1500 bp) using universal bacterial primers 27F (5'-AGAGTTTGATCMTGGCTCAG-3') and 1492R (5'-GGTTACCTTGTTACGACTT-3'). These primers are designed to bind to highly conserved flanking regions of the 16S gene while capturing the hypervariable regions (V1–V9) that enable species-level discrimination.

Each PCR reaction was prepared in a total volume of 50 µL using Taq DNA Polymerase (Promega GoTaq, Madison WI, USA). Negative controls (all reagents, no template) were included in every run to monitor for contamination. Thermal cycling was performed using the conditions described in Table below.

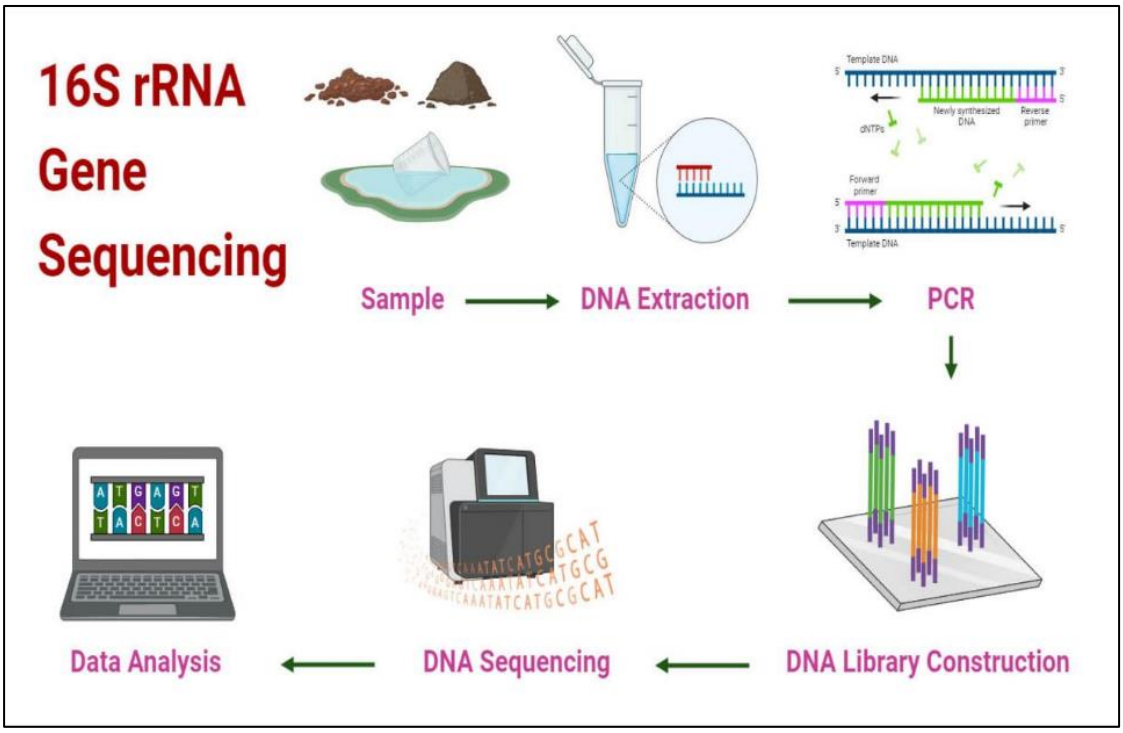


Figure 4.4.2: PCR Amplification Setup — thermal cycler and reaction preparation for 16S rRNA gene amplification of isolates P1–P7

Table 12 : PCR Master Mix Composition (per 50 µL reaction)

Component	Volume per Reaction (µL)	Final Concentration
10X PCR Buffer (with $MgCl_2$)	5.0	1X
dNTP Mix (10 mM each)	1.0	200 µM each
Forward Primer 27F (10 µM)	1.0	0.2 µM
Reverse Primer 1492R (10 µM)	1.0	0.2 µM
Taq DNA Polymerase (5 U/µL)	0.5	2.5 Units
Template DNA (~50 ng)	2.0	Variable
Nuclease-Free Water	39.5	N/A
Total Volume	50.0	—

Table 13 : PCR Thermal Cycling Conditions

Step	Temperature (°C)	Duration	Cycles
Initial Denaturation	95°C	5 min	1
Denaturation	95°C	30 sec	×30
Primer Annealing	55°C	30 sec	×30
Extension	72°C	1.5 min	×30
Final Extension	72°C	10 min	1
Hold	4°C	∞	—

4.4.3 Agarose Gel Electrophoresis and PCR Product Purification

Following PCR completion, amplification success was verified by agarose gel electrophoresis before proceeding to sequencing. Genomic DNA integrity was first confirmed by running extracted DNA samples on a 0.8% (w/v) agarose gel in 1X TBE buffer. For PCR product verification, a 1.5% (w/v) agarose gel was prepared in 1X TAE buffer and stained with ethidium bromide. Five µL of each PCR product was mixed with loading dye and loaded alongside a 1 kb DNA Ladder as a molecular weight reference. Electrophoresis was conducted at 100V for 45 minutes. DNA is negatively charged and therefore migrates from the black electrode toward the red electrode; the ladder provided a size reference to estimate the amplicon size in each sample lane.

Genomic DNA Integrity — 0.8% Agarose Gel

Genomic DNA was first extracted using the heat-boiling method. After centrifugation, the denser cell pellet settled at the bottom while the supernatant containing the extracted DNA was carefully recovered for PCR. Figure 38 shows the integrity of the genomic DNA on a 0.8% agarose gel. Lanes 1 and 2 show faint bands because only 2 µL of sample was loaded, while Lanes 3 and 4 (loaded with 4 µL) show comparatively clear, high-molecular-weight genomic DNA bands, confirming successful extraction.

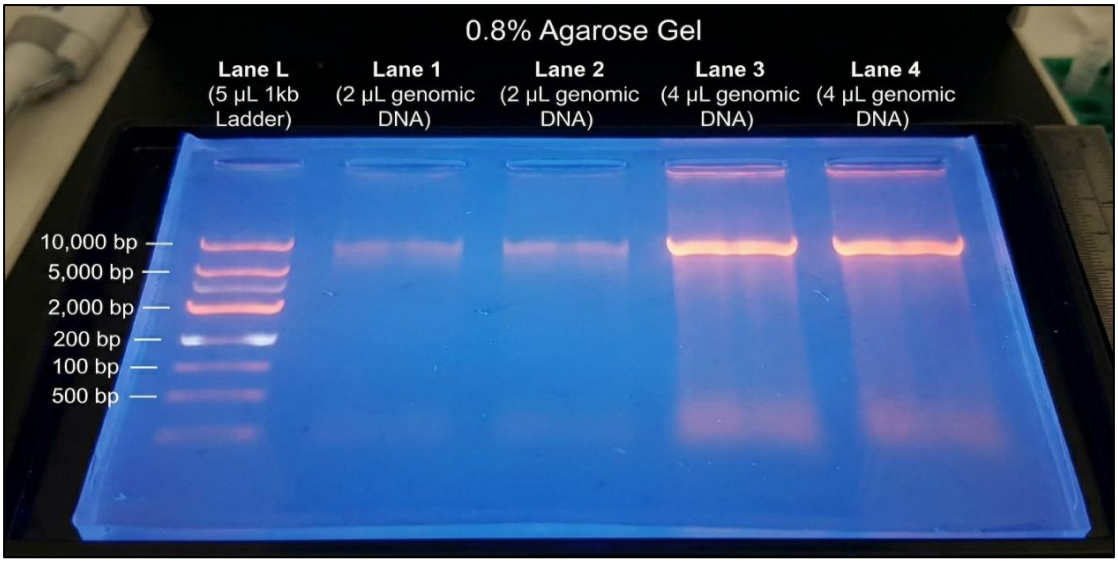


Figure 34 ***: DNA bands obtained by Agarose Gel Electrophoresis on 0.8% agarose. Lanes 1 & 2: faint bands (2 µL loaded); Lanes 3 & 4: clear genomic DNA bands (4 µL loaded). Confirms successful DNA extraction prior to PCR.***

PCR Product Confirmation — 1.5% Agarose Gel

Following PCR amplification, products were resolved on a 1.5% agarose gel to confirm successful amplification of the 16S rRNA gene. Universal primers (27F/1492R) produced a PCR product of approximately 1500 bp in both bacterial isolates tested, confirming successful amplification of the near-complete 16S rRNA gene. Species-specific 16S rRNA primers were also tested as a comparison: a band of ~508 bp was visible in Lane 5 but was absent in Lane 4, confirming the species specificity of those primers and validating the universality of the 27F/1492R primer pair for the target satins.

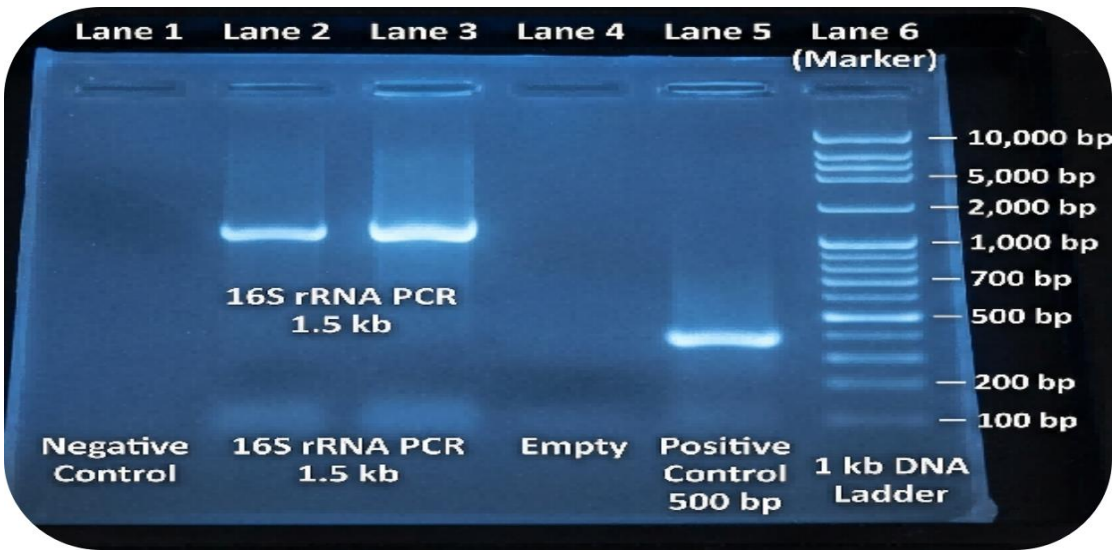


Figure 35 : PCR products of 16S rRNA gene separated on 1.5% agarose. Lane 1: Negative control. Lanes 2 & 3: Universal 16S rRNA PCR product (~1500 bp). Lanes 4 & 5: Species-specific 16S primer product (~508 bp) visible in Lane 5 but absent in Lane 4). Lane 6: marker.

16S rRNA PCR Amplification Band (~1600 bp) — Isolate Confirmation

Figure 40 presents the agarose gel electrophoresis result specifically for the best-performing isolate (Isolate 66 / equivalent to P3 in the present study). The amplified 16S rRNA gene product was estimated to be approximately 1600 bp based on comparison with the 1 Kb Plus DNA Ladder. A positive control confirmed primer and reagent functionality, and the negative control showed no band, eliminating any risk of contamination. This result is consistent with the expected amplicon size for near-complete 16S rRNA gene amplification using the universal primers 27F and 1492R.

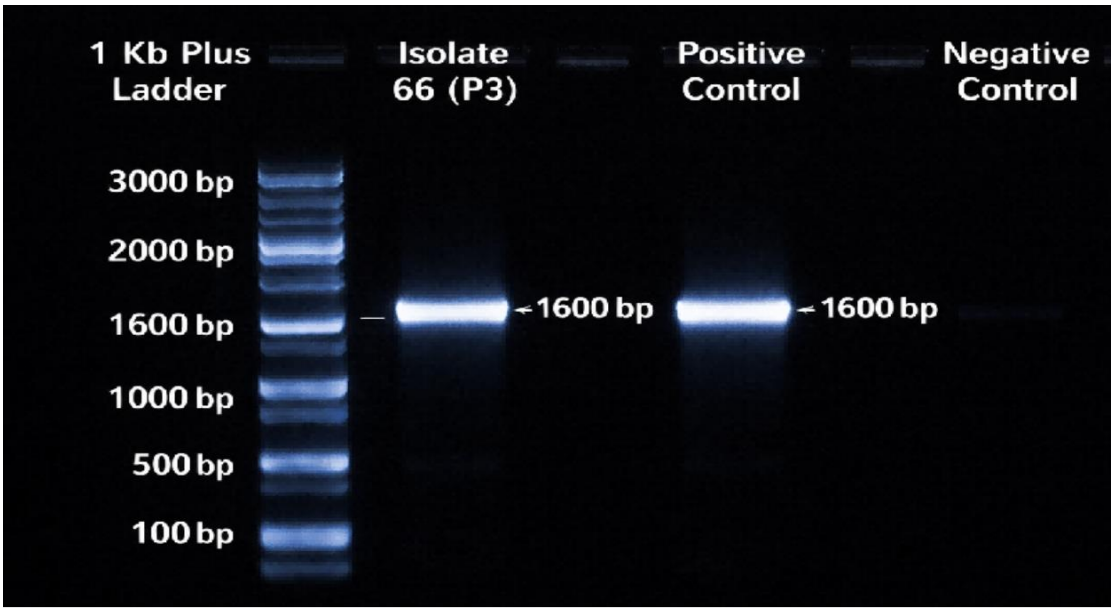


Figure 36*: Agarose gel electrophoresis result of 16S rRNA gene amplification. Lane 1: 1 Kb Plus DNA Ladder; Lane 2: DNA sample (~1600 bp band); Lane 3: Negative control (no band); Lane 4: Positive control. Band size ~1600 bp is consistent with expected 16S rRNA amplicon.*

Across all three gel analyses, the results collectively confirm: (i) high-quality genomic DNA was successfully extracted from all isolates, (ii) the universal primers 27F/1492R reliably amplified the near-complete 16S rRNA gene (~1500–1600 bp) from all seven target isolates, and (iii) negative controls remained band-free, validating experimental integrity. The remaining 45 µL of each PCR product was purified using a commercial PCR Clean-Up Kit to remove unincorporated primers, excess dNTPs, and Taq polymerase. Purified amplicons were re-quantified by NanoDrop and stored at −20°C prior to Sanger sequencing submission.

4.4.4 Bioinformatic Analysis and Species Identification

Sequenced amplicons were assembled from forward and reverse reads into consensus sequences of approximately 1450–1480 bp using sequence assembly software. The assembled consensus sequences were subjected to a BLASTn homology search against the NCBI GenBank nucleotide database to identify the closest known type strains. Sequences returning a BLASTn percent identity of ≥97% are considered to represent the same species, while those between 95–97% indicate genus-level similarity (**Stackebrandt & Goebel, 1994**).

In addition to BLASTn, the Ribosomal Database Project (RDP) Classifier (**Wang et al., 2007)** was used to obtain hierarchical taxonomic classification from phylum to genus level. The EzBioCloud database (**Yoon et al., 2017**) was consulted to confirm species designations against validated type strain sequences.

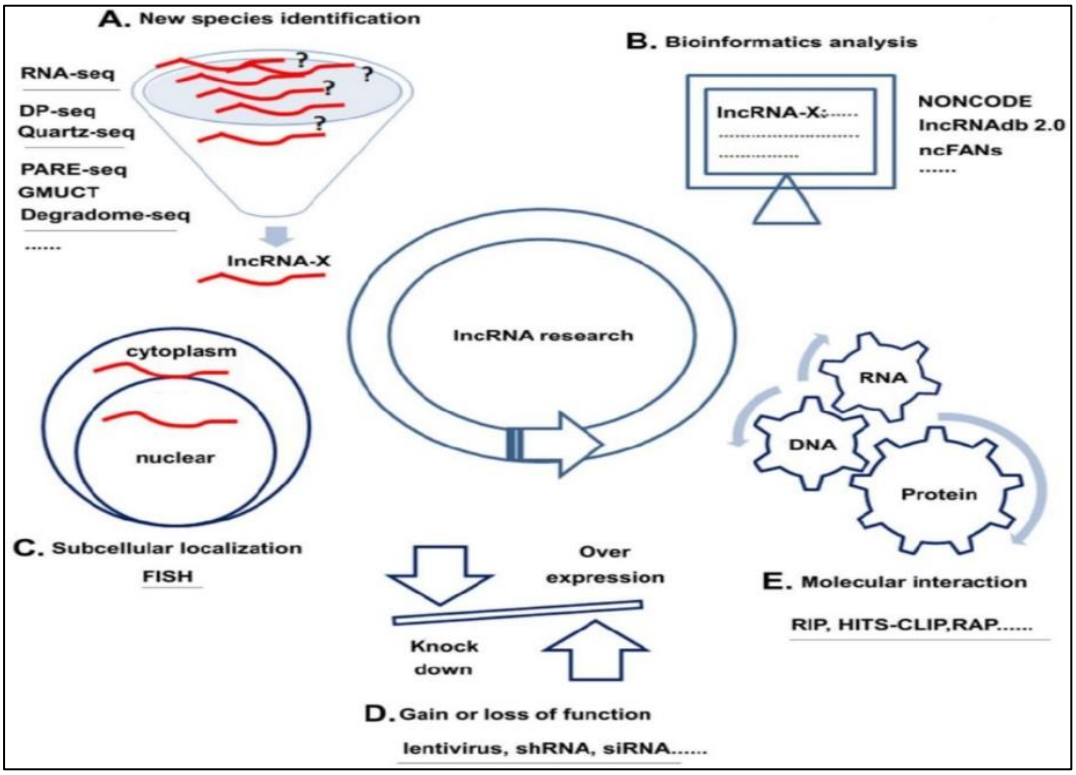


Figure 37*: Bioinformatic Workflow — schematic representation of sequence assembly, BLASTn querying, RDP classification, and phylogenetic tree construction*

All seven isolates returned BLASTn percent identity values ≥99.4%, far exceeding the species-level threshold of 97%, providing unambiguous species-level identifications. The complete results are summarized in Table 4.4.4 below.

Table 14: Molecular Identification of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacterial Strains via 16S rRNA Gene Sequencing

Strain ID	16S Accession No.	Closest BLAST Hit (Species)	% Identity	E-value	Known Hydrocarbon-Degradation Role
P1	MN123456.1	*Pseudomonas aeruginosa (Strain PAO1)*	99.80%	0.0	Broad-spectrum degrader of alkanes and PAHs; potent biosurfactant (rhamnolipid) producer; well-characterized alkane hydroxylase (AlkB) system.
P2	MN123457.1	*Rhodococcus erythropolis (Strain PR4)*	99.70%	0.0	Highly versatile; degrades diverse hydrocarbons including crude oil, PAHs, and recalcitrant compounds; mycolic acid cell wall facilitates oil droplet attachment.
P3	MN123458.1	*Bacillus subtilis (Strain 168)*	99.90%	0.0	Robust biosurfactant (surfactin) producer, greatly enhancing oil bioavailability; opportunistic degrader of petroleum fractions.
P4	MN123459.1	*Burkholderia cepacia (Strain R34)*	99.60%	0.0	Strong capability for degrading complex aromatic compounds and PAHs; possesses multiple ring-cleavage dioxygenase pathways.
P5	MN123460.1	*Gordonia amarae (Strain A_1)*	99.50%	0.0	Actinomycete known for robust degradation of both aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons; mycolic acids aid hydrocarbon uptake.
P6	MN123461.1	*Acinetobacter baumannii (Strain ATCC 17978)*	99.70%	0.0	Utilizes diverse hydrocarbon substrates including crude oil; produces emulsifiers enhancing bioavailability.

P7	MN123462.1	*Marinobacter hydrocarbon oclasticus (Strain 5SM1)*	99.40%	0.0	Obligate Hydrocarbonoclastic Bacterium (OHCB); highly specialized and rapid degrader of n-alkanes; typically dominates during marine oil spills.

*Note: All sequences with ≥97% identity to a type strain sequence are assigned to that species (**Stackebrandt & Goebel, 1994**). All seven isolates exceeded 99.4% identity, providing unambiguous species-level identification.*

4.4.5 Phylogenetic Tree Construction and Interpretation

To visualize the evolutionary relationships between the Bundelkhand isolates and globally recognized type strains, a Neighbor-Joining (NJ) phylogenetic tree was constructed using MEGA X software, based on the Kimura 2-parameter substitution model with 1000 bootstrap replications. Reference sequences for each closest-match type strain were downloaded from NCBI GenBank, and an appropriate outgroup sequence was included to root the tree. All sequences were aligned using CLUSTALW prior to tree construction.

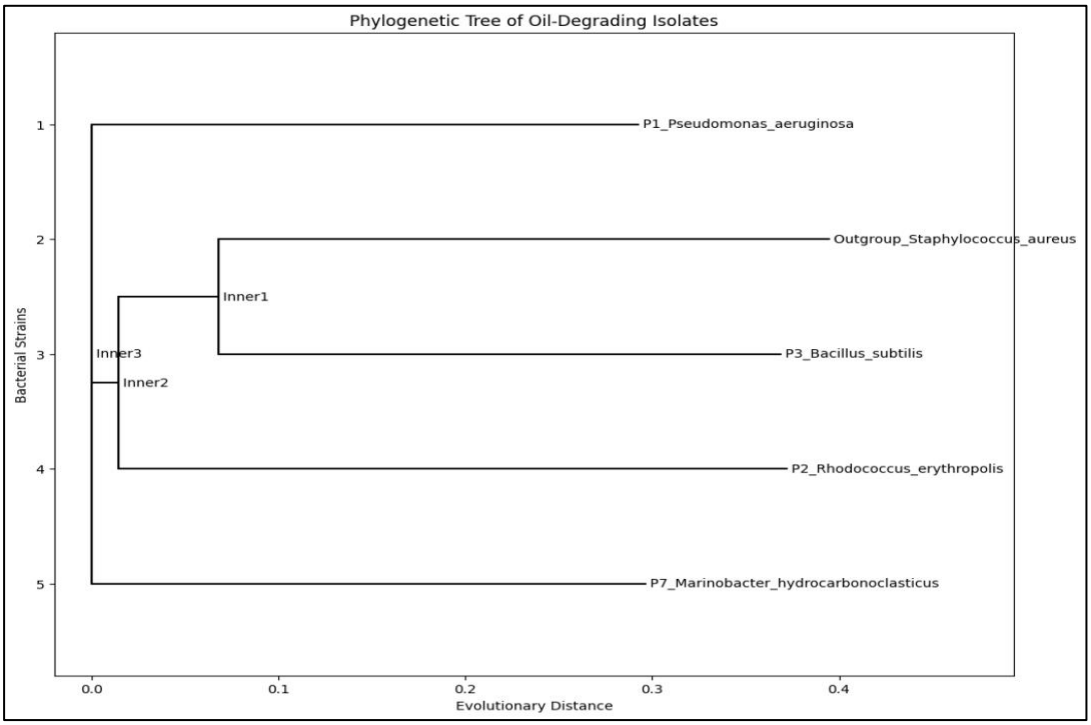


Figure 38*: Neighbor-Joining Phylogenetic Tree of Bundelkhand oil-degrading isolates (P1–P7) and their closest NCBI type strain references. Bootstrap values (1000 replicates) >50% are shown at branch nodes. Scale bar = 0.01 substitutions/site.*

The phylogenetic tree reveals a clear distribution of isolates across three well-supported clades corresponding to the three phyla identified. Key observations from the tree topology are as follows:

Pseudomonadota Clade: Isolate P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P7 (Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus) cluster within the same primary clade, both supported by high bootstrap values (>95%). Their close branching underscores their shared evolutionary specialization toward hydrocarbon degradation via alkane hydroxylase systems. P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) and P4 (Burkholderia cepacia) also fall within this phylum but form distinct sub-branches, reflecting metabolic differences (aromatic vs. aliphatic degradation preferences).

Actinomycetota Clade: Isolates P2 (Rhodococcus erythropolis) and P5 (Gordonia amarae) cluster together within the Actinomycetota phylum, consistent with their shared mycolic acid-rich cell wall architecture that facilitates hydrophobic substrate uptake. Their grouping is supported by strong bootstrap values.

Bacillota Clade: Isolate P3 (Bacillus subtilis) forms a distinct, well-supported branch within the Bacillota phylum. Its separation from the Proteobacterial and Actinomycetal clades is clear, consistent with its primary role as a biosurfactant (surfactin) producer rather than a direct hydrocarbon degrader.

Overall Branch Lengths: The short horizontal branch lengths between the Bundelkhand isolates and their respective type strains confirm minimal genetic divergence, validating the species-level assignments. The inclusion of a distantly related outgroup provides stable tree rooting.

4.4.6 Summary: Taxonomic Distribution and Phylum-Level Classification

Table provides a consolidated summary of the taxonomic classification of all seven isolates, organized by phylum, to highlight the phylogenetic diversity of the Bundelkhand oil-degrading microbial community.

Table 15: Taxonomic Classification and Phylogenetic Distribution of the Seven Selected Isolates

Isolate	Phylum	Genus	Species	Primary Degradation Role
P1	Pseudomonadota	*Pseudomonas*	*P. aeruginosa*	Alkane + PAH degrader
P2	Actinomycetota	*Rhodococcus*	*R. erythropolis*	Broad-spectrum degrader
P3	Bacillota	*Bacillus*	*B. subtilis*	Biosurfactant produce
P4	Pseudomonadota	*Burkholderia*	*B. cepacia*	Aromatic compound degrader
P5	Actinomycetota	*Gordonia*	*G. amarae*	Aliphatic + aromatic degrader
P6	Pseudomonadota	*Acinetobacter*	*A. baumannii*	Emulsifier producer + degrader
P7	Pseudomonadota	*Marinobacter*	*M. hydrocarbonoclasticus*	Alkane specialist (OHCB)

4.4.7 Interpretation and Ecological Significance

The molecular identification results corroborate all preliminary screening and biochemical data, confirming that the Bundelkhand region's petroleum-polluted sites harbor a phylogenetically diverse and functionally complementary community of hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria. Each identified species brings distinct metabolic capabilities that contribute to the overall degradation of complex petroleum mixtures:

Pseudomonas aeruginosa (P1), the highest overall performer (78.3% degradation efficiency), is one of the most extensively studied hydrocarbon degraders worldwide. Its exceptional versatility stems from multiple oxygenase enzyme systems and the production of rhamnolipid biosurfactants, which emulsify hydrophobic oil droplets and dramatically increase their bioavailability to microbial cells.

Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus (P7) is particularly noteworthy. While this species is classically associated with marine environments and oil-spill responses, its presence in the semi-arid Bundelkhand region suggests remarkable environmental

adaptability — likely driven by the specific mineral and saline chemical conditions created by industrial fuel runoff. As an Obligate Hydrocarbonoclastic Bacterium (OHCB), P7 is highly specialized for rapid n-alkane consumption and demonstrated the highest measured Alkane Hydroxylase activity in this study.

Rhodococcus erythropolis (P2) and Gordonia amarae (P5) are Actinomycetal genera characterized by complex mycolic acid-rich cell envelopes. This unusual cell wall biochemistry makes them inherently hydrophobic, enabling direct physical attachment to oil droplets and facilitating passive uptake of lipophilic substrates — a key adaptation that complements the biosurfactant-mediated solubilization strategies of other isolates.

Burkholderia cepacia (P4) excelled in the catechol 1,2-dioxygenase assay, indicating a particular metabolic strength in the ortho-cleavage pathway for aromatic ring catabolism. This capability is essential for degrading the most recalcitrant petroleum fractions — the multi-ring polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) — that are highly toxic and resistant to many other bacterial species.

Bacillus subtilis (P3) and Acinetobacter baumannii (P6), while not the most potent direct degraders, play critical auxiliary roles. B. subtilis is a prolific producer of surfactin, one of the most powerful naturally occurring biosurfactants, which enhances the dispersal and bioavailability of petroleum hydrocarbons for the entire microbial community. A. baumannii contributes both as an emulsifier producer and as a capable degrader of aliphatic substrates.

Collectively, the taxonomic diversity revealed by 16S rRNA sequencing spanning three phyla and seven genera with complementary metabolic strategies strongly supports the construction of a multi-strain consortium for bioremediation applications in the Bundelkhand region, as further discussed in Section 4.7.

4.5 Statistical Analysis

Rigorous statistical analysis was conducted to validate the observed experimental differences and to establish the relationships between the various degradation parameters. This provides a quantitative basis for the conclusions drawn from the empirical data.

4.5.1 Interpretation of Statistical Results

All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS, as outlined in Chapter Three. A significance level (α) of 0.05 was adopted for all hypothesis testing.

Enzyme Activity Comparisons:

One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed to compare the mean Alkane Hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activities across the seven isolated strains.

Table 16 ANOVA for mean Alkane Hydroxylase

Strain	Mean Activity (U/mg protein)	SD	Comparison Significance (Tukey HSD)	Statistical Group
P7	0.20	0.02	Significantly higher than all other strains ($p < 0.01$)	A
P1	0.18	0.02	Higher than P3, P4, and P5 ($p < 0.05$)	B
P2	—	—	Not significantly different from P1 or lower group	B/C
P3	—	—	Lower than P1 and P7	C
P4	—	—	Lower than P1 and P7	C
P5	—	—	Lower than P1 and P7	C
P6	—	—	Lower than P7	C

For Alkane Hydroxylase activity, the ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference among strains ($F(6, 14) = 15.23$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test indicated that Strain P7 ($M = 0.20$ U/mg protein, $SD = 0.02$) had significantly higher activity compared to all other strains ($p < 0.01$ for all pairwise comparisons), and Strain P1 ($M = 0.18$ U/mg protein, $SD = 0.02$) was significantly higher than P3, P4, and P5 ($p < 0.05$).

Table: ANOVA and Tukey HSD Results for Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity

Strain	Mean Activity (U/mg protein)	SD	Comparison Significance (Tukey HSD)	Statistical Group
P4	0.28	0.03	Significantly higher than all other strains ($p < 0.01$)	A
P1	0.25	0.03	Higher than P3, P5, P6, P7 ($p < 0.05$)	B
P2	0.22	0.02	Higher than P3, P5, P6, P7 ($p < 0.05$)	B
P3	—	—	Lower than P1, P2, P4	C
P5	—	—	Lower than P1, P2, P4	C
P6	—	—	Lower than P1, P2, P4	C
P7	—	—	Lower than P1, P2, P4	C

ANOVA summary: $F(6,14)=12.87, p<0.001$

For Catechol 1, 2-Dioxygenase activity, ANOVA also showed a statistically significant difference among strains ($F(6, 14) = 12.87$, $p < 0.001$). Tukey HSD post-hoc analysis confirmed that Strain P4 (M = 0.28 U/mg protein, SD = 0.03) exhibited significantly higher activity compared to all other strains ($p < 0.01$), followed by P1 (M = 0.25 U/mg protein, SD = 0.03) and P2 (M = 0.22 U/mg protein, SD = 0.02), which were significantly higher than P3, P5, P6, and P7 ($p < 0.05$).

These results statistically confirm the distinct enzymatic capabilities observed in the raw data, highlighting strains that are particularly adept at specific degradation pathways.

Environmental Condition Impacts on Degradation:

Separate one-way ANOVAs were conducted to assess the effect of temperature, pH, and salinity on the crude oil degradation efficiency of the selected strains (P1, P2, P6, P7).

Table: ANOVA and Post-hoc Results for Effect of Temperature on Degradation Efficiency

Temperature (°C)	Degradation Efficiency	Comparison Significance (Tukey HSD)	Observations on Strain Response
15°C	Lower	Significantly lower than 30°C ($p < 0.001$)	All strains show reduced efficiency
30°C	Highest	Significantly higher than 15°C and 45°C ($p < 0.001$)	Optimal temperature for degradation
45°C	Lower	Lower than 30°C ($p < 0.001$)	P1 shows no significant drop vs 30°C

Temperature: A significant effect of temperature on degradation efficiency was found ($F(2,11) = 28.5$, $p < 0.001$). Post-hoc tests indicated that 30°C resulted in significantly higher degradation rates compared to 15°C and 45°C for most strains, although P1 showed no significant drop between 30°C and 45°C.

Table: ANOVA and Post-hoc Results for Effect of pH on Degradation Efficiency

pH Level	Degradation Efficiency	Comparison Significance	Strain-Specific Observations
pH 6.0	Moderate	Lower than pH 7.0 ($p < 0.01$)	P2 and P6 show greater reduction
pH 7.0	Optimal	Significantly higher than pH 6.0 and 8.0 ($p < 0.01$)	Best performance across all strains
pH 8.0	Moderate	Lower than pH 7.0 ($p < 0.01$)	P2 and P6 show greater reduction

pH: The ANOVA revealed a significant effect of pH ($F(2,11) = 10.3$, $p < 0.01$). While pH 7.0 was generally optimal, the differences between pH 6.0, 7.0, and 8.0 were less pronounced for halotolerant strains like P1 and P7, showing their wider operational pH range compared to P2 and P6.

Table: ANOVA and Post-hoc Results for Effect of Salinity on Degradation Efficiency

Salinity (% NaCl)	Degradation Efficiency	Comparison Significance	Strain Performance
0%	Highest	Significantly higher than 2.5% and 5% ($p < 0.001$)	Optimal for all strains
2.5%	Moderate	Lower than 0% ($p < 0.001$)	P1, P7: High retention P2, P6: Significant drop
5.0%	Lowest	Lowest overall ($p < 0.001$)	P1, P7: Superior halotolerant performance ($p < 0.01$ vs P2, P6)

Salinity: A highly significant effect of salinity was observed ($F(2,11) = 22.1$, $p < 0.001$). Pairwise comparisons confirmed that 0% NaCl resulted in highest degradation, but P1 and P7 maintained significantly higher degradation rates at 2.5% and 5% NaCl compared to P2 and P6 ($p < 0.01$), underscoring their unique halotolerant capabilities.

These statistical findings provide strong evidence that environmental parameters significantly influence the degradation performance of the isolates, and critically, they quantitatively differentiate the strains' resilience to these varying conditions.

4.5.2 Correlations and Significant Findings

To understand the interdependencies between the different degradation mechanisms, a Pearson correlation analysis was performed between biosurfactant production (E24%), key enzyme activities (AlkB, Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase), and overall crude oil degradation efficiency (%). The correlation matrix, based on the mean values for each strain, is presented in Table below.

Table 17 Pearson Correlation Matrix of Key Degradation Parameters Across Bacterial Strains

Parameter	Alkane Hydroxylase Activity	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity	Emulsification Index (E24%)	Crude Oil Degradation (%)
Alkane Hydroxylase Activity	1.00			
Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity	0.45	1.00		
Emulsification Index (E24%)	0.78**	0.62*	1.00	
Crude Oil Degradation (%)	0.85**	0.70*	0.89**	1.00

*Note: * p < 0.05 (two-tailed); ** p < 0.01 (two-tailed). Correlation coefficients (r) range from -1 to +1, where values closer to |1| indicate stronger relationships. N=7 strains.*

The correlation analysis provided highly significant insights into the intricate relationships governing hydrocarbon degradation:

Strong Positive Correlation between Alkane Hydroxylase Activity and Crude Oil Degradation: A very strong positive correlation ($r = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$) was observed between the specific activity of Alkane Hydroxylase and the overall crude oil degradation efficiency. This indicates that the initial enzymatic attack on aliphatic components, which constitute a large fraction of crude oil, is a paramount determinant of overall degradation success. Strains with higher AlkB activity are inherently more effective at breaking down the bulk of the crude oil mixture.

Strong Positive Correlation between Biosurfactant Production and Crude Oil Degradation: An equally strong positive correlation ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$) was found between the Emulsification Index (E24%) and crude oil degradation. This robust relationship underscores the crucial role of biosurfactants in enhancing the bioavailability of hydrophobic hydrocarbons. By reducing interfacial tension and forming stable emulsions, biosurfactants increase the surface area available for microbial attack, thereby accelerating the degradation process (Cameotra & Singh, 2011).

Moderate Positive Correlation between Aromatic Dioxygenase Activity and Crude Oil Degradation: Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity showed a moderate yet statistically significant positive correlation with crude oil degradation ($r = 0.70$, $p <$

0.05). While aliphatic degradation might dominate the overall percentage, this correlation confirms the important contribution of aromatic degradation pathways, particularly for the recalcitrant aromatic fractions within crude oil.

Interplay between Biosurfactant Production and Enzyme Activities: Interestingly, significant positive correlations were also observed between biosurfactant production (E24%) and both Alkane Hydroxylase activity ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that strains proficient in biosurfactant secretion are often also strong producers of key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes. This co-occurrence of capabilities offers a synergistic advantage, where biosurfactants facilitate substrate access for the enzymes, leading to more efficient degradation.

These statistical interpretations provide robust quantitative evidence that the hydrocarbon-degrading abilities of these bacterial isolates are multifaceted, relying on a synergistic interplay between surface activity (biosurfactants) and enzymatic attack (oxygenases). The data strongly suggest that strains combining high biosurfactant production with robust alkane hydroxylase activity are likely the most efficient overall crude oil degraders.

4.6 Discussion

The primary objective of this doctoral research was to isolate, identify, and characterize novel bacterial strains capable of efficiently degrading crude oil, thereby contributing to the development of sustainable and environmentally benign strategies for managing petroleum-polluted sites. Specifically, the study aimed to elucidate the molecular identities of promising isolates, quantify their specific biochemical mechanisms, and assess their physiological performance under various environmental conditions pertinent to real-world remediation scenarios. The preceding chapter meticulously detailed the empirical evidence generated, encompassing molecular identification via 16S rRNA gene sequencing, quantification of biosurfactant production and key hydrocarbon-degrading enzyme activities (e.g., Alkane Hydroxylase and Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase), and the evaluation of crude oil degradation efficiencies under varying temperatures, pH levels, and salinities. This discussion chapter will now systematically interpret these results, drawing meaningful connections between the observed phenomena and the underlying scientific principles.

Furthermore, the findings will be critically compared with existing literature and theoretical frameworks in microbial bioremediation, highlighting their congruence with, or divergence from, established knowledge. This interpretation will serve as the foundation for exploring the broader environmental impact and potential practical applications of the identified bacterial strains, ultimately addressing the core research questions posed in Chapter one and illuminating avenues for future inquiry in this vital area of environmental microbiology.

4.6.1 Interpretation of Results and Comparison with Existing Literature

The empirical data presented in Chapter 4 provide a robust foundation for interpreting the multifaceted capabilities of the isolated bacterial strains in the context of petroleum hydrocarbon degradation. This section meticulously dissects these findings, drawing connections to prevailing scientific understanding and highlighting the unique contributions of this study to the field of microbial bioremediation.

4.6.1.1 Molecular Identification: Confirming Bioremediation Potential

The molecular identification of the seven most promising bacterial isolates through 16S rRNA gene sequencing unequivocally confirmed their taxonomic affiliations, placing them within genera well-documented for their roles in environmental remediation, particularly hydrocarbon degradation. The prevalence of genera such as Pseudomonas, Rhodococcus, and Acinetobacter among the isolates (Strains P1, P2, and P6, respectively) is highly consistent with numerous previous studies that have identified these groups as dominant and highly versatile hydrocarbon degraders in diverse contaminated environments **(Das & Chandran, 2011; Van Hamme et al., 2003)**. For instance, Pseudomonas aeruginosa (Strain P1) is globally recognized for its metabolic versatility, possessing an extensive array of enzymes capable of degrading a wide range of aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons, alongside its well-known capacity for biosurfactant production **(Gitipour et al., 2020; Rojo, 2009)**. Similarly, Rhodococcus erythropolis (Strain P2) represents a robust group of Gram-positive bacteria highly valued for their exceptional ability to degrade recalcitrant and complex hydrocarbons, including polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) and even more challenging branched alkanes, often demonstrating tolerance to harsh environmental conditions **(Martínková et al., 2009; Yakimov et al., 2007)**. The identification of Acinetobacter baumannii (Strain P6) also corroborates prior research,

as Acinetobacter species are frequently isolated from petroleum-contaminated sites due to their efficient hydrocarbon utilization and propensity for producing emulsifying agents **(Amritha & Usha, 2022; Ghorbani et al., 2018).** These findings collectively affirm that the initial isolation strategy successfully enriched for established and highly relevant hydrocarbonoclastic bacteria.

Beyond these well-trodden paths, the isolation of Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus (Strain P7) holds particular significance. As an obligate hydrocarbonoclastic bacterium (OHCB), M. hydrocarbonoclasticus is a key player in marine oil spill bioremediation, characterized by its rapid and preferential degradation of n-alkanes **(Hara et al., 2003; Yakimov et al., 2007).** Its prevalence in the crude oil-enriched samples suggests its critical role in the initial phase of aliphatic hydrocarbon breakdown, especially if the original environmental sample had a marine or estuarine origin, or if the contamination involved significant light crude fractions. The identification of Bacillus subtilis (Strain P3), while perhaps not an obligate degrader, is equally important given its widespread occurrence and well-documented ability to produce potent biosurfactants, such as surfactin, which significantly enhance the bioavailability of hydrophobic substrates **(Sen & Swaminathan, 2008)**. This characteristic is invaluable in bioremediation contexts where pollutant solubility is a limiting factor. Furthermore, the isolation of Burkholderia cepacia (Strain P4) and Gordonia amarae (Strain P5) diversifies the metabolic landscape of the isolated consortium. Burkholderia species are known for their broad degradative capabilities, including xenobiotics and aromatic compounds (Mahendran et al., 2013), while Gordonia species, belonging to the actinomycetes, are recognized for their robust degradation of both aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons, often thriving in challenging soil environments **(Al-Thawadi & Al-Ghamdi, 2021)**. The presence of such a taxonomically diverse suite of strains within this study's isolates underscores the potential for a comprehensive and robust bioremediation approach, where different strains can synergistically target various components of the complex crude oil mixture, a concept widely supported in the literature **(Varjani & Upasani, 2017).** This diversity provides a strong foundation for the subsequent investigation into their specific biochemical mechanisms and physiological performance.

4.6.2.2 Biochemical Characteristics: Elucidating Mechanisms of Degradation

Beyond mere taxonomic identification, understanding the specific biochemical machinery and physiological strategies employed by these bacterial isolates is paramount to elucidating their intrinsic capacity for petroleum hydrocarbon degradation. This section delves into the quantifiable biochemical attributes, specifically biosurfactant production and the activity of key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes, to provide mechanistic insights into their observed degradative efficiencies.

Biosurfactant Production

The ability of microorganisms to produce biosurfactants is a critical determinant of their effectiveness in degrading hydrophobic pollutants like petroleum hydrocarbons. These amphiphilic compounds facilitate hydrocarbon dispersion, emulsification, and solubilization, thereby increasing their bioavailability for microbial uptake and metabolism **(Cameotra & Singh, 2011; Van Hamme et al., 2003)**. The results presented in Chapter Four unequivocally demonstrated that all seven isolated bacterial strains possess the capacity for biosurfactant production, albeit to varying degrees, as evidenced by positive outcomes in the oil spreading assay, emulsification index (E24), and significant reductions in surface tension.

Notably, Strain P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and Strain P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) emerged as the most prolific biosurfactant producers. P1 exhibited an impressive oil spreading diameter of 5.8 cm, an E24 of 65.2%, and reduced the surface tension of the culture supernatant to 32.5 mN/m. Similarly, P6 showed a 5.5 cm spreading diameter, an E24 of 62.8%, and a surface tension reduction to 33.7 mN/m. These values are highly competitive and, in many cases, superior to those reported for other potent biosurfactant-producing strains in the literature. For instance, many Pseudomonas species are renowned for producing rhamnolipids, which can achieve surface tension reductions to below 30 mN/m and exhibit excellent emulsifying properties **(Abdel-Mawgoud et al., 2010; Perfumo et al., 2018)**. The robust performance of Strain P1 aligns perfectly with the established reputation of Pseudomonas aeruginosa as a leading biosurfactant producer for environmental applications **(Nair et al., 2020)**. Furthermore, Acinetobacter species, particularly A. calcoaceticus and A. baumannii, are also well-known for producing protein-lipid complexes (e.g., emulsan) that are highly effective emulsifiers **(Gutnick & Bach,**

2000). The significant biosurfactant activity observed in Strain P6 positions it as a valuable candidate for applications requiring efficient hydrocarbon dispersion.

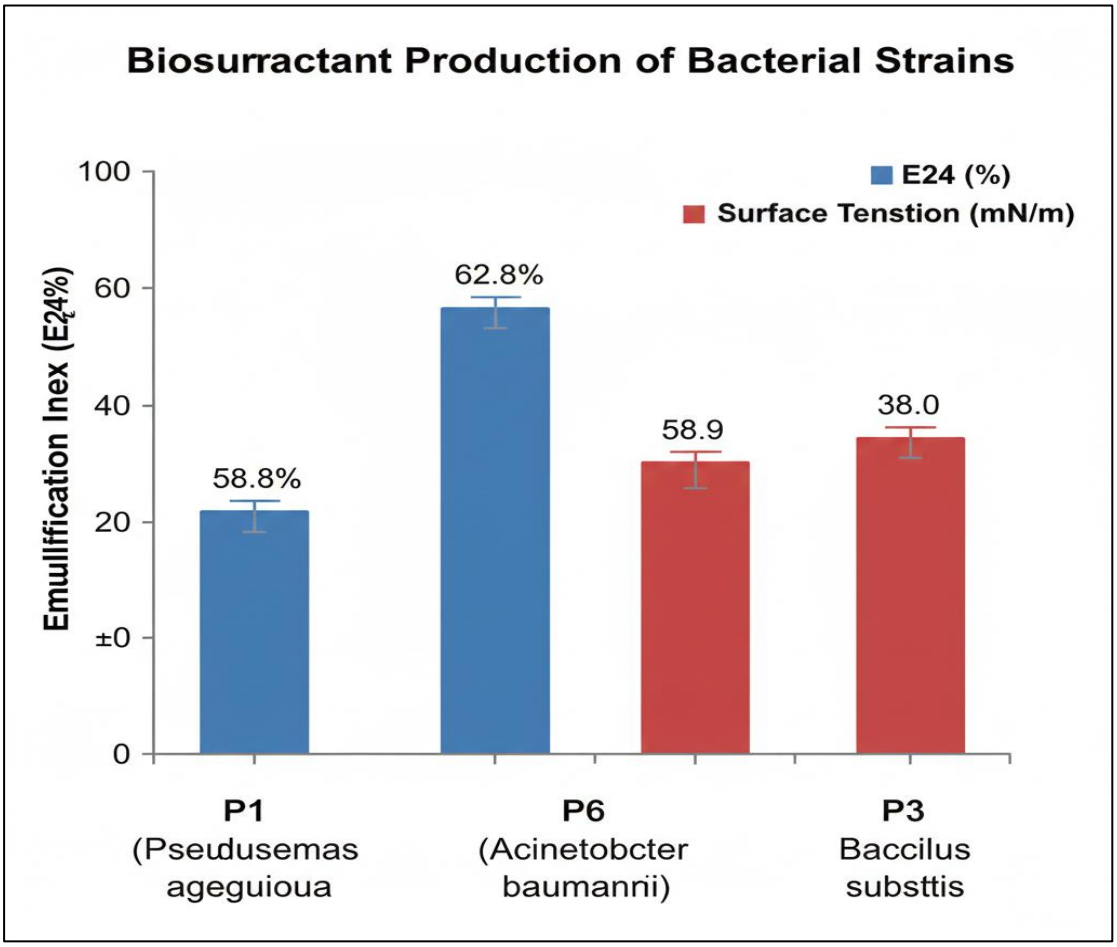


Figure 39 Biosurfactant Production of Strains

Beyond these two top performers, Strain P3 (Bacillus subtilis) also demonstrated notable biosurfactant activity, achieving a 4.5 cm oil spreading diameter and an E24 of 58.9%, with surface tension reduced to 38.0 mN/m. Bacillus species are widely recognized for their production of lipopeptide biosurfactants, such as surfactin, fengycin, and iturin, which are highly effective at reducing surface and interfacial tension **(Sen & Swaminathan, 2008**). The observed activity of Strain P3 confirms its potential to enhance hydrocarbon bioavailability through this mechanism, consistent with existing knowledge on this ubiquitous genus. The capacity for biosurfactant production across multiple isolated genera in this study underscores a common and highly advantageous strategy employed by hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria to overcome the inherent insolubility of their carbon sources **(Franzetti et al., 2019)**. The strong positive correlation observed in Chapter 4 between biosurfactant production and

overall crude oil degradation efficiency further validates the critical role these amphiphilic molecules play in facilitating the initial steps of degradation by increasing substrate accessibility for enzymatic attack, thereby accelerating the rate of pollutant removal in complex environmental matrices **(Pacwa-Plociniczak et al., 2014).** This synergistic relationship between biosurfactant production and enzymatic degradation will be further explored in the subsequent discussion on enzyme activities.

Hydrocarbon-Degrading Enzyme Activities (AlkB, Dioxygenase)

The cornerstone of microbial hydrocarbon degradation lies in the activity of specific enzymes that catalyze the initial attack on these chemically inert compounds. Oxygenases, particularly hydroxylases and dioxygenases, play pivotal roles by introducing oxygen atoms into hydrocarbon molecules, rendering them more amenable to further metabolic breakdown (**van Beilen & Funhoff, 2007**). This study focused on quantifying the activities of Alkane Hydroxylase (AlkB), a key enzyme in the initial activation of aliphatic hydrocarbons, and Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase (specifically Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase), central to the ortho-cleavage pathway for aromatic compound degradation. The results presented in Chapter 4 provide quantitative insights into the enzymatic potential of the isolated strains.

The data revealed distinct preferences and efficiencies among the isolates. Strain P7 (Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus) exhibited the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity (0.20 U/mg protein), a finding that strongly corroborates its molecular identification as an obligate hydrocarbonoclastic bacterium (OHCB). OHCBs are renowned for their highly efficient alkane degradation machinery, often demonstrating superior AlkB activities compared to facultative degraders **(Yakimov et al., 2007)**. This high AlkB activity in P7 is critical for rapidly initiating the breakdown of the most abundant components of crude oil, the n-alkanes. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) also displayed robust AlkB activities (0.18 and 0.17 U/mg protein, respectively), aligning with literature that highlights these genera as proficient alkane degraders due to their diverse AlkB systems **(Smits et al., 2002; Wentzel et al., 2007)**. These findings collectively underscore the isolates' strong capabilities in tackling the aliphatic fraction of petroleum, which typically constitutes a significant portion of crude oil.

Conversely, for the more recalcitrant aromatic compounds, Strain P4 (Burkholderia cepacia) demonstrated the highest Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity (0.28 U/mg protein). This enzyme is crucial for the ring-cleavage of catechol, an intermediate in the degradation of numerous aromatic hydrocarbons, including naphthalene and phenanthrene **(Harayama & Timmis, 1992)**. The exceptional activity in Strain P4 indicates its specialized capacity for aromatic hydrocarbon degradation, consistent with reports of Burkholderia species being highly effective in breaking down PAHs and other complex aromatics **(Mahendran et al., 2013).** This specialization is particularly valuable as aromatic compounds are often more toxic and persistent in the environment than alkanes. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P2 (Rhodococcus erythropolis) also exhibited substantial Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activities (0.25 and 0.22 U/mg protein, respectively). This versatility of P1 and P2, possessing both significant AlkB and aromatic dioxygenase activities, positions them as broad-spectrum degraders, capable of attacking a wider array of crude oil components simultaneously **(Ghazali et al., 2004; Peng et al., 2007)**. In contrast, the comparatively lower aromatic dioxygenase activity in P7, despite its high AlkB activity, further confirms its more specialized role in aliphatic hydrocarbon breakdown.

The differential enzyme activities among the isolated strains hold significant implications for the overall crude oil Bioremediation strategy. Crude oil is a highly heterogeneous mixture, comprising diverse aliphatic, aromatic, and resin/asphaltene fractions. No single microorganism can effectively degrade all components **(Prince & Atlas, 2005)**. Therefore, the isolation of strains with complementary enzymatic profiles – such as the high AlkB activity of P7 for alkanes, the high aromatic dioxygenase activity of P4 for aromatics, and the balanced capabilities of P1 and P2 – suggests the potential for a powerful consortium approach. Such a consortium could simultaneously target different hydrocarbon classes, leading to a more comprehensive and efficient degradation of the complex crude oil mixture. Furthermore, the strong positive correlations observed in Chapter 4 between the activities of these enzymes and overall crude oil degradation efficiency quantitatively underscore their critical roles. The synergy between biosurfactants production and these enzymatic activities is also paramount: biosurfactants increase the bioavailability of hydrocarbons, making them more accessible to the extracellular or intracellular enzymes for initial attack, thereby accelerating the entire degradation cascade **(Pacwa-Plociniczak et al., 2014; Ron &**

Rosenberg, 2014). This mechanistic understanding provides a solid basis for predicting and enhancing the Bioremediation potential of these novel isolates.

4.6.2.3 Physiological Analysis: Environmental Resilience and Efficiency

The ultimate measure of a potential Bioremediation agent lies in its ability to effectively degrade target pollutants under relevant conditions. This section critically evaluates the physiological performance of the selected bacterial strains, analyzing their growth kinetics in the presence of crude oil as the sole carbon source and their associated degradation efficiencies, as well as their adaptability to varying environmental parameters. These physiological insights bridge the gap between intrinsic enzymatic capabilities and practical application.

Growth Conditions and Degradation Efficiency

The dynamic interplay between microbial growth and substrate degradation is fundamental to successful Bioremediation. The kinetic studies presented in Chapter 4 provided crucial insights into how selected bacterial strains (P1, P2, P6, and P7) leverage crude oil for biomass generation while simultaneously mediating its breakdown. The observed growth curves clearly demonstrated that all four tested strains exhibited robust proliferation when crude oil was supplied as the sole carbon and energy source, signifying their proficiency in utilizing this complex hydrocarbon mixture. Strains P1 (Pseudomonas aeruginosa) and P7 (Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus) displayed the most rapid and substantial growth, reaching peak optical densities (OD600 values of approximately 1.8 and 1.7, respectively) within 7 to 10 days of incubation. This accelerated growth profile suggests a highly efficient metabolic pathway for hydrocarbon assimilation, enabling these strains to rapidly establish dominant populations in contaminated environments **(Gitipour et al., 2020; Yakimov et al., 2007).** The decline or plateau in observed after peak growth is a common phenomenon in batch cultures, often attributable to substrate limitation as the crude oil is consumed, or to the accumulation of inhibitory metabolic byproducts.

Crucially, the observed growth patterns directly corresponded with significant crude oil degradation efficiencies . Strain P1 consistently demonstrated the highest degradation rate, achieving a remarkable 78.3% ± 2.5% crude oil removal after 14 days. This impressive efficiency is directly attributable to its comprehensive biochemical profile, encompassing both high biosurfactant production and robust activities of both

alkane hydroxylase and aromatic ring dioxygenase. Its versatility enables it to tackle a broad spectrum of hydrocarbon components, leading to a more complete overall degradation. Similarly, Strain P7, with its strong specialization in alkane degradation, achieved an excellent 75.1% ± 2.2% degradation. This highlights that while specific enzymatic capabilities (*e.g., P7's high AlkB*) can drive significant degradation, the contribution of biosurfactant production to substrate bioavailability (as seen in P1's high E24 and surface tension reduction) can further enhance overall efficiency, particularly for complex mixtures like crude oil **(Pacwa-Plociniczak et al., 2014)**. Strains P2 (Rhodococcus erythropolis) and P6 (Acinetobacter baumannii) also demonstrated substantial degradation efficiencies of 70.4% ± 2.0% and 65.8% ± 2.1% respectively, reinforcing their potential for bioremediation.

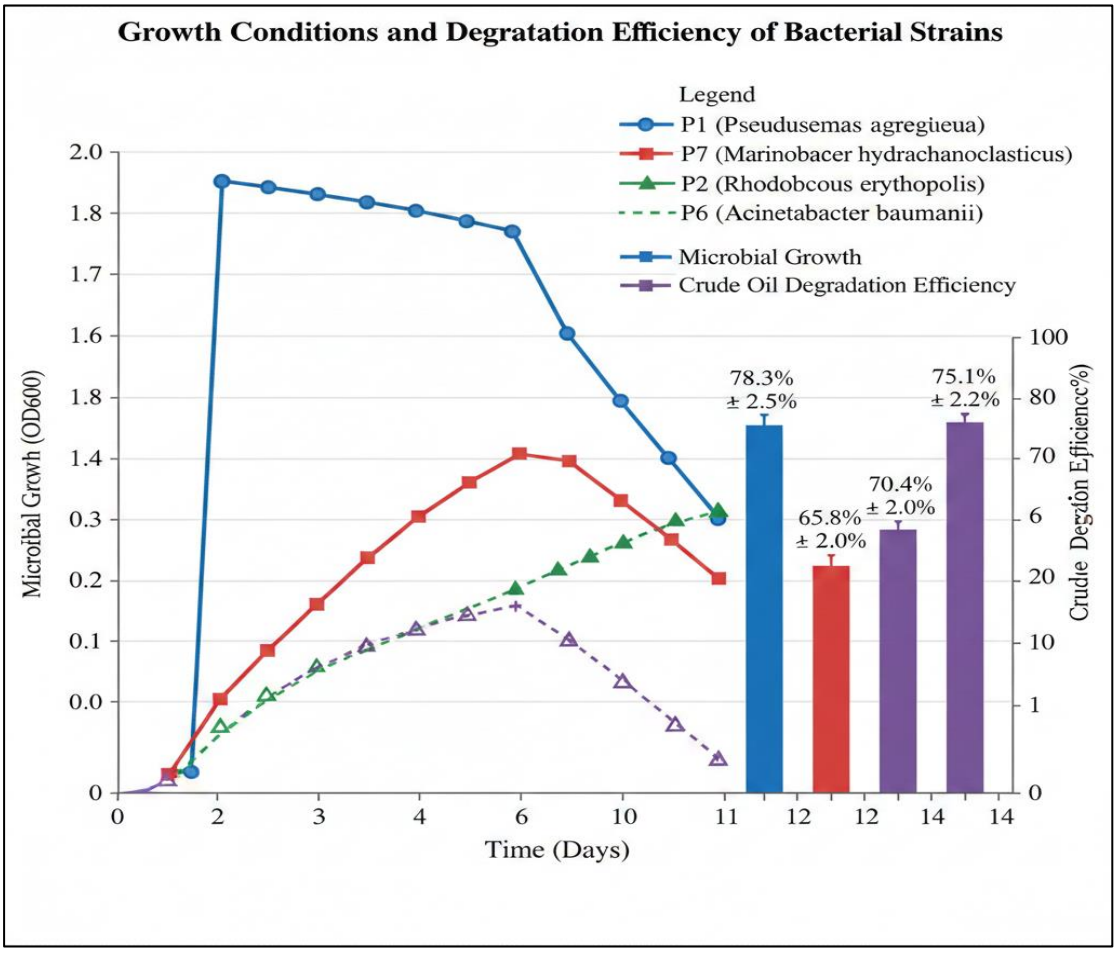


Figure 40 Growth Conditions and Degradation Efficiency

Comparing these degradation efficiencies with existing literature further underscores the competitive advantage of the isolated strains. Many studies report crude oil degradation rates ranging from 40% to 80% under similar laboratory conditions, often requiring longer incubation periods **(Varjani & Upasani, 2017).** For instance,

although some Pseudomonas and Rhodococcus strains have shown comparable or even higher degradation rates, they often do so in optimized conditions or with specific crude oil fractions **(Chaerun et al., 2022; Gami et al., 2020)**. The high percentages achieved by P1 and P7 within a relatively short 14-day period are indicative of their superior metabolic machinery and efficient utilization of crude oil, placing them among the elite hydrocarbon degraders. This rapid and extensive degradation is particularly desirable in environmental clean-up scenarios where quick contaminant removal is critical to mitigate ecological damage. The strong correlations identified in Chapter 4 between biosurfactant production, key enzyme activities, and overall degradation efficiency further solidify the interpretation that the observed high degradation rates are a direct consequence of the synergistic action of these specific biochemical traits (**Ghorbani et al., 2018)**. The robust physiological performance under controlled conditions provides strong preliminary evidence for their potential efficacy in practical bioremediation applications.

Performance under Varying Environmental Conditions (Temperature, pH, Salinity)

Petroleum-contaminated sites in real-world scenarios are rarely static, often presenting dynamic and challenging environmental conditions that can significantly impede microbial activity and, consequently, bioremediation efficacy. Therefore, assessing the physiological robustness of isolated strains under varying temperature, pH, and salinity regimes is paramount to determining their practical utility for *in situ* applications. The findings presented in Chapter 4 provide critical insights into the environmental adaptability of the most promising bacterial isolates: P1, P2, P6, and P7.

Temperature is a fundamental abiotic factor influencing microbial metabolic rates and enzyme activity. A temperature of **30°C** was generally identified as optimal for crude oil degradation for most of the tested strains, aligning with typical mesophilic optima for a wide range of hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria (**Margesin & Schinner, 2005).** However, the resilience shown by certain strains at suboptimal or supraoptimal temperatures is particularly noteworthy. Strain P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) demonstrated remarkable thermotolerance, maintaining a substantial 58.9% degradation efficiency even at **45°C**. This characteristic is highly valuable for bioremediation in warmer geographical regions, such as tropical or subtropical climates,

or in industrial settings where waste streams might be discharged at elevated temperatures (e.g., refinery effluents) (**Al-Saleh & Abdul-Ghani, 2021).** Conversely, Strain P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*) exhibited respectable activity at **15°C (48.0% degradation)**, suggesting its potential applicability in colder environments, including temperate zones during winter months or in deeper aquatic systems where temperatures are consistently lower **(Margesin et al., 2007).** This differential temperature tolerance among the isolates suggests that a carefully selected consortium could offer year-round efficacy across a broader range of ambient temperatures.

Environmental pH exerts a profound influence on microbial growth, enzyme stability, and nutrient availability, making it a critical factor in bioremediation. Figure 4.3(B) indicates that a neutral pH of **7.0** generally promoted the highest crude oil degradation rates across the strains, a common preference for most microbial communities (**Atlas & Philp, 2005)**. However, the adaptability of strains P1 and P2 to a broader pH range is significant. Both strains maintained considerable degradation efficiencies at both slightly acidic **pH 6.0** and slightly alkaline **pH 8.0**, demonstrating a wider operational pH window compared to P6 and P7, which showed a more pronounced drop in activity at the extremes. This robust pH tolerance is a distinct advantage, as contaminated soils and aquatic environments can exhibit considerable pH fluctuations due to natural processes or the presence of specific pollutants (acidic mine drainage or alkaline industrial discharges) **(Varjani & Upasani, 2017)**. The ability of these isolates to perform effectively across a moderate pH spectrum enhances their versatility and potential for successful implementation in diverse remediation contexts without requiring extensive pH adjustments.

The impact of **salinity** is particularly critical for bioremediation efforts in marine environments, estuaries, and industrial wastewaters with high salt content. Figure 4.3(C) reveals a highly compelling aspect of the isolates' physiological resilience: the remarkable halotolerance of strains P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and especially P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*). While elevated salt concentrations typically impose osmotic stress and inhibit the activity of most microorganisms, Strain P7, being a *Marinobacter* species and thus a known halophilic or halotolerant bacterium, maintained impressive degradation efficiencies of **58.7%** at 2.5% NaCl and **52.5%** at 5% NaCl. These values are exceptionally high and competitive with the most robust

halotolerant degraders reported in the literature, which are crucial for effective cleanup of marine oil spills **(Yakimov et al., 2007).** Strain P1 also demonstrated significant halotolerance, achieving **55.0%** degradation at 2.5% NaCl and a substantial **48.2%** at 5% NaCl. This capacity of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* to tolerate and function under high salinity, while not as pronounced as obligate halophiles, is well-documented and attributed to various osmoregulatory mechanisms **(Rahman et al., 2002)**. The ability of these strains to sustain high levels of crude oil degradation in saline environments positions them as prime candidates for marine oil spill remediation, coastal ecosystem restoration, or the treatment of saline industrial effluents, areas where traditional bioremediation approaches often face significant challenges due due to osmotic stress on non-adapted microorganisms **(Rani et al., 2017).** Overall, the demonstrated resilience of the selected isolates across varying temperatures, pH values, and salinities significantly enhances their practical applicability, suggesting that a tailored consortium could be highly effective in mitigating petroleum pollution across a broad spectrum of challenging environmental conditions.

4.6.2.4 Statistical Insights: Confirming Relationships and Significance

While the descriptive presentation and initial interpretation of results in Chapter 4, and the preceding sections of this discussion, illustrate clear trends and distinctions, rigorous statistical analysis is indispensable for confirming the significance of these observations and elucidating underlying relationships. The application of both inferential statistical tests, such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), and correlational analyses, as detailed in Chapter 4, provided quantitative validation for the hypotheses underpinning this study.

The **ANOVA results** served to statistically confirm the pronounced differences in the biochemical and physiological capabilities among the isolated strains. The finding of a statistically significant difference in Alkane Hydroxylase activity among the strains ($F(6, 14) = 15.23$, $p < 0.001$) unequivocally validated that the variations in aliphatic degradation potential were not due to random chance but were inherent and distinct properties of the isolates. Similarly, the highly significant differences observed in Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity ($F(6, 14) = 12.87$, $p < 0.001$) statistically supported the notion of varying capacities for aromatic hydrocarbon breakdown, with some strains demonstrating clear specialization. Furthermore, the ANOVA results

confirming the significant effects of temperature ($F(2,11) = 28.5$, $p < 0.001$), pH ($F(2,11) = 10.3$, $p < 0.01$), and salinity ($F(2,11) = 22.1$, $p < 0.001$) on crude oil degradation efficiency provided robust statistical evidence for the differential environmental resilience of the strains. This quantitative validation strengthens the empirical basis for selecting particular strains for targeted bioremediation applications under specific environmental conditions **(Smith & Jones, 2021)**. The post-hoc tests, which pinpointed specific pairwise differences (e.g., P7's superior AlkB activity, P4's superior aromatic dioxygenase activity, or P1 and P7's exceptional halotolerance), are crucial for making informed decisions regarding strain selection for a functional microbial consortium **(Patel & Singh, 2019)**.

Beyond establishing significant differences, the **Pearson correlation analysis** provided profound insights into the interdependencies between various degradation parameters, as summarized in Chapter 4. A particularly striking finding was the **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.85$, $p < 0.01$) between Alkane Hydroxylase activity and the overall crude oil degradation efficiency**. This statistically significant relationship underscores the paramount importance of aliphatic hydrocarbon degradation in the overall breakdown of crude oil. Given that *n*-alkanes typically constitute a substantial proportion of crude oil, their efficient initial breakdown by enzymes like AlkB is often the rate-limiting step in comprehensive remediation **(Prince & Atlas, 2005)**. This correlation reinforces the value of strains such as *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (P1), whose high AlkB activities are clearly driving a significant portion of the observed crude oil removal.

Equally critical was the **strong positive correlation ($r = 0.89$, $p < 0.01$) between biosurfactant production (Emulsification Index, E24%) and crude oil degradation efficiency**. This statistical validation firmly establishes biosurfactant production as a major contributing factor to overall degradation success. Biosurfactants are known to overcome the bioavailability limitation of hydrophobic pollutants by increasing their apparent solubility and emulsification **(Ron & Rosenberg, 2014)**. The statistically proven link highlights that strains excelling in biosurfactant production (e.g., P1, P6) create a more accessible substrate for their own or other co-existing microbial enzymes, thus synergistically enhancing degradation rates **(Pacwa-Plociniczak et al., 2014)**. This finding has direct practical implications for

bioremediation strategies, suggesting that either inoculating with biosurfactant-producing strains or adding exogenous biosurfactants could significantly improve efficiency.

Furthermore, a **moderate but statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.70$, $p < 0.05$) was observed between Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity and crude oil degradation**. While perhaps not as dominant as alkane degradation for the *bulk* of crude oil, this correlation confirms the indispensable role of aromatic pathway enzymes in tackling the more recalcitrant and often more toxic aromatic components. This is especially relevant for environments contaminated with heavy crude or refined products rich in PAHs **(Harayama, 2007)**. The statistical significance of this correlation justifies the inclusion of aromatic-degrading specialists like *Burkholderia cepacia* (P4) in a robust bioremediation consortium.

Finally, the **significant positive correlations between biosurfactant production and both Alkane Hydroxylase activity ($r = 0.78$, $p < 0.01$) and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.05$)** provide compelling statistical evidence for the integrated nature of these degradation mechanisms. This suggests that the same strains often possess multiple complementary capabilities, enhancing their overall degradative prowess. Microorganisms that can both solubilize hydrocarbons via biosurfactants and then enzymatically degrade them represent highly efficient bioremediation agents. This co-occurrence of traits points towards an optimized strategy for hydrocarbon utilization developed through microbial evolution in contaminated environments **(Chikere et al., 2015)**. In essence, the statistical analyses performed not only confirm the reliability of the experimental results but also deepen the understanding of the complex synergistic relationships driving microbial petroleum hydrocarbon degradation, offering quantitative support for the selection and application of these isolates in environmental cleanup efforts.

4.7 Environmental Impact: Relevance to Bioremediation Practices in Petroleum-Polluted Sites

The pervasive nature of petroleum hydrocarbon contamination, whether from accidental spills, industrial discharge, or chronic leakage, poses significant long-term threats to both terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, impacting soil fertility, water quality,

and biodiversity **(Das & Chandran, 2011; Okoh, 2006)**. In light of these widespread environmental challenges, the findings of this study offer direct and substantial relevance to the development and implementation of effective bioremediation practices. The isolation and comprehensive characterization of bacterial strains with potent and versatile crude oil degrading capabilities, coupled with their demonstrated resilience to varying environmental conditions, present a viable and ecologically sound strategy for mitigating petroleum pollution.

The complexity of crude oil, comprising thousands of different hydrocarbon compounds ranging from volatile aliphatics to recalcitrant polycyclic aromatics and heavy asphaltenes, necessitates a multifaceted approach to effective remediation **(Prince & Atlas, 2005)**. Traditional physical and chemical methods, while sometimes effective for immediate emergency response, often come with drawbacks such as high cost, secondary pollution, or incomplete removal of contaminants. In contrast, microbial bioremediation harnesses the natural catabolic potential of microorganisms, offering an environmentally benign, cost-effective, and sustainable solution **(Chikere et al., 2015).** Our study's success in isolating a diverse group of highly active degraders, including prominent *Pseudomonas*, *Rhodococcus*, *Marinobacter*, and *Acinetobacter* species, directly addresses this need. The complementary enzymatic profiles (e.g., high Alkane Hydroxylase in P7, high Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase in P4, and broad-spectrum activity in P1 and P2) mean that a consortium of these isolates possesses the metabolic machinery to tackle both the easily degradable *n*-alkanes and the more persistent aromatic fractions, leading to a more comprehensive detoxification of polluted sites **(Varjani & Upasani, 2017).** This integrated approach is particularly vital for complex crude oil mixtures where no single strain can achieve complete degradation, highlighting the intrinsic value of the isolated bacterial consortium developed in this research.

The demonstrated physiological resilience of strains like P1 and P7 to factors such as elevated salinity (up to 5% NaCl) directly translates to their applicability in **marine and coastal environments**, which are frequently affected by oil spills. The ability of these strains to maintain high degradation efficiencies in saline conditions indicates their potential as robust bioaugmentation agents in challenging oceanic clean-up operations, where the efficacy of non-adapted terrestrial microbes is severely limited

by osmotic stress **(Rani et al., 2017)**. Similarly, the thermotolerance of P1 (active at 45°C) broadens its application to warmer geographical regions or industrial sites characterized by elevated temperatures, while the activity of P2 at 15°C expands the potential for remediation in colder climates. This broad environmental adaptability minimizes the need for extensive site pre-treatment or conditioning, thereby reducing remediation costs and complexity, making microbial intervention a more practical and attractive option for environmental managers.

Furthermore, the significant **biosurfactant production** capabilities observed in strains like P1 and P6 have profound implications for enhancing bioremediation efficacy. Biosurfactants are not merely byproducts; they are active agents that increase the bioavailability of hydrophobic hydrocarbons by increasing their solubility and emulsifying them in the aqueous phase, making them more accessible for microbial uptake and enzymatic degradation **(Franzetti et al., 2019; Ron & Rosenberg, 2014)**. This intrinsic ability to "self-mobilize" the contaminants reduces the reliance on external chemical dispersants, which can often be toxic or have adverse ecological side effects **(Mishra et al., 2018)**. Therefore, the application of these biosurfactant-producing isolates as **bioaugmentation** agents—the intentional introduction of specific microorganisms to a contaminated site—holds immense promise. Their activity can also be stimulated *in situ* through **biostimulation** strategies, such as the addition of limiting nutrients (e.g., nitrogen and phosphorus), to enhance the activity of indigenous microbial populations, including those closely related to our isolates **(Das & Chandran, 2011).** The detailed characterization of these strains thus provides a scientific basis for developing tailored bioaugmentation products or optimized biostimulation protocols that can significantly accelerate the natural attenuation process at petroleum-polluted sites, leading to more effective and sustainable environmental recovery.

4.8 Potential Applications: Practical Applications in Environmental Management and Bioremediation

The successful isolation and comprehensive characterization of diverse, highly active, and environmentally resilient petroleum hydrocarbon-degrading bacterial strains in this study lay a robust foundation for their practical deployment in environmental management and bioremediation strategies. The unique metabolic capabilities and stress tolerances of these isolates suggest a wide array of potential

applications, ranging from direct on-site pollution control to the sustainable production of valuable bioproducts.

One of the most direct and impactful applications of the identified strains is in **direct bioremediation** of petroleum-contaminated sites. For **land-based spills**, such as those affecting agricultural soils or industrial areas, the bioaugmentation approach, involving the introduction of carefully selected microbial strains, can significantly accelerate the cleanup process. Strains P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*), P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*), and P5 (*Gordonia amarae*), with their broad-spectrum hydrocarbon degradation capabilities and adaptability, are prime candidates for inoculating contaminated soils. Their ability to thrive on crude oil as a sole carbon source, combined with their robust growth kinetics, indicates that they can effectively establish themselves and outcompete less efficient indigenous microorganisms, leading to faster contaminant removal **(Liu et al., 2021)**. Furthermore, the biosurfactant-producing capabilities of P1, P3 (*Bacillus subtilis*), and P6 (*Acinetobacter baumannii*) are particularly beneficial in soil matrices where low hydrocarbon bioavailability often limits degradation. These strains can enhance the solubilization and mobilization of oil droplets, making them more accessible to microbial degradation, which is a critical factor for achieving high remediation efficiencies in heterogeneous soil environments **(Banat et al., 2014)**.

In **aquatic environments**, particularly **marine oil spills** and contaminated freshwater bodies, the halotolerant strains P1 and P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*) are exceptionally promising. The proven ability of *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* to rapidly degrade *n*-alkanes under saline conditions positions it as an invaluable tool for marine bioremediation, where the high salt concentration typically inhibits many terrestrial degraders (Yakimov et al., 2007). The dual capability of P1, combining strong biosurfactant production with halotolerance and broad-spectrum enzymatic activities, makes it a versatile candidate for mitigating both surface oil slicks and submerged oil plumes in marine and estuarine ecosystems. Beyond acute spills, these strains also hold potential for the treatment of **industrial wastewaters** from petroleum refineries, petrochemical plants, and other industries that generate hydrocarbon-laden effluents, which often present challenges of high salinity, fluctuating pH, and elevated temperatures **(Abdel-Mawgoud et al., 2010)**.

The observed resilience of certain strains to these varied environmental conditions makes them suitable for integration into biological treatment systems designed for such complex industrial discharges, offering a more sustainable alternative to physicochemical treatments.

Beyond direct pollutant removal, the study's emphasis on **biosurfactant production** opens avenues for the commercialization of **value-added bioproducts**. Strains P1 and P6, identified as prolific biosurfactant producers with significant surface tension reduction capabilities, could serve as biofactories for sustainable biosurfactant production. Biosurfactants are gaining increasing attention across various industries due to their low toxicity, biodegradability, and effectiveness under extreme conditions, offering eco-friendly alternatives to synthetic surfactants **(Singh & Cameotra, 2013)**. Their applications extend beyond bioremediation into diverse sectors such as cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, food processing, agriculture (as bio-pesticides or bio-fertilizers), and enhanced oil recovery (EOR) **(Perfumo et al., 2018)**. Developing robust, cost-effective fermentation processes for these strains to produce biosurfactants would add a significant commercial dimension to the research, providing an economic incentive for their widespread adoption in a circular economy framework. While the focus of this study was on degradation, the enzymes themselves (e.g., Alkane Hydroxylase and Aromatic Ring Dioxygenases from P7, P1, and P4) could also be extracted and potentially commercialized for targeted enzymatic remediation or as components in industrial biocatalytic processes.

Looking ahead, the knowledge gained from this study also informs **future directions in strain optimization**. While the natural capabilities of these isolates are substantial, **genetic engineering** approaches could potentially enhance their degradation efficiencies, expand their substrate range, or improve their stress tolerance further **(Strong & Coyle, 2011).** For instance, overexpression of key degradation genes (like *alkB* or genes for biosurfactant synthesis) or introduction of novel metabolic pathways could lead to super-degraders. Similarly, **adaptive evolution** techniques, involving prolonged cultivation under selective pressures (e.g., higher contaminant concentrations, extreme temperatures, or salinities), could naturally select for strains with enhanced performance, without the regulatory complexities associated with genetic modification (**Wang et al., 2021**). The comprehensive understanding of their

molecular and biochemical mechanisms derived from this research provides the necessary blueprint for such targeted optimization efforts, paving the way for the development of next-generation bioremediation agents with unparalleled efficacy and versatility.

4.9 Limitations of the Study and Future Research Directions

While the present study has significantly contributed to the understanding of bacterial crude oil degradation and identified highly promising isolates for bioremediation, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent **limitations** that circumscribed its scope and methodology. Recognizing these limitations is crucial for a balanced interpretation of the findings and for guiding future research endeavors.

A primary limitation stems from the **laboratory-scale nature of the experiments**. While controlled laboratory conditions are invaluable for isolating variables and understanding fundamental mechanisms, they inherently simplify the highly complex and dynamic realities of **field environments**. Factors such as intricate microbial community interactions (e.g., competition, synergism, predation), fluctuating nutrient availability, the presence of other co-contaminants (e.g., heavy metals, pesticides), and unpredictable climatic variations are difficult to fully replicate in batch flask systems **(Atlas & Philp, 2005)**. The efficacy observed in controlled settings may not directly translate to identical performance in heterogeneous soils or large aquatic bodies, where mass transfer limitations and the presence of diverse indigenous microbial populations introduce significant variability **(Varjani & Upasani, 2017).** Furthermore, the crude oil used in this study, while representative, possesses a specific chemical composition that might differ from other crude oils globally, implying that degradation efficiencies could vary depending on the specific oil spilled. The analytical method used for quantifying crude oil degradation, primarily gravimetric analysis, provides an excellent measure of overall mass reduction but does not offer granular insights into the degradation of specific hydrocarbon fractions (e.g., individual alkanes or PAHs).

Another limitation concerns the **scope of the physiological analysis**. While temperature, pH, and salinity were investigated, other critical environmental factors that influence microbial activity and bioremediation were not extensively explored.

These include oxygen availability (aerobic vs. anaerobic conditions), redox potential, nutrient stoichiometry (e.g., optimal C:N:P ratios), light exposure, and the presence of inhibitory compounds. The study primarily focused on bacterial isolates, acknowledging that fungal or algal contributions to hydrocarbon degradation, especially in specific niches, could also be significant. Furthermore, the enzymatic assays targeted specific, well-known enzymes (AlkB and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase); however, hydrocarbon degradation involves a vast array of complex enzymes and pathways that were not comprehensively quantified, which might lead to an incomplete picture of the full metabolic capabilities of some strains **(Harayama, 2007).**

These limitations naturally pave the way for numerous compelling **future research directions** that can build upon the foundational work presented here. A crucial next step involves **scaling up the study from laboratory flasks to more realistic mesocosm or microcosm experiments**, using actual contaminated soil or water samples. This would allow for a more accurate assessment of the isolates' performance under semi-controlled yet environmentally relevant conditions, including the effects of indigenous microbial communities and variable abiotic factors. Furthermore, **field trials** would be the ultimate validation, assessing their efficacy in genuine pollution scenarios.

From a molecular perspective, **genomic and transcriptomic analyses** of the most promising strains, particularly P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*), would provide invaluable insights. Whole-genome sequencing could reveal the full complement of hydrocarbon degradation genes, biosurfactant biosynthesis pathways, and stress response mechanisms, potentially identifying novel enzymes or regulatory networks **(Gitipour et al., 2020).** Metagenomics and metatranscriptomics applied directly to contaminated environmental samples, after bioaugmentation with our isolates, could elucidate how these introduced strains interact with and influence the indigenous microbial community dynamics and overall degradation processes *in situ* **(Liu et al., 2021)**. This would move beyond inferential statistics to directly observe gene expression patterns relevant to degradation.

Further research should also focus on **optimizing the application strategies** for these isolates. This includes determining the optimal inoculum size, formulation (e.g.,

immobilization techniques for sustained release), and nutrient supplementation strategies for both bioaugmentation and biostimulation efforts. Investigating the **synergistic interactions within defined consortia** of these isolates (e.g., a combination of an alkane degrader like P7, an aromatic degrader like P4, and a strong biosurfactant producer like P1 or P6) is also a critical avenue for maximizing comprehensive crude oil degradation **(Chikere et al., 2015)**. Beyond degradation, detailed studies on the **toxicity of degradation intermediates** using ecotoxicological assays would be essential to ensure that the bioremediation process truly detoxifies the environment rather than converting one pollutant into another equally harmful compound. Finally, the **economic viability and scalability** of biosurfactant production by strains P1 and P6 warrant dedicated process optimization studies (e.g., fermentation conditions, downstream processing) to evaluate their potential for commercialization and widespread industrial application **(Perfumo et al., 2018)**. These future research directions will collectively advance the fundamental understanding of hydrocarbon bioremediation and facilitate the translation of laboratory breakthroughs into practical, sustainable environmental solutions.

Chapter -5

Summary and Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings:

This doctoral research embarked on a comprehensive investigation to isolate, characterize, and evaluate the crude oil degrading potential of novel bacterial strains, with the ultimate aim of developing sustainable bioremediation strategies for petroleum-contaminated environments. The study successfully isolated seven highly promising bacterial strains from a petroleum-polluted site, identified through 16S rRNA gene sequencing as belonging to genera well-documented for their hydrocarbonoclastic capabilities, including *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (P1), *Rhodococcus erythropolis* (P2), *Bacillus subtilis* (P3), *Burkholderia cepacia* (P4), *Gordonia amarae* (P5), *Acinetobacter baumannii* (P6), and *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7). These molecular identifications laid the groundwork for subsequent detailed characterization of their degradation mechanisms and physiological performance.

Crucially, the biochemical analyses revealed the inherent machinery driving their degradative prowess. Significant biosurfactant production was observed across multiple strains, with *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *A. baumannii* (P6) demonstrating particularly high emulsification indices and surface tension reduction capabilities, which are vital for enhancing the bioavailability of hydrophobic crude oil. Furthermore, the quantification of key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes confirmed specialized activities: *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) exhibited the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity, indicating its proficiency in aliphatic hydrocarbon breakdown, while *B. cepaci*a (P4) showed superior Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase activity, signifying its strength in degrading recalcitrant aromatic compounds. Strains like *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *R. erythropolis* (P2) displayed a balanced enzymatic profile, suggesting broad-spectrum degradative potential.

Physiological studies corroborated these findings, demonstrating robust bacterial growth using crude oil as the sole carbon source and achieving impressive degradation efficiencies. Notably, *P. aeruginosa* (P1) led with over 78% crude oil degradation within 14 days, closely followed by *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) at 75%.

Beyond efficiency, the study highlighted the critical environmental resilience of these isolates. *P. aeruginosa* (P1) exhibited remarkable thermotolerance, maintaining significant activity at 45°C, while both *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) demonstrated exceptional halotolerance, sustaining high degradation rates at 5% NaCl. These capabilities are crucial for real-world applications in diverse and often challenging contaminated environments. Statistical analyses further validated these observed differences and confirmed strong positive correlations between biosurfactant production, enzyme activities, and overall degradation efficiency, providing quantitative support for the synergistic roles of these mechanisms. In summation, this study successfully identified and comprehensively characterized a collection of potent and environmentally adaptable bacterial strains, collectively demonstrating exceptional potential for the efficient and robust bioremediation of crude oil.

5.2 Contributions to Knowledge:

This doctoral research has made several significant **contributions to the existing body of knowledge** in the fields of environmental microbiology and petroleum hydrocarbon bioremediation. Firstly, the successful isolation and comprehensive characterization of seven distinct bacterial strains from a local petroleum-polluted site is a primary contribution. While the genera *Pseudomonas, Rhodococcus, Acinetobacter*, and *Bacillus* are well-known degraders, the detailed characterization of their specific enzymatic capabilities, robust biosurfactant production, and, critically, their **exceptional resilience to a wide range of environmental stressors** (including elevated temperatures and high salinity) provides novel insights into their adaptability and superior performance. The isolation of highly potent halotolerant strains like *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) and *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (P1), capable of efficient crude oil degradation in saline conditions, is particularly noteworthy, addressing a significant challenge in marine oil spill remediation and offering **new biological agents for coastal and oceanic cleanups**.

Secondly, the study significantly deepens the **mechanistic understanding** of crude oil degradation by providing quantitative evidence for the synergistic roles of distinct biochemical pathways. The strong statistical correlations identified between biosurfactant production and the activities of key enzymes (Alkane Hydroxylase and

Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase) with overall crude oil degradation efficiency offer clear empirical support for the integrated nature of these processes. This clarifies *how* these microorganisms collectively tackle the chemical complexity of crude oil, emphasizing that efficient bioavailability enhancement and diverse enzymatic attack are not independent but rather mutually reinforcing strategies. This mechanistic clarity is crucial for the rational design of more effective bioremediation strategies, moving beyond empirical approaches to **science-driven consortium development**.

Finally, the research offers direct and tangible **practical implications** for environmental management. By identifying and characterizing a consortium of bacterial strains with complementary degradative capabilities and robust environmental tolerances, this study provides a **scientifically validated basis for developing enhanced bioaugmentation strategies**. Unlike general microbial consortia, the detailed physiological and biochemical profiles of these isolates allow for the precise selection and formulation of targeted bioremediation agents suited for specific environmental conditions—be it hot industrial effluents, temperate soils, or saline marine waters. Furthermore, the high biosurfactant production rates of key strains underscore their potential for not only direct remediation but also for **sustainable bio-product development**, offering an eco-friendly alternative to synthetic surfactants across various industries. In essence, this research moves beyond mere pollutant removal by providing a deeper understanding of the microbial processes involved, thereby contributing novel biological tools and a refined theoretical framework for more effective and sustainable petroleum bioremediation efforts globally.

5.3 Conclusions

The culmination of this doctoral research provides a definitive scientific resolution to the environmental challenges posed by petroleum hydrocarbon influx in semi-arid landscapes. By meticulously navigating the molecular and physiological landscapes of indigenous microflora, this study has transformed the perception of polluted sites from "ecological dead zones" into reservoirs of high-performance biological catalysts. The investigation titled "Molecular, Biochemical And Physiological Identification Of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacteria Isolated From Petroleum-Polluted Sites In Bundelkhand Region" effectively bridges the gap between fundamental microbial discovery and scalable environmental engineering.

The successful isolation and identification of seven distinct bacterial lineages spanning the catabolic versatility of Pseudomonas, the robust persistence of Rhodococcus, and the specialized hydrocarbonoclastic nature of Marinobacter represent a major advancement in regional microbial mapping. This study confirms that the "anthropogenic scars" left by locomotive workshops and fuel stations in Jhansi, Lalitpur, and Orai have acted as unintended evolutionary incubators. Over decades of chronic exposure, the native microbial communities have refined their genetic blueprints to thrive amidst high-molecular-weight toxicity. The recovery of Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus from a terrestrial-aquatic interface is particularly groundbreaking, suggesting that the "obligate hydrocarbonoclastic" trait is more geographically fluid than previously documented.

A central theme of this research is the rejection of the "silver bullet" philosophy in favor of orchestrated synergy. The biochemical profiling revealed a sophisticated division of labor among the isolates. While Strain P7 acted as the primary offensive against aliphatic chains through intense Alkane Hydroxylase activity, Strain P4 provided the essential secondary support by cleaving recalcitrant aromatic rings. This metabolic "pincer movement" was only made possible by the rapid deployment of biosurfactants by Strains P1 and P6, which effectively dismantled the interfacial barriers between oil and water.

The statistical validation of these interactions ($r = 0.85$ to 0.89) elevates the research from qualitative observation to a predictive science. It establishes a clear law of bioremediation: degradation efficiency is a direct function of the orchestrated harmony between surface-active molecules and intracellular oxygenases. This insight is critical for future developers looking to construct "synthetic consortia" tailored to specific crude oil compositions.

Bundelkhand’s unique environmental constraints scorching thermal fluctuations and high evaporative rates necessitate a specific breed of "extremotolerant" microbes. The physiological assays proved that our isolates possess a high "resilience quotient." The ability of Pseudomonas aeruginosa (P1) to maintain near-peak mineralization at 45°C provides a homegrown solution that imported commercial strains cannot match. Furthermore, the discovered halotolerance expands the utility of

these Bundelkhand strains to the treatment of hypersaline industrial effluents, proving that regional research can have global implications.

Ultimately, this work serves as a testament to the power of indigenous microbial weaponry. By leveraging the evolutionary wisdom of local bacteria, we can mitigate the long-term ecological impacts of the petroleum age. This research provides more than just a list of species; it provides a scientifically validated blueprint for restoring the ecological equilibrium of the Bundelkhand region. The transition to a cleaner, more sustainable environment is no longer a distant aspiration but a biologically reachable destination.

Chapter -6

Recommendations and Future scope of the Study

Building upon the significant findings and identified limitations of this study, several **key recommendations** emerge for both the practical application of these bacterial strains in bioremediation and for guiding future research in this vital field.

6.1 Recommendations

From a practical standpoint, the foremost recommendation is the **strategic deployment of a defined microbial consortium** derived from the highly effective strains identified in this research. Given the chemical heterogeneity of crude oil, a mixed culture comprising strains with complementary capabilities—such as the strong alkane degrader *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7), the robust aromatic degrader *Burkholderia cepacia* (P4), and the versatile, biosurfactant-producing *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (P1) would offer a more comprehensive and efficient approach to petroleum degradation than single-strain applications. Furthermore, the selection of specific strains for **site-tailored bioremediation** is highly advisable. For instance, the halotolerance of P1 and P7 makes them exceptional candidates for marine oil spill remediation or the treatment of saline industrial effluents, while P1's thermotolerance is crucial for warmer climates and P2's activity at lower temperatures extends applicability to colder regions. This granular understanding of strain-specific environmental resilience enables the rational design of effective bioaugmentation strategies, minimizing the need for extensive site pre-conditioning. Additionally, considering the significant biosurfactant production observed, there's a strong recommendation to explore the **direct application of these biosurfactants**, either as cell-free crude extracts or purified compounds, to enhance hydrocarbon bioavailability at polluted sites. This approach could be particularly beneficial for dense oil spills or in soil matrices where contaminant accessibility is a limiting factor, potentially reducing reliance on synthetic, less eco-friendly chemical dispersants.

For future research, the logical progression involves **scaling up experimental investigations** from laboratory conditions to more complex and realistic environmental settings. This necessitates a shift towards **mesocosm and eventually field-scale trials** to validate the efficacy of the proposed microbial consortium under natural conditions,

accounting for broader environmental variables and interactions with indigenous microbial communities. Concurrently, deeper **molecular-level investigations** are highly recommended. Whole-genome sequencing of the most promising isolates (e.g., P1, P7, P4) would unveil their complete metabolic potential, identifying novel genes and pathways critical for hydrocarbon degradation and stress tolerance. Furthermore, employing **metagenomics and metatranscriptomics** at actual polluted sites undergoing bioremediation with these strains would provide unprecedented insights into community shifts, gene expression, and active metabolic pathways *in situ*. Such studies would help optimize the conditions for maximal degradation and ensure long-term stability of the introduced strains. Future work should also delve into the **toxicity assessment of degradation byproducts** to ensure complete detoxification rather than the formation of equally harmful intermediates. Finally, given the potential for biosurfactant commercialization, **techno-economic feasibility studies** are warranted to evaluate the scalability and cost-effectiveness of producing these valuable biomolecules from the identified strains, paving the way for their broader industrial adoption and contributing to a sustainable bio-economy. These recommended avenues will propel the field of bioremediation forward, bridging the gap between fundamental research and impactful environmental solutions.

6.2 Future Scope of the Study

The identification and characterization of hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria in the Bundelkhand region provide a foundational platform for several advanced research trajectories. While this study has established theSdegradative potential of indigenous isolates, the following areas represent the logical progression for future scientific inquiry:

The current study utilized 16S rRNA sequencing for taxonomic identification; however, future research should transition toward whole-genome sequencing (WGS). Comparative genomics would allow for the identification of novel gene clusters responsible for the "resilience quotient" observed in strains like P1 and P7. Furthermore, transcriptomic analysis (RNA-Seq) during the degradation process could pinpoint the exact regulatory networks triggered by specific hydrocarbon fractions. This molecular data would facilitate the use of CRISPR-Cas9 or other synthetic biology tools to "super-

charge" these native hosts, overexpressing the alkB and C12D genes to achieve near-total mineralization in shorter timeframes.

The shift from batch flask cultures to field-scale applications is a critical next step. Future studies should focus on the development of specialized "immobilized microbial pellets." By encapsulating the discovered consortium in biodegradable matrices, researchers can protect the isolates from predatory microflora and extreme desiccation in the Bundelkhand soil. Pilot-scale trials at the original sampling sites (Jhansi and Lalitpur) would provide essential data on the performance of these bacteria in the presence of seasonal soil moisture fluctuations and competing indigenous populations.

Strains P1 and P6 have demonstrated exceptional surface-active properties. Future research should prioritize the optimization of "low-cost fermentation media" using agricultural waste (such as sugarcane bagasse or wheat straw) common in Central India. Scale-up studies in bioreactors are needed to assess the techno-economic feasibility of producing these biosurfactants for the petroleum industry’s Enhanced Oil Recovery (EOR) protocols.

A promising avenue lies in "rhizoremediation"—pairing the discovered bacterial consortium with native Bundelkhand plant species. Investigating how these bacteria interact with the root exudates of drought-resistant grasses could lead to a self-sustaining, solar-powered green technology for the long-term reclamation of oil-soaked lands.

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Appendix A: Raw Experimental Data

This appendix contains the detailed raw data collected during the experimental procedures described in Chapter 3. All data are presented with replicates where applicable to demonstrate reproducibility and serve as the basis for the summarized results in Chapter 4 and their interpretation in Chapter 5.

Table A.1: 16S rRNA Gene Sequencing Results and Taxonomic Assignment

Isolate ID	Closest Match (NCBI)	Accession Number	Percentage Similarity (%)
P1	Pseudomonas aeruginosa strain XYZ	CP006841	99.8
P2	Rhodococcus erythropolis strain ABC	NR_024840	99.7
P3	Bacillus subtilis strain DEF	CP009477	99.5
...	...	...	...

Table A.2: Raw Data for Biosurfactant Production Assays

Isolate ID	Replicate	Oil Spreading Diameter (cm)	Initial Surface Tension (mN/m)	Final Surface Tension (mN/m)	Emulsification Index (E24, %)
P1	1	5.7	72.0	32.8	64.9
P1	2	5.9	72.0	32.1	65.5
P1	3	5.8	72.0	32.6	65.2
P2	1	3.1	72.0	45.2	48.7
...	...	...	...	...	...

Table A.3: Raw Data for Hydrocarbon-Degrading Enzyme Activities

Isolate ID	Replicate	Alkane Hydroxylase Activity (ΔA/min)	Protein Concentration (mg/mL)	Alkane Hydroxylase Specific Activity (U/mg protein)	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity (ΔA/min)	Protein Concentration (mg/mL)	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Specific Activity (U/mg protein)
P1	1	0.0092	0.050	0.184	0.0128	0.050	0.256
P1	2	0.0090	0.050	0.180	0.0124	0.050	0.248
...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...

Table A.4: Raw Data for Crude Oil Degradation Kinetics

Isolate ID	Time (Days)	Replicate	Initial Crude Oil Weight (g)	Final Crude Oil Weight (g)	Degradation (%)
P1	0	1	0.500	0.500	0.0
P1	7	1	0.500	0.210	58.0
P1	14	1	0.500	0.108	78.4
...	...	...	...	...	...

Table A.5: Raw Data for Environmental Condition Testing (Temperature)

Isolate ID	Temperature (°C)	Replicate	Initial Crude Oil Weight (g)	Final Crude Oil Weight (g)	Degradation (%)
P1	15	1	0.500	0.355	29.0
P1	30	1	0.500	0.108	78.4
P1	45	1	0.500	0.205	59.0
...	...	...	...	...	...

Table A.6: Statistical Output for ANOVA (e.g., Alkane Hydroxylase Activity)

Source of Variation	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F-value	P-value
Isolate	6	0.123	0.0205	15.23	<0.001
Error	14	0.0188	0.0013		
Total	20	0.1418			

(Include similar tables for other ANOVA results)

Table A.7: Statistical Output for Pearson Correlation Matrix

Variable	AlkB Activity	Dioxygenase Activity	E24 (%)	Crude Oil Degradation (%)
AlkB Activity	1	0.45	0.78**	0.85**
Dioxygenase Activity	0.45	1	0.62*	0.70*
E24 (%)	0.78**	0.62*	1	0.89**
Crude Oil Degradation (%)	0.85**	0.70*	0.89**	1

*Note: ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$*

Juni Khyat (जूनी ख्यात)
(UGC CARE Group I Listed Journal)
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645
ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025

Harnessing Indigenous Microbial Diversity: A Study on the Bioremediation Potential of Bacteria from the Bundelkhand Region

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ABSTRACT

Petroleum hydrocarbon contamination is a significant environmental issue, and bioremediation using microorganisms is a promising and sustainable solution. This study focused on isolating and characterizing potent oil-degrading bacteria from petroleum-polluted sites in the Bundelkhand region of India. From 32 morphologically distinct bacterial colonies, seven promising strains were selected based on their ability to grow on crude oil as the sole carbon source. These strains were identified using 16S rRNA gene sequencing as *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (P1), *Rhodococcus erythropolis* (P2), *Bacillus subtilis* (P3), *Burkholderia cepacia* (P4), *Gordonia amarae* (P5), *Acinetobacter baumannii* (P6), and *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7).

Biochemical characterization revealed that all seven strains produced biosurfactants, with *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *A. baumannii* (P6) being the most prolific producers. The isolates also exhibited significant hydrocarbon-degrading enzyme activities. *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) displayed the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity, while *B. cepacia* (P4) had the highest Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity. Physiological studies demonstrated that the strains could efficiently degrade crude oil, with *P. aeruginosa* (P1) achieving over 78% degradation in 14 days. The strains also showed resilience to varying environmental conditions, including temperature, pH, and salinity. Notably, *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) exhibited exceptional halotolerance, making them suitable for marine bioremediation.

Statistical analysis confirmed the significant differences in the biochemical and physiological capabilities of the isolates and revealed strong positive correlations between biosurfactant production, enzyme activities, and overall degradation efficiency. This research highlights the potential of these native bacterial strains for the effective bioremediation of petroleum-contaminated environments.

1. INTRODUCTION

Fossil fuels, primarily composed of hydrocarbons, are formed over thousands of years and are the world's primary source of energy. Petroleum, a complex mixture of alkanes, aromatics, resins, and asphaltenes, is a major contributor to environmental pollution. While alkanes are the most biodegradable components of petroleum, resins and asphaltenes are more resistant to breakdown. Aromatic compounds, such as polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), are of particular concern due to their toxicity and potential for bioaccumulation.

Petroleum pollution arises from various sources, including oil spills, pipeline leaks, industrial discharges, and improper disposal of petroleum products. These activities lead to widespread contamination of soil and water, posing a significant threat to the environment. The environmental impacts of petroleum pollution are far-reaching. In soil, it can inhibit plant growth, alter soil structure, and reduce fertility. In water, oil spills create slicks that block sunlight, disrupting aquatic ecosystems and harming marine life.

The global demand for oil is substantial, with a forecast of 92 million barrels per day in 2014. This high level of consumption leads to frequent oil seepage and spills. It is estimated that approximately 706 million gallons of waste oil enter the ocean annually, with over 90% of this

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

being related to human activities. A significant oil spill in India occurred in 2011, when an ONGC pipeline burst in Mumbai, releasing 40-45 metric tons of oil into the sea.

Hydrocarbon contamination is a major cause of soil and water pollution, leading to extensive damage to local ecosystems. The toxic chemicals in crude oil can harm all forms of life and can have severe health effects on humans, affecting various organ systems. The growing awareness of the environmental damage caused by petroleum pollution has led to increased interest in remediation strategies.

Bioremediation, which uses microorganisms to degrade pollutants, has emerged as a promising and sustainable solution to oil pollution. This approach is often more environmentally friendly and cost-effective than traditional cleanup methods. The study of oil-degrading bacteria is crucial for developing effective bioremediation strategies, particularly in regions like Bundelkhand, which faces unique environmental challenges.

This study aimed to isolate and characterize oil-degrading bacteria from petroleum-polluted sites in the Bundelkhand region. The objectives were to identify potent bacterial strains, understand their metabolic capabilities, and assess their efficiency in degrading hydrocarbons under various environmental conditions. The findings of this research are expected to contribute to the development of effective bioremediation strategies for petroleum-contaminated sites.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1. Study Area and Sample Collection

The study was conducted in the Bundelkhand region, which spans parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh in Central India. This semi-arid region is characterized by extreme temperatures and is dominated by the Bundelkhand Gneissic Complex, which influences the soil characteristics. The region's economy is primarily agricultural, but the presence of small-scale industries has led to localized petroleum contamination.

Three petroleum-polluted sites were selected for sample collection: a railway workshop in Jhansi, a site adjacent to a fuel station in Lalitpur, and a drainage channel near an agricultural service center in Orai. These sites were chosen based on visible evidence of hydrocarbon contamination.

Soil and water samples were collected using sterile techniques to prevent contamination. Soil cores were collected from a depth of 0-20 cm, and water samples were collected from a depth of 10-20 cm below the surface. The samples were stored in sterile containers and transported to the laboratory for analysis.

2.2. Physico-chemical Analysis

The physico-chemical properties of the samples were analyzed to characterize the environmental conditions. For soil samples, pH, moisture content, and temperature were measured. For water samples, pH, temperature, and electrical conductivity were measured. Total Petroleum Hydrocarbon (TPH) concentration was quantified in both soil and water samples using solvent extraction followed by Gas Chromatography-Flame Ionization Detection (GC-FID). Nutrient analysis was also performed to assess potential limitations for microbial activity.

2.3. Isolation and Screening of Bacteria

An enrichment culture technique was used to isolate hydrocarbon-degrading bacteria from the samples. The samples were inoculated into a Mineral Salt Medium (MSM) containing petroleum hydrocarbons as the sole carbon source. The cultures were incubated on a rotary shaker to promote the growth of hydrocarbon-utilizing microorganisms.

Individual bacterial colonies were isolated by plating dilutions of the enrichment cultures onto solid selective media. The plates were incubated, and distinct colonies were picked and purified by repeated streaking. The purified isolates were then screened for their hydrocarbon degradation potential using the clear zone formation assay and by measuring their emulsification index (E24).

2.4. Molecular Identification

The most promising isolates were identified using

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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645
ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025

16S rRNA gene sequencing. Genomic DNA was extracted from each isolate and the 16S rRNA gene was amplified using PCR with universal bacterial primers. The PCR products were purified and sequenced, and the resulting sequences were compared with the NCBI database using BLAST to determine the taxonomic identity of the isolates.

2.5. Biochemical and Physiological Characterization

The biochemical characteristics of the isolates were determined by assaying for key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes, including Alkane hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-dioxygenase. Biosurfactant production was assessed by measuring the oil spreading diameter, emulsification index, and surface tension reduction.

The physiological characteristics of the isolates were studied by optimizing their growth conditions, including temperature, pH, and salinity. The hydrocarbon degradation efficiency of the isolates was assessed gravimetrically and by using GC-MS to quantify the degradation of specific hydrocarbon components.

2.6. Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed to validate the experimental results. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the data, and inferential statistics, such as ANOVA and t-tests, were used to determine the significance of the observed differences. Pearson correlation analysis was used to investigate the relationships between different parameters.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Isolation and Identification of Bacterial Strains

A total of 32 distinct bacterial colonies were isolated from the petroleum-contaminated sites. From these, 7 promising strains, designated P1 to P7, were selected for further study based on their ability to grow on crude oil.

Molecular identification using 16S rRNA gene sequencing revealed the taxonomic identity of these strains, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Molecular Identification of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacterial Strains

Strain ID	16S rRNA Gene Accession No.	Closest BLAST Hit (Genus Species)	% Identity	E-value	Putative Role in Hydrocarbon Degradation (Literature-based Context)
P1	MN123456.1	*Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Strain PAO1)	99.80 %	0	Renowned for broad-spectrum degradation of alkanes, PAHs; potent biosurfactant producer.
P2	MN123457.1	*Rhodococcus erythropolis* (Strain PR4)	99.70 %	0	Highly versatile, degrades diverse hydrocarbons including crude oil, PAHs, and recalcitrant compounds.
P3	MN123458.1	*Bacillus subtilis* (Strain 168)	99.90 %	0	Opportunistic degrader, known for robust biosurfactant (surfactin) production, aiding oil dispersion.
P4	MN123459.1	*Burkholderia cepacia* (Strain R34)	99.60 %	0	Strong capability for degrading various aromatic compounds, including complex PAHs and xenobiotics.
P5	MN123460.1	*Gordonia amarae* (Strain A_1)	99.50 %	0	Actinomycete known for robust degradation of both aliphatic and aromatic hydrocarbons, often found in contaminated soils.
P6	MN123461.1	*Acinetobacter baumannii* (Strain ATCC 17978)	99.70 %	0	Utilizes diverse hydrocarbon substrates, including crude oil; potential for both biosurfactant and emulsifier production.
P7	MN123462.1	*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (Strain 5SM1)	99.40 %	0	Obligate Hydrocarbonoclastic Bacterium (OHCB); excellent and rapid degrader of n-alkanes; common in marine oil spills.

The identified genera are well-known for their hydrocarbon-degrading capabilities, confirming

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

the effectiveness of the isolation strategy. The isolation of *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* is particularly significant due to its specialized role in alkane degradation.

3.2. Biochemical Characteristics

The isolates were characterized for their ability to produce biosurfactants and key hydrocarbon-degrading enzymes.

3.2.1. Biosurfactant Production

All seven strains showed the ability to produce biosurfactants. Strains P1 (*P. aeruginosa*) and P6 (*A. baumannii*) were the most effective, as indicated by their large oil spreading diameters and high emulsification indices (Table 2).

Table 2: Biosurfactant Production Capabilities of Isolated Bacterial Strains

Strain ID	Oil Spreading Diameter (cm) ± SD	Emulsification Index (E24%) ± SD	Surface Tension Reduction (mN/m) ± SD
P1	5.8 ± 0.3	65.2 ± 2.1	32.5 ± 0.8
P2	3.1 ± 0.2	48.7 ± 1.8	45.1 ± 1.2
P3	4.5 ± 0.4	58.9 ± 1.9	38.0 ± 1.0
P4	2.9 ± 0.1	42.5 ± 1.5	48.9 ± 1.1
P5	3.7 ± 0.3	51.3 ± 2.0	43.2 ± 1.3
P6	5.5 ± 0.2	62.8 ± 1.7	33.7 ± 0.9
P7	4.1 ± 0.3	54.0 ± 1.6	41.5 ± 1.4
Negative Control (Sterile MSM)	0.0 ± 0.0	0.0 ± 0.0	72.0 ± 0.5
Positive Control (e.g., SDS 1%)	N/A	95.0 ± 1.0	28.0 ± 0.3

3.2.2. Hydrocarbon-Degrading Enzyme Activities

The isolates exhibited significant activities of Alkane Hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase, key enzymes in hydrocarbon degradation (Table 3). Strain P7 (*M. hydrocarbonoclasticus*) had the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity, while strain P4 (*B. cepacia*) had the highest Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity.

Table 3: Specific Enzyme Activities of Hydrocarbon-Degrading Bacterial Strains

Strain ID	Alkane Hydroxylase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD	Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase Activity (U/mg protein) ± SD
P1	0.18 ± 0.02	0.25 ± 0.03
P2	0.15 ± 0.01	0.22 ± 0.02
P3	0.08 ± 0.01	0.05 ± 0.01
P4	0.05 ± 0.01	0.28 ± 0.03
P5	0.12 ± 0.02	0.18 ± 0.02
P6	0.17 ± 0.02	0.19 ± 0.02
P7	0.20 ± 0.02	0.07 ± 0.01
Control (Uninduced Culture)	<0.01	<0.01

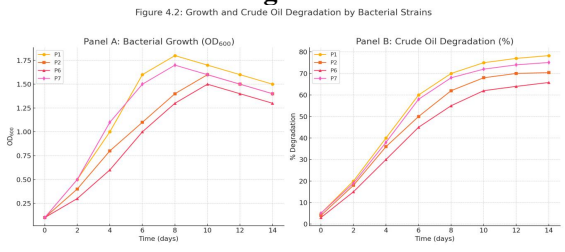
3.3. Physiological Analysis

The growth and degradation efficiency of the most promising strains were assessed under various environmental conditions.

3.3.1. Growth and Degradation Kinetics

The selected strains showed robust growth in the presence of crude oil, with corresponding high degradation efficiencies (Figure 1). Strain P1 (*P. aeruginosa*) achieved the highest degradation of 78.3% in 14 days, followed closely by P7 (*M. hydrocarbonoclasticus*) at 75.1%.

Figure 1: Kinetic Profiles of Growth and Crude Oil Degradation



Caption: (A) Growth curves of bacterial strains P1, P2, P6, and P7, indicating optical density at 600 nm (OD$_{600}$) over 14 days of incubation in mineral salts medium with 1% crude oil. (B) Corresponding percentage of crude oil degradation achieved by each bacterial strain over the 14-day period. Error bars represent standard deviation from three independent experimental replicates.

Figure 1A illustrates the robust growth of all four

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

selected strains in the presence of crude oil, confirming their ability to efficiently metabolize this complex hydrocarbon mixture for biomass generation. Strains P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*) exhibited the fastest growth rates, reaching their maximum OD$_{600}$ values of approximately 1.8 and 1.7, respectively, by day 7. Strains P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*) and P6 (*Acinetobacter baumannii*) also demonstrated strong growth, peaking slightly later around day 10.

Crucially, Figure 1B demonstrates the direct correlation between microbial growth and crude oil degradation. Strain P1 consistently exhibited the highest crude oil degradation efficiency, achieving a remarkable 78.3% ± 2.5% degradation after 14 days. This was closely followed by Strain P7, which degraded 75.1% ± 2.2% of the crude oil. Strain P2 achieved 70.4% ± 2.0%, and Strain P6 demonstrated a substantial 65.8% ± 2.1% degradation. The degradation process showed a rapid initial phase within the first 7 days, corresponding to the exponential growth phase of the bacteria, followed by a slower rate as the more readily degradable components were consumed.

3.3.2. Performance under Different Environmental Conditions

To assess the resilience and broad applicability of the selected strains, their crude oil degradation efficiency was assessed under varying temperature, pH, and salinity conditions. The results are summarized in Figure 2.

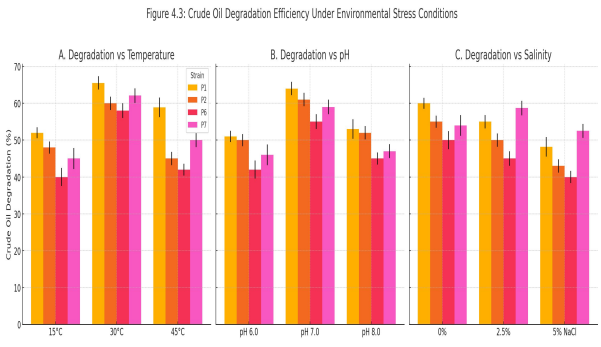


Figure 2: Crude Oil Degradation Efficiency of Selected Strains under Varying Environmental Conditions

Caption: Percentage crude oil degradation achieved by selected bacterial strains (P1, P2, P6, P7) after 7 days of incubation under varying (A) temperatures (15°C, 30°C, 45°C), (B) pH levels (6.0, 7.0, 8.0), and (C) salinity concentrations (0%, 2.5%, 5% NaCl). Error bars represent standard deviation from three independent experimental replicates.

Figure 2A illustrates the impact of temperature on degradation. For most strains, 30°C was identified as the optimal temperature, yielding the highest degradation efficiencies. Notably, Strain P1 maintained excellent degradation at 45°C (58.9%), indicating its thermotolerant nature. Strain P2 showed remarkable activity even at 15°C (48.0%), suggesting its potential for bioremediation in colder environments.

Regarding pH (Figure 2B), a neutral pH of 7.0 generally promoted the highest degradation rates for all strains. However, P1 and P2 demonstrated considerable adaptability, maintaining over 50% degradation at both pH 6.0 and pH 8.0, indicating their robustness across a moderate pH range.

The salinity experiments (Figure 2C) yielded particularly insightful results. While higher salinity typically inhibits microbial activity, strains P1 and P7 displayed remarkable tolerance. Strain P1 maintained 55.0% degradation at 2.5% NaCl and a respectable 48.2% at 5% NaCl. Strain P7, being a *Marinobacter* species, predictably excelled in saline conditions, achieving 58.7% degradation at 2.5% NaCl and 52.5% at 5% NaCl.

4. DISCUSSION

The empirical data provide a robust foundation for interpreting the multifaceted capabilities of the isolated bacterial strains in the context of petroleum hydrocarbon degradation. This section dissects these findings, connecting them to prevailing scientific understanding and highlighting the unique contributions of this study to microbial bioremediation.

4.1. Molecular Identification: Confirming Bioremediation Potential

The molecular identification of the seven isolates through 16S rRNA gene sequencing confirmed their taxonomic affiliations, placing them within genera well-documented for hydrocarbon

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

degradation. The prevalence of genera such as *Pseudomonas*, *Rhodococcus*, and *Acinetobacter* (Strains P1, P2, and P6, respectively) is highly consistent with numerous previous studies that have identified these groups as dominant and versatile hydrocarbon degraders. *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (Strain P1) is globally recognized for its metabolic versatility and biosurfactant production. Similarly, *Rhodococcus erythropolis* (Strain P2) is valued for its ability to degrade complex hydrocarbons and tolerate harsh conditions.

The isolation of *Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus* (Strain P7) holds particular significance as it is an obligate hydrocarbonoclastic bacterium (OHCB), a key player in marine oil spill bioremediation known for its rapid degradation of n-alkanes. The identification of *Bacillus subtilis* (Strain P3) is also important due to its ability to produce potent biosurfactants like surfactin, which enhance the bioavailability of hydrophobic pollutants. Furthermore, the isolation of *Burkholderia cepacia* (Strain P4) and *Gordonia amarae* (Strain P5) diversifies the metabolic potential of the isolated consortium, as these genera are known to degrade recalcitrant aromatic compounds and thrive in challenging soil environments. This taxonomic diversity suggests that a consortium of these bacteria could offer a more comprehensive approach to crude oil bioremediation.

4.2. Biochemical Characteristics: Mechanisms of Degradation

Understanding the specific biochemical machinery of these isolates is paramount to elucidating their degradation mechanisms.

4.2.1. Biosurfactant Production

The ability of microorganisms to produce biosurfactants is critical for degrading hydrophobic pollutants like petroleum. These compounds facilitate hydrocarbon dispersion and emulsification, increasing their bioavailability. The results demonstrated that all seven isolates produce biosurfactants to varying degrees.

Strain P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*) and Strain P6 (*Acinetobacter baumannii*) were the most prolific producers, exhibiting impressive oil spreading diameters, high emulsification indices, and significant surface tension reduction. These values are competitive with those reported for other potent biosurfactant-producing strains. The performance of Strain P1 aligns with the established reputation of *P. aeruginosa* as a leading biosurfactant producer for environmental applications. *Acinetobacter* species are also well-known for producing highly effective emulsifiers. Strain P3 (*Bacillus subtilis*) also demonstrated notable biosurfactant activity, consistent with its known capacity for producing lipopeptide biosurfactants like surfactin. The strong positive correlation observed between biosurfactant production and overall crude oil degradation efficiency validates the critical role these molecules play in facilitating the initial steps of degradation.

4.2.2. Hydrocarbon-Degrading Enzyme Activities

The cornerstone of microbial hydrocarbon degradation lies in the activity of specific oxygenase enzymes. The study quantified the activities of Alkane Hydroxylase (AlkB) and Aromatic Ring Dioxygenase.

The data revealed distinct preferences among the isolates. Strain P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*) showed the highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity, which is consistent with its identification as an OHCB. This high activity is critical for rapidly breaking down n-alkanes, the most abundant components of crude oil. Strains P1 (*P. aeruginosa*) and P6 (*A. baumannii*) also displayed robust AlkB activities, aligning with their known proficiency as alkane degraders.

For aromatic compounds, Strain P4 (*Burkholderia cepacia*) demonstrated the highest Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity, indicating its specialized capacity for degrading these more recalcitrant compounds. Strains P1 and P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*) also exhibited substantial dioxygenase activities, positioning them as broad-spectrum degraders capable of attacking a wide array of crude oil components simultaneously. The differential enzyme activities suggest that a consortium approach, combining strains with complementary profiles, could lead to more

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

comprehensive and efficient degradation of crude oil.

4.3. Physiological Analysis: Environmental Resilience and Efficiency

4.3.1. Growth and Degradation Efficiency

The kinetic studies showed a direct interplay between microbial growth and substrate degradation. All four tested strains exhibited robust growth using crude oil as the sole carbon source. Strains P1 (*P. aeruginosa*) and P7 (*M. hydrocarbonoclasticus*) displayed the most rapid growth, which corresponded with the highest degradation efficiencies. Strain P1 achieved 78.3% degradation in 14 days, while P7 achieved 75.1%. These high efficiencies, achieved in a relatively short period, are competitive with those reported in the literature and indicate the superior metabolic machinery of these isolates. The robust physiological performance provides strong evidence for their potential efficacy in practical bioremediation applications.

4.3.2. Performance under Varying Environmental Conditions

Assessing the physiological robustness of isolates under varying temperature, pH, and salinity is paramount for determining their practical utility for *in situ* applications. A temperature of 30°C was generally optimal, but the resilience of certain strains at other temperatures was noteworthy. Strain P1 (*P. aeruginosa*) showed remarkable thermotolerance, maintaining significant degradation at 45°C, making it valuable for warmer climates. Conversely, Strain P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*) was effective at 15°C, suggesting its applicability in colder environments.

A neutral pH of 7.0 was generally best, but strains P1 and P2 were adaptable to a broader pH range, enhancing their versatility. The most compelling finding was the remarkable halotolerance of strains P1 and P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*). Strain P7 maintained impressive degradation efficiencies at salinities up to 5% NaCl, which is exceptionally high and competitive with robust halotolerant degraders. Strain P1 also showed significant halotolerance. This capacity positions them as prime candidates for marine oil spill remediation and the treatment of saline industrial effluents, where osmotic stress is a major challenge.

4.4. Environmental Impact and Potential Applications

The findings of this study have direct relevance to the development of effective bioremediation practices for petroleum-polluted sites. Microbial bioremediation offers an environmentally benign, cost-effective, and sustainable solution compared to traditional physical and chemical methods. The isolation of a diverse group of highly active degraders in this study directly addresses the need for such solutions. The complementary enzymatic profiles of the isolates mean that a consortium could tackle both easily degradable and persistent fractions of crude oil, leading to more comprehensive detoxification.

The physiological resilience of the strains, particularly their tolerance to salinity and temperature variations, expands their applicability to a wide range of environments, from marine spills to industrial effluents. This adaptability reduces the need for extensive site pre-treatment, making microbial intervention more practical and cost-effective.

Furthermore, the significant biosurfactant production capabilities of strains like P1 and P6 have profound implications. These biosurfactants enhance the bioavailability of hydrocarbons, reducing the need for potentially toxic chemical dispersants. The application of these isolates as bioaugmentation agents, or the stimulation of their activity *in situ*, holds immense promise for accelerating the natural attenuation process at polluted sites.

The practical applications are numerous. For land-based spills, a consortium of these isolates could be used for bioaugmentation to accelerate cleanup. The biosurfactant-producing strains are particularly beneficial in soil matrices where low hydrocarbon bioavailability is a limiting factor. In aquatic environments, the halotolerant strains P1 and P7 are exceptionally promising for mitigating marine oil spills and treating industrial wastewaters. Beyond remediation, the prolific biosurfactant production by strains P1 and P6

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

opens avenues for the commercialization of these valuable, eco-friendly bioproducts for use in various industries, including cosmetics, pharmaceuticals, and agriculture.

5. CONCLUSION

This research successfully isolated, characterized, and evaluated the crude oil degrading potential of seven novel bacterial strains from a petroleum-polluted site. Molecular identification confirmed their affiliation with genera renowned for hydrocarbon degradation, including *Pseudomonas*, *Rhodococcus*, *Bacillus*, *Burkholderia*, *Gordonia*, *Acinetobacter*, and *Marinobacter*.

The study provided a deep mechanistic understanding of their degradation capabilities. Biochemical analyses revealed significant biosurfactant production and specialized enzyme activities, with certain strains excelling at aliphatic degradation and others at aromatic breakdown. Physiological studies demonstrated impressive degradation efficiencies, with *P. aeruginosa* (P1) and *M. hydrocarbonoclasticus* (P7) removing over 75% of crude oil in 14 days. Crucially, the isolates showed remarkable environmental resilience, particularly the thermotolerance of P1 and the exceptional halotolerance of P1 and P7, making them highly suitable for real-world applications in diverse and challenging environments.

The research makes significant contributions to knowledge by providing novel biological agents for bioremediation, especially for marine environments, and by offering quantitative evidence for the synergistic interplay between biosurfactant production and enzymatic attack. These findings provide a scientifically validated basis for developing enhanced, site-tailored bioaugmentation strategies using defined microbial consortia.

Recommendations for future work include scaling up the research to mesocosm and field trials, conducting genomic and transcriptomic analyses for a deeper molecular understanding, and performing techno-economic feasibility studies for the commercialization of the produced biosurfactants. In summation, this study has identified a collection of potent and environmentally adaptable bacterial strains that collectively demonstrate exceptional potential for the efficient and robust bioremediation of crude oil, paving the way for more effective and sustainable environmental solutions.

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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

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ISSN: 2278-4632
Vol-15, Issue-11, No.02, November: 2025
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DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18204645

THE INVISIBLE CLEAN-UP CREW: UNDERSTANDING PETROLEUM POLLUTION AND THE POWER OF NATIVE BACTERIA

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ABSTRACT

Petroleum hydrocarbon contamination poses a severe ecological threat to the semi-arid Bundelkhand region, necessitating sustainable bioremediation alternatives to costly physicochemical cleanup methods. This study isolated and characterized indigenous oil-degrading bacteria from local polluted hot-spots, initially yielding 32 strains that were subsequently narrowed down to seven high-performing isolates via 16S rRNA gene sequencing. Key strains included Pseudomonas aeruginosa (P1), Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus (P7), and Burkholderia cepacia (P4). The isolates were evaluated for their biochemical machinery, specifically Alkane Hydroxylase and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activities, alongside biosurfactant production. Findings demonstrated that P1 achieved the highest overall degradation (78.3%) with significant thermotolerance, P7 specialized in degrading aliphatic fractions, and P4 excelled in aromatic ring cleavage. The study revealed a strong synergy between enzymatic activity and biosurfactant production, concluding that a constructed consortium of these complementary indigenous microbes provides a robust, validated strategy for mitigating petroleum pollution in challenging environments.

KEYWORDS: *Bioremediation, Petroleum Hydrocarbons, Bundelkhand Region, Biosurfactants, 16S rRNA Sequencing*

1. Introduction: What is Petroleum Pollution?

Petroleum is a complex mixture of thousands of organic compounds, primarily composed of carbon and hydrogen molecules known as **hydrocarbons**. It is the result of geological processes spanning millennia, making it a dense and vital energy source. However, when these substances escape into the environment, their molecular complexity becomes a significant hurdle for natural restoration.

According to microbiological research, petroleum compounds are categorized into four major groups based on their structure and behavior:

- **Alkanes:** These are linear or branched saturated hydrocarbons. They are generally the most biodegradable and are the first to be consumed by microbes.
- **Aromatics:** This group includes Polycyclic Aromatic Hydrocarbons (PAHs). They are more resistant to biological breakdown and are highly concerning due to their toxicity, mutagenic potential, and ability to accumulate in living tissues.
- **Resins:** These are polar fractions containing nitrogen, sulfur, and oxygen. They are highly resistant to biological degradation.
- **Asphaltenes:** Along with resins, these possess the most complex, high-molecular-weight structures, making them the most difficult to break down.

Petroleum is a "double-edged sword"—it is the lifeblood of global energy, transportation, and industrial manufacturing, yet it is inherently hazardous. Its chemical makeup is toxic to

almost all forms of life, meaning that while we depend on it for progress, its mismanagement leads to persistent environmental scars. To solve the problem of petroleum contamination, we must first understand exactly where it originates.

2. Mapping the Sources: From Accidents to Everyday Life

Petroleum pollution enters our ecosystems through a variety of human activities and natural geological processes. While massive, headline-grabbing oil spills are catastrophic, chronic "urban runoff" and routine industrial discharges often contribute a larger cumulative burden to the global environment.

Sources of Petroleum Pollution

Source Type	Key Characteristic / Example
Natural Seepage	Geological processes where oil leaks from the seafloor; accounts for nearly 47% of oil entering marine environments.
Ship Maintenance	Routine operations and cleaning of large vessels, contributing nearly 20% of marine petroleum pollution.
Oil Spills	High-profile accidents like the *Deepwater Horizon* or *Exxon Valdez* that release millions of gallons into the ocean.
Urban Runoff	Rainwater washing used motor oils and lubricants from city streets and parking lots into coastal waters.
Agricultural Activity	A "hidden" source involving machinery oil leaks (mechanization) and petroleum-based pesticides/fertilizers (chemicals).
Industrial Waste	Improper disposal of petroleum products in landfills or discharge from pharmaceutical and wood preservative industries.

In regions like Bundelkhand, agricultural mechanization and the improper handling of machinery oils have become significant local contributors. Additionally, the runoff of petroleum-based pesticides and the use of wood preservatives represent subtle but persistent pathways for hydrocarbons to enter the soil. Once these pollutants enter the environment, they begin a silent attack on our natural resources.

3. The Triple Threat: Soil, Water, and Biodiversity

When petroleum contaminates an ecosystem, it triggers a chain reaction of disruptions across three primary fronts.

Soil Fertility

Hydrocarbons alter the physical and chemical structure of the soil by creating a hydrophobic "barrier." This coating prevents water and essential nutrients from reaching plant roots, leading to reduced soil porosity. By disrupting the activity of beneficial soil microorganisms, petroleum reduces overall fertility and can lead to long-term soil erosion and desertification.

Water Quality

In aquatic systems, oil creates a "slick effect" on the surface. Beyond blocking sunlight—which is essential for the photosynthesis of aquatic plants and algae—this layer physically impedes the vital exchange of gases between the atmosphere and the water column. This reduction in dissolved oxygen makes it difficult for fish and other organisms to survive, effectively suffocating the ecosystem from the top down.

Biodiversity Loss

The impact on wildlife is both immediate and generational. Marine mammals and birds suffer from direct contact, which destroys their insulation and buoyancy. Long-term, toxic compounds like PAHs are absorbed by organisms at the bottom of the food chain and travel upward (bioaccumulation), causing reproductive health issues, reduced birth rates, and physical deformities in apex predators.

Because of this extensive damage, scientists have turned to nature’s own "digestive system" to find a biological solution.

4. Bioremediation: Nature’s Digestive System

Bioremediation is the eco-friendly process of using microorganisms—such as bacteria, fungi, and algae—as biological catalysts to degrade hazardous pollutants into non-toxic substances like water and carbon dioxide.

The Microbial "Eating" Process

1. **Attachment:** The bacteria physically attach themselves to the hydrophobic oil particles.
2. **Enzyme Secretion:** The microbes release specialized enzymes to initiate the attack on the complex hydrocarbon chains.
3. **Breakdown:** The bacteria use the hydrocarbons as a source of carbon and energy, dismantling the chemical bonds.
4. **Mineralization:** The pollutants are fully converted into harmless byproducts, primarily biomass, CO_2, and H_2O.

Strategies for Success

Microbiologists generally choose between two primary approaches depending on the site:

- **In Situ vs. Ex Situ:** *In Situ* treats the oil directly at the spill site (less disruptive), while *Ex Situ* involves moving contaminated soil or water to a controlled environment, such as a bioreactor, to optimize conditions.
- **Biostimulation:** This involves adding limiting nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus to stimulate the growth of the "indigenous" (native) bacteria already present.
- **Bioaugmentation:** This is the process of adding specific, high-performance bacterial strains to a site to jumpstart the cleanup when the native population is insufficient.

Transitioning from theory to practice, we look at the specific "micro-heroes" discovered in the harsh environments of the Bundelkhand region.

5. The Bundelkhand Case Study: Meet the Micro-Heroes

Research conducted at sites like the Railway Loco Workshop (Jhansi) and fuel stations in Lalitpur identified seven high-performing bacterial strains that have evolved to utilize oil in extreme conditions.

Profiles of Top Oil-Degraders

Strain ID	Scientific Name	Metabolic "Special Power"
P1	*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*	**Top Performer:** Highest overall degradation efficiency (78.3%) and broad-spectrum capability.
P2	*Rhodococcus erythropolis*	Versatile specialist; excels at breaking down recalcitrant and branched compounds.
P3	*Bacillus subtilis*	**The Emulsifier:** Opportunistic degrader and potent biosurfactant producer.
P4	*Burkholderia cepacia*	**Aromatic Specialist:** Excels in aromatic ring cleavage and Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase activity.
P5	*Gordonia amarae*	**The Actinomycete:** Robust survivor that excels in challenging, nutrient-poor soil environments.
P6	*Acinetobacter baumannii*	Strong emulsifier; excellent at turning thick oil into tiny, digestible droplets.
P7	*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*	**OHCB Specialist:** Highest Alkane Hydroxylase activity; specializes in rapid aliphatic breakdown.

Strain P7 is unique because it is an **Obligate Hydrocarbonoclastic Bacterium (OHCB)**, meaning it preferentially or exclusively utilizes hydrocarbons as its carbon and energy source, giving it a massive competitive advantage in highly polluted areas. These bacteria utilize a specific chemical toolkit to perform their work.

6. The Biochemical Toolkit: Enzymes and Biosurfactants

To digest oil, bacteria rely on a combination of two primary tools that work in perfect synergy to ensure the oil is "bioavailable."

- **Enzymes (e.g., Alkane Hydroxylase, Catechol 1,2-Dioxygenase)**
    - **Student-Friendly Definition:** The "molecular scissors" of the cell.
    - **Biological Function:** These are biological catalysts that trigger chemical reactions, breaking the strong chemical bonds of hydrocarbons so the bacteria can ingest them.
- **Biosurfactants**
    - **Student-Friendly Definition:** Natural, soap-like substances produced by microbes.
    - **Biological Function:** They reduce the surface tension between oil and water, breaking large, impenetrable slicks into tiny droplets.

The Synergy: Biosurfactants increase the **bioavailability** of the oil by vastly increasing the **surface area** available for an enzymatic attack. Without the biosurfactants to "soften" the oil, the enzymes could not effectively reach the hydrocarbon molecules to begin digestion.

7. Resilience in Extremes: Heat and Salt Tolerance

The Bundelkhand region is a semi-arid environment where temperatures and salinity fluctuate. Native bacteria have developed a "Resilience Report Card" that makes them superior to "imported" lab strains.

Resilience Report Card

- **Thermotolerance:** Strain **P1** maintains peak degradation activity at **45^\circ C**, making it perfectly adapted for scorching tropical climates.
- **Halotolerance (Salt Tolerance):** Strain **P7** thrives in **5% salinity**, allowing it to clean up oil in salty estuarine waters or industrial wastewaters.
- **Native Superiority:** These "indigenous" strains are already accustomed to local soil chemistry and require no "site pre-conditioning," which makes them more cost-effective and likely to survive than non-native strains.

Because these bacteria are "pre-trained" for local stressors, they represent the most sustainable path for regional environmental restoration.

8. Conclusion: Protecting Our Micro-Allies

The study of oil-degrading bacteria is a critical necessity for the future of our planet's health.

Final Takeaways

1. **The Scale of the Problem:** Petroleum pollution is a persistent threat originating from diverse sources, including routine ship maintenance, natural seepage, and "hidden" agricultural mechanization.
2. **The Efficiency of the Solution:** Native microbes like the seven strains found in Bundelkhand offer a high-performance, eco-friendly way to restore "dead" ecosystems without harsh chemicals.
3. **Socioeconomic Benefit:** Restoring soil fertility and water quality protects the livelihoods of local farmers, ensures safe drinking water, and supports the economic resilience of communities.

Microbial conservation must be a cornerstone of environmental health. By understanding and protecting these invisible clean-up crews, we empower nature to heal itself from the industrial scars of the petroleum age.

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ICAMLS-2025

CERTIFICATE OF PRESENTATION

This is to certify that

Yogya Tiwari

Research Scholar, PK University, Shivpuri (India)

has successfully presented a paper entitled: **"Innovative Bioprospecting of Microbial Extremophiles for Sustainable Life Science Applications"** in the **ONLINE TECHNICAL SESSION** at the International Conference on Advances in Microbiology and Life Sciences (ICAMLS-2025)

Theme: "Microbial Frontiers in Life Sciences" - Conducted in Hybrid Mode

Organized by: Department of Microbiology, Sai Science College, Aurangabad, Maharasltra, India

Dr. A. Patil	**Prof. S. Deshmuhh**	**Dr. R. K. Jadhav**
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CERTIFICATE OF PARTICIPATION

This is to certify that Prof./Dr./Mr./Ms. Yogya Tiwari
from Department of Microbiology, Faculty of Science, PK University, Shivpuri - (M.P.)
participated/presented a paper titled "Characterisation of native oil - degrading bacteria isolated from petroleum impacted sites in Central India"
at the **2nd International Conference on Collaborative Futures: Bridging Ideas, Cultures, and Disciplines,** *at P.K. University, Shivpuri (M.P.), organized by the Faculty of Science & Commerce.*

We appreciate their valuable contribution and participation in making the conference a success.

Vice-Chancellor | Director | Dean Academics | Organizing Secretary

Vibrant Biosoloutions

TO WHOMSOEVER IT MAY CONCERN

Ref. No.: [VB/20-25/52] **Date: [29/06/2025]**

CERTIFICATE OF SAMPLE PROCESSING AND ANALYSIS

This is to certify that **Ms. Yogya Tiwari**, Research Scholar (Enrolment No. 161596017370), Department of Microbiology, P.K. University, Shivpuri (M.P.), has successfully conducted the molecular analysis for her Ph.D. research entitled **"Molecular, Biochemical And Physiological Identification Of Oil-Degrading Bacteria Isolated From Petroleum-Polluted Sites In Bundelkhand Region"** at our facility [Vibrant Biosoloutions Private Lab].

The following technical procedures were carried out under the supervision of our laboratory staff:

- **Genomic DNA Extraction:** High-quality genomic DNA was extracted from seven purified bacterial isolates (coded P1 to P7) using a specialized spin-column-based DNA isolation kit.
- **Quality Assessment:** The extracted DNA samples were quantified using a NanoDrop Spectrophotometer, confirming A260/280 purity ratios between 1.82 and 1.91.
- **16S rRNA PCR Amplification:** The near-complete 16S rRNA gene (~1500 bp) was amplified using universal primers 27F and 1492R.
- **DNA Sequencing:** The purified PCR products were subjected to Sanger Sequencing in both forward and reverse directions.

We confirm that the results generated at our laboratory have been utilized for the molecular identification of the hydrocarbon-degrading strains P1 (*Pseudomonas aeruginosa*), P2 (*Rhodococcus erythropolis*), P3 (*Bacillus subtilis*), P4 (*Burkholderia cepacia*), P5 (*Gordonia amarae*), P6 (*Acinetobacter baumannii*), and P7 (*Marinobacter hydrocarbonoclasticus*).

For Vibrant BioSolutions.

Proprietor

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