Report for end-semester evaluation of CE 498 course

Crack Behavior of High Plastic Soil: A Comparative Study with and without Biopolymer Reinforcement

Submitted By

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CERTIFICATE

It is certified that the work contained in the project report entitled "**Crack Behavior of High Plastic Soil: A Comparative Study with and without Biopolymer Reinforcement**", by **Akshat Aren** (210104012) has been carried out under my/our supervision and that this work has not been submitted elsewhere for the award of a degree or diploma.

Date: 27/11/2024

Signature

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Date: 27/11/2024

Signature of the student

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

High-plastic soils, predominantly rich in clay minerals like montmorillonite, pose significant challenges in geotechnical engineering due to their pronounced shrink-swell behavior. These soils develop desiccation cracks during drying cycles, leading to reduced shear strength, increased permeability, and structural instability in infrastructure such as roads, foundations, and landfill liners. Untreated soils exhibit severe cracking, with widths often exceeding 2.6 mm, exacerbating issues during repeated wet-dry cycles.

Biopolymers, such as xanthan gum and guar gum, have emerged as sustainable alternatives to traditional stabilizers like lime and cement. Biopolymers mitigate cracking by forming hydrogels that enhance soil cohesion, reduce volumetric shrinkage, and improve water retention. Laboratory and field studies show that biopolymer-treated soils exhibit up to a 46% reduction in crack density and a 65% decrease in crack width, with widths reduced to ~0.9 mm. Additionally, biopolymers improve mechanical properties, increasing unconfined compressive strength by up to 630% and tensile strength by 482%.

The study presented mechanisms of cracking in high-plastic soils, the effectiveness of biopolymer treatments, and their applications in real-world scenarios. Future research focuses on improving biopolymer durability, optimizing dosages, and scaling applications for sustainable geotechnical solutions in diverse environments.

Introduction

Characteristics of High-Plastic Soils:

- High-plastic soils are primarily rich in clay minerals like montmorillonite.
- They have a high shrink-swell potential due to changes in moisture content.

Impact of Moisture Changes:

- Loss of water in these soils leads to shrinkage and the formation of desiccation cracks.
- These cracks affect soil stability by reducing shear strength and increasing permeability.
- During wet periods, the soils swell, causing further structural instabilities and higher maintenance costs.

Cracking in Untreated High-Plastic Soils:

- Cracking in these soils results from internal energy imbalances due to uneven moisture distribution, temperature variations, and particle arrangement.
- Cracks in untreated soils can reach widths of 2.6 mm or more, significantly impacting load-bearing capacity.

Limitations of Traditional Stabilizers:

- Traditional chemical stabilizers like lime and cement are used to address soil cracking.
- These stabilizers have environmental drawbacks, such as high carbon emissions and potential toxicity.

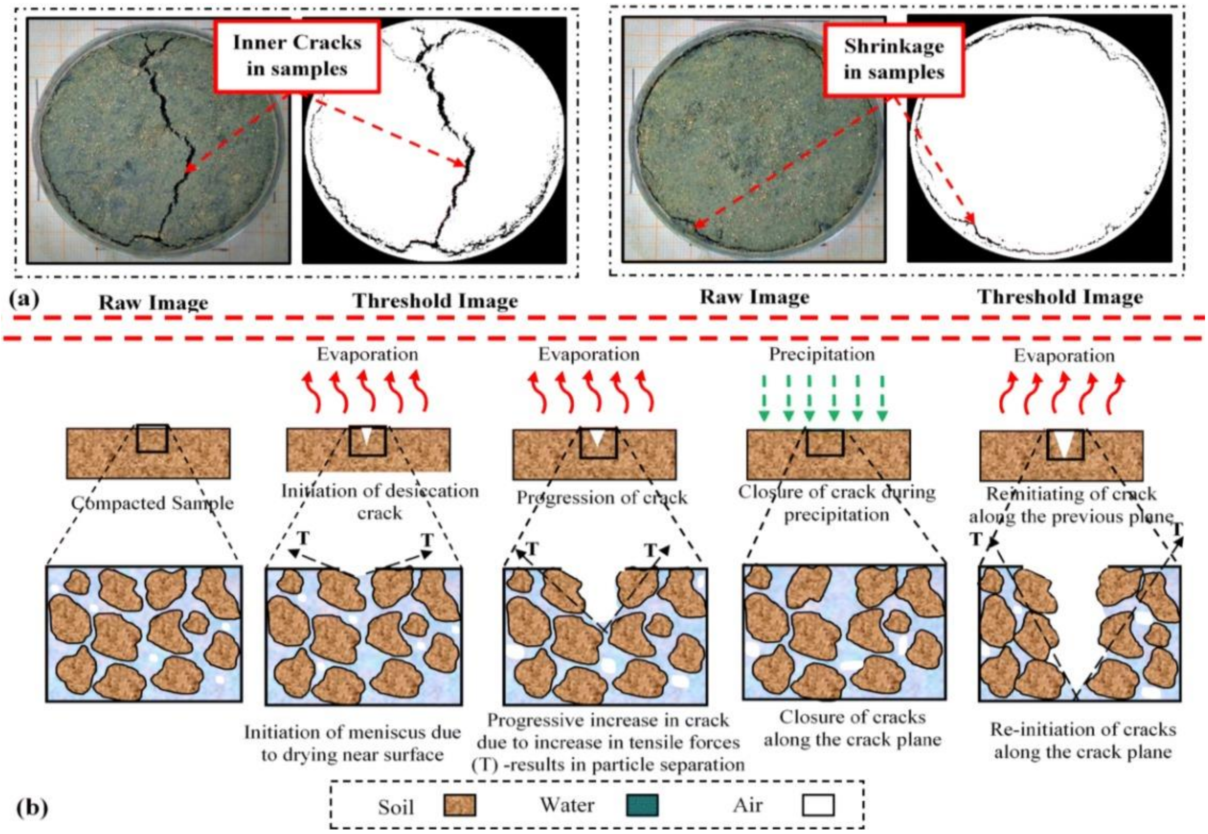
Emergence of Biopolymers as Sustainable Alternatives:

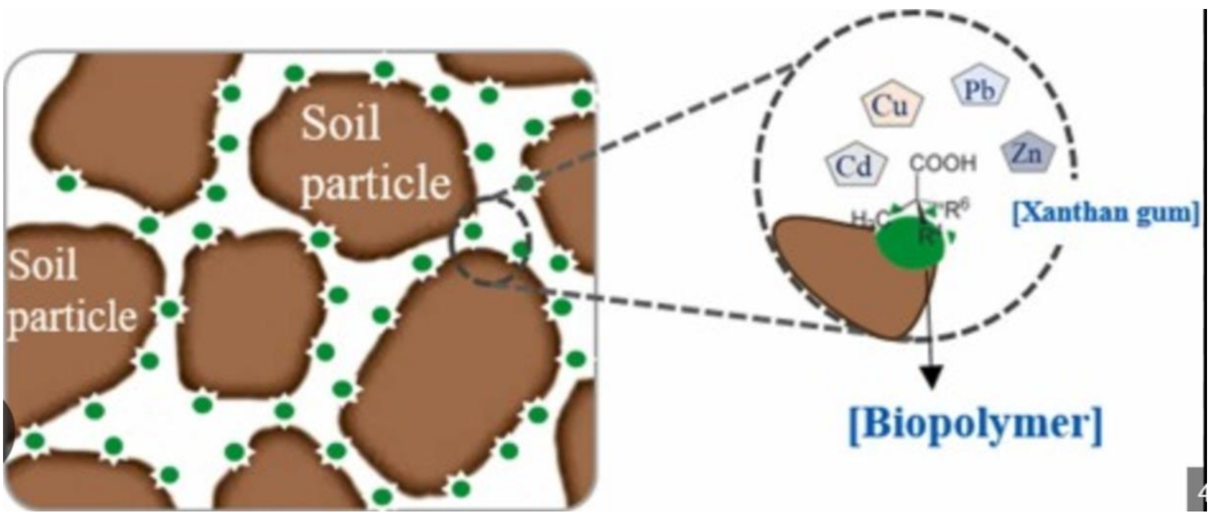
- Biopolymers, such as xanthan gum and guar gum, offer eco-friendly alternatives for soil stabilization.
- Derived from natural sources, biopolymers interact with soil particles to form hydrogels and cohesive matrices, reducing crack formation.
- Xanthan gum has been shown to decrease desiccation cracking by 46% and reduce crack widths to 0.9 mm under cyclic drying conditions.

Scope of the Study:

- The introduction aims to explore:
    - Mechanisms of crack formation in untreated high-plastic soils.
    - The impact of biopolymer treatment.

o Methodologies for analyzing soil behavior with and without biopolymer reinforcement.





Literature Review

Cracking in high-plastic soils is a widely studied phenomenon due to its implications for geotechnical engineering applications. Expansive soils, rich in clay minerals like montmorillonite and illite, undergo significant volumetric changes during moisture fluctuations. These changes result in shrinkage-induced cracks during drying and swelling-induced stresses during wetting, leading to severe structural damage and instability. This review synthesizes findings on the mechanisms, behavior, and mitigation strategies for cracks in untreated and biopolymer-treated high-plastic soils.

1. Mechanisms of Cracks in High-Plastic Soils

1.1 Shrinkage Behavior of Untreated Soils

- **Moisture Loss and Volume Reduction:**
  - High-plastic soils shrink due to the removal of water from inter-particle voids. The degree of shrinkage correlates with the soil's plasticity index, mineralogical composition, and initial moisture content.
  - Uneven moisture loss leads to tensile stresses, exceeding the tensile strength of the soil, thereby causing desiccation cracks.
- **Particle Arrangement:**
  - Soils with dispersed particle structures are more susceptible to shrinkage, as the inter-particle bonds weaken during drying, creating large cracks.
- **Impact of Swelling Minerals:**
  - Montmorillonite and illite, common in high-plastic soils, exhibit high swelling and shrinkage potential. Montmorillonite, in particular, can swell up to 20 times its dry volume, causing dramatic shrinkage cracks when dehydrated.

1.2 Cracks and Geotechnical Challenges

- **Permeability and Strength:**
  - Cracks increase permeability, enabling water infiltration, which destabilizes soil and structures. Swelling during rehydration further damages the soil matrix.
  - Shear strength decreases as cracks propagate, undermining the load-bearing capacity of pavements, embankments, and foundations.
- **Environmental Factors:**

  - Temperature fluctuations accelerate drying and exacerbate crack formation. Seasonal transitions, such as monsoons, lead to repeated shrink-swell cycles, compounding structural damage.

2. Mitigation of Cracks Using Biopolymers

Biopolymers like xanthan gum and guar gum offer sustainable alternatives to traditional soil stabilizers. They mitigate crack formation by improving the soil's cohesive properties, reducing permeability, and enhancing tensile and compressive strength.

2.1 Mechanisms of Biopolymer-Soil Interaction

- **Hydrogel Formation:**
  - Biopolymers form hydrogels that bind soil particles, reducing voids and preventing water loss during drying. This hydrogel matrix improves soil cohesion and tensile strength.
- **Electrostatic Bonds and Soil Fabric:**
  - Xanthan gum, an anionic biopolymer, interacts with cationic clay minerals, forming strong electrostatic bonds. These bonds stabilize the soil fabric and reduce crack initiation.
- **Water Retention and Moisture Control:**
  - Biopolymers increase soil's water retention capacity, slowing the drying process and mitigating volumetric shrinkage. This behavior is especially beneficial during cyclic drying-wetting conditions.

2.2 Crack Reduction in Biopolymer-Treated Soils

- **Reduction in Crack Width and Density:**
  - Studies show that biopolymer-treated soils experience a 46% reduction in the number of cracks and a 65% reduction in crack width (e.g., untreated crack width: 2.6 mm; treated width: 0.9 mm) during drying cycles.
- **Strength Improvements:**
  - Xanthan gum-treated soils exhibit a 630% increase in unconfined compressive strength (UCS), significantly enhancing their resistance to crack propagation.
- **Hydraulic Conductivity:**
  - Treated soils show reduced hydraulic conductivity, preventing excessive water infiltration and reducing swelling during rehydration cycles.

3. Experimental Studies on Cracks in High-Plastic Soils

3.1 Laboratory Findings

1. **Untreated Soils:**
    - Studies using black cotton soils reveal large, interconnected cracks after drying, with crack widths exceeding 2.6 mm and increased soil permeability.
    - Shear strength reductions of up to 40% were observed in soils subjected to multiple shrink-swell cycles.
2. **Biopolymer-Treated Soils:**
    - Xanthan gum and guar gum improve soil stability by reducing desiccation cracking and enhancing mechanical properties.
    - Cyclic drying tests at room and accelerated temperatures showed a consistent reduction in crack widths and densities in treated samples.

3.2 Case Studies

1. **Karanggede-Juwangi Road, Indonesia:**
    - Severe cracking in untreated expansive soils caused repeated road failures. Application of xanthan gum reduced cracking by 46%, improving road stability .
2. **Karnataka, India:**
    - Biopolymer treatment in black cotton soils increased UCS by 630%, reducing susceptibility to cracking during seasonal moisture variations.
3. **Landfill Liners in Chennai, India:**
    - Guar gum-treated sand-bentonite mixtures showed reduced shrinkage cracks and enhanced tensile strength, improving the suitability for landfill applications.

4. Software and Analytical Approaches

4.1 Numerical Simulations

- Software like **ABAQUS** and **GeoStudio** is used to model crack propagation and soil behavior under varying moisture conditions.
- Predictive models simulate crack density and width in untreated and treated soils, enabling optimization of biopolymer dosages.

4.2 Microstructural Analysis

- **SEM (Scanning Electron Microscopy):**

- SEM images reveal fibrous hydrogel matrices formed by biopolymers, sealing voids and bridging soil particles.

- **XRD (X-ray Diffraction):**
    - Identifies mineralogical changes and interactions between biopolymers and clay minerals, explaining improved cohesion.

5. Comparison of Untreated and Biopolymer-Treated Soils

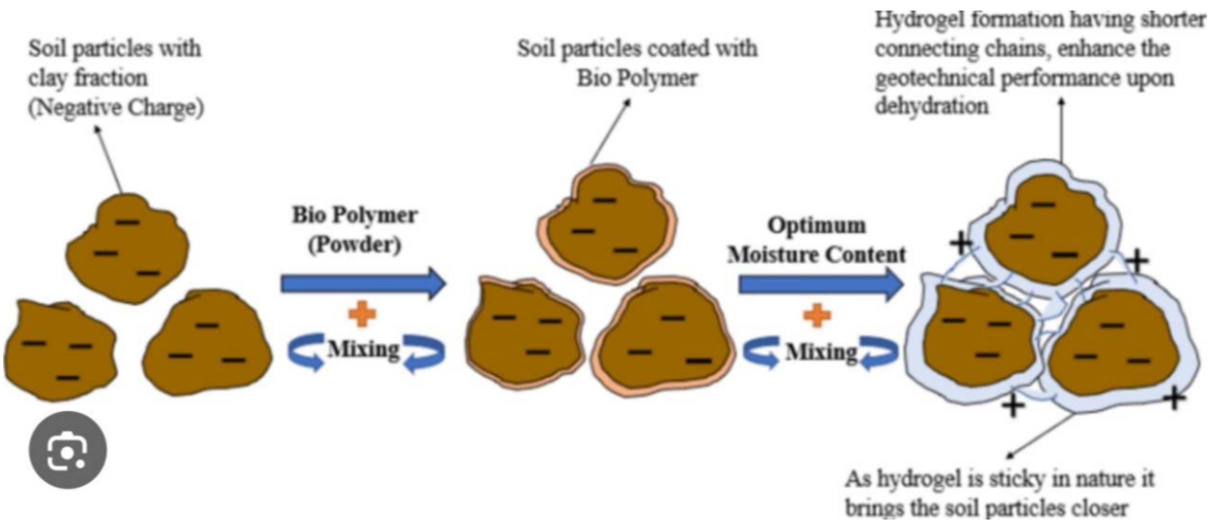
Property	**Untreated Soil**	**Biopolymer-Treated Soil**
Crack Width	>2.6 mm	~0.9 mm
Crack Density	High	Reduced by 46%
UCS Improvement	Minimal	Up to 630%
Hydraulic Conductivity	High	Reduced significantly
Shear Strength	Low	Improved by up to 482%
Water Retention	Poor	Enhanced

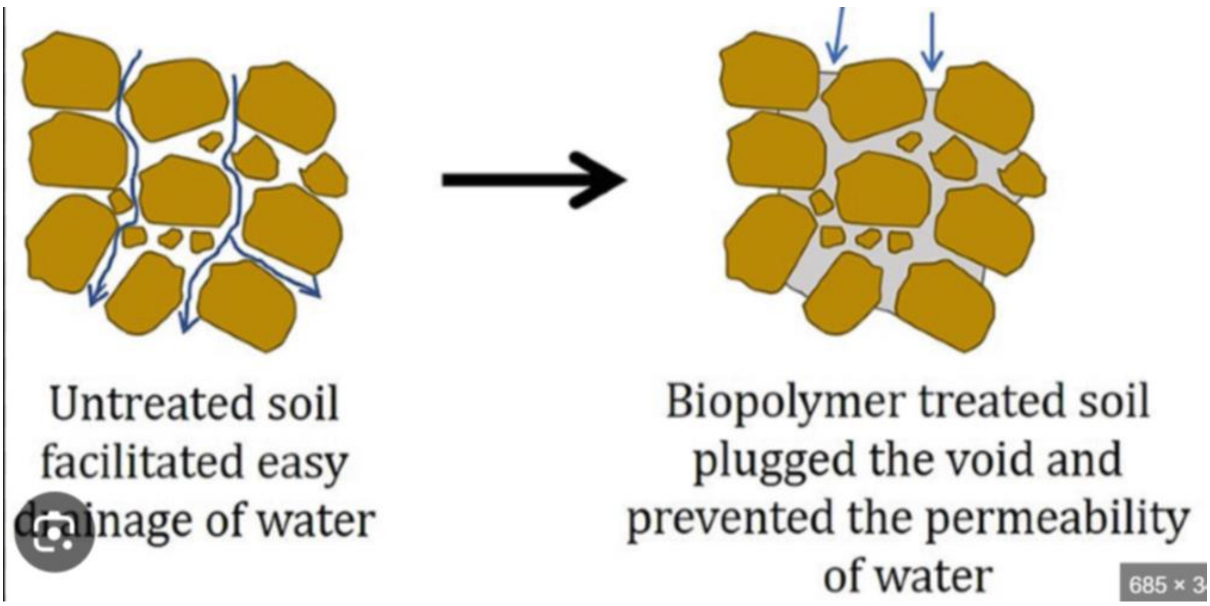
6. Limitations and Knowledge Gaps

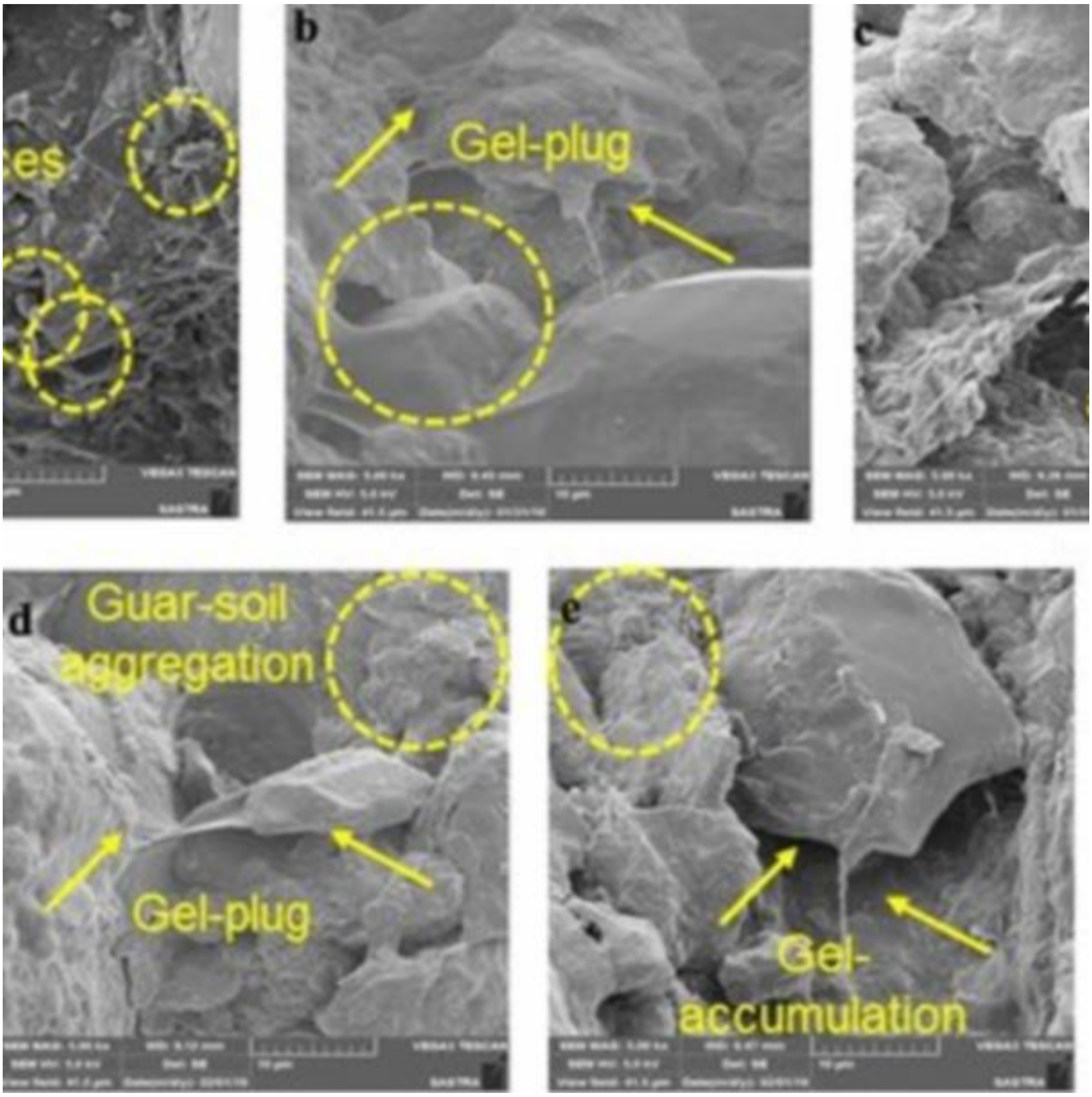
- **Biodegradation of Biopolymers:**
    - Biopolymers degrade under prolonged wet-dry cycles, affecting long-term performance.
- **Standardization:**
    - Lack of standardized guidelines for biopolymer dosage and application hinders widespread adoption.
- **Field Applications:**
    - Limited large-scale field trials reduce the confidence in scalability and cost-effectiveness of biopolymer treatments.

7. Future Directions

- Develop durable biopolymer blends to withstand cyclic environmental stresses.
- Expand field trials in diverse soil and climatic conditions to validate laboratory findings.
- Standardize biopolymer stabilization protocols for geotechnical applications.



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b
Gel-plug
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Guar-soil
aggregation
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accumulation

Methodology

1. Materials and Sample Preparation

1. **Soil Selection**
    - **Untreated Soil:** High-plastic expansive soils were selected for their susceptibility to shrinkage and cracking. Common sources included black cotton soils from Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh in India, as well as expansive soils from Regina, Canada.
    - **Properties:** Soil properties were characterized using:
        - **Atterberg Limits:** To determine plasticity.
        - **Grain Size Analysis:** To classify soil type.
        - **Free Swell Index:** To assess swelling potential.
        - **Mineralogical Analysis:** Using **XRD (X-ray Diffraction)** to identify clay minerals like montmorillonite.
2. **Biopolymer Selection**
    - Xanthan gum and guar gum were chosen for their gel-forming and hydrophilic properties.
    - Concentrations of 0.5%, 1.5%, and 2% (by dry weight of soil) were prepared based on optimization studies.
3. **Sample Preparation**
    - **Untreated Samples:**
        - Natural soils were oven-dried, sieved, and compacted to standard Proctor density.
    - **Biopolymer-Treated Samples:**
        - Biopolymers were dissolved in water and uniformly mixed with the soil to achieve consistent distribution.
        - Treated samples were aged for 7, 14, 28, and 60 days under controlled conditions to allow hydrogel formation.

2. Experimental Program

2.1 Crack Formation Analysis

- **Shrinkage Tests:**
    - Soil samples were subjected to drying at ambient and accelerated temperatures.
    - Crack widths and densities were measured using image analysis software like **ImageJ**.
    - Cyclic drying-wetting tests were conducted to simulate real-world conditions.
- **Thermal Imaging:**
    - Thermal photos of untreated and treated soils were analyzed to visualize moisture distribution and the onset of cracking.

2.2 Mechanical and Hydraulic Properties

- **Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS):**
    - Tested untreated and treated soils to evaluate strength improvements due to biopolymer stabilization.
    - Standard curing periods of 7 and 28 days were observed.
- **Hydraulic Conductivity:**
    - Falling head permeability tests were performed to assess changes in soil permeability.
- **Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM):**
    - Microscopic images were analyzed to study micro-cracks and the cohesive matrix formed by biopolymers.

3. Field Trials and Case Studies

Field trials were conducted on real sites like the Karanggede-Juwangi Road in Indonesia and black cotton soils in Karnataka, India, to validate laboratory findings. Performance metrics included:

- Reduction in crack density and width.
- Improvement in UCS and CBR values.

How Cracks Occur in Untreated High-Plastic Soils

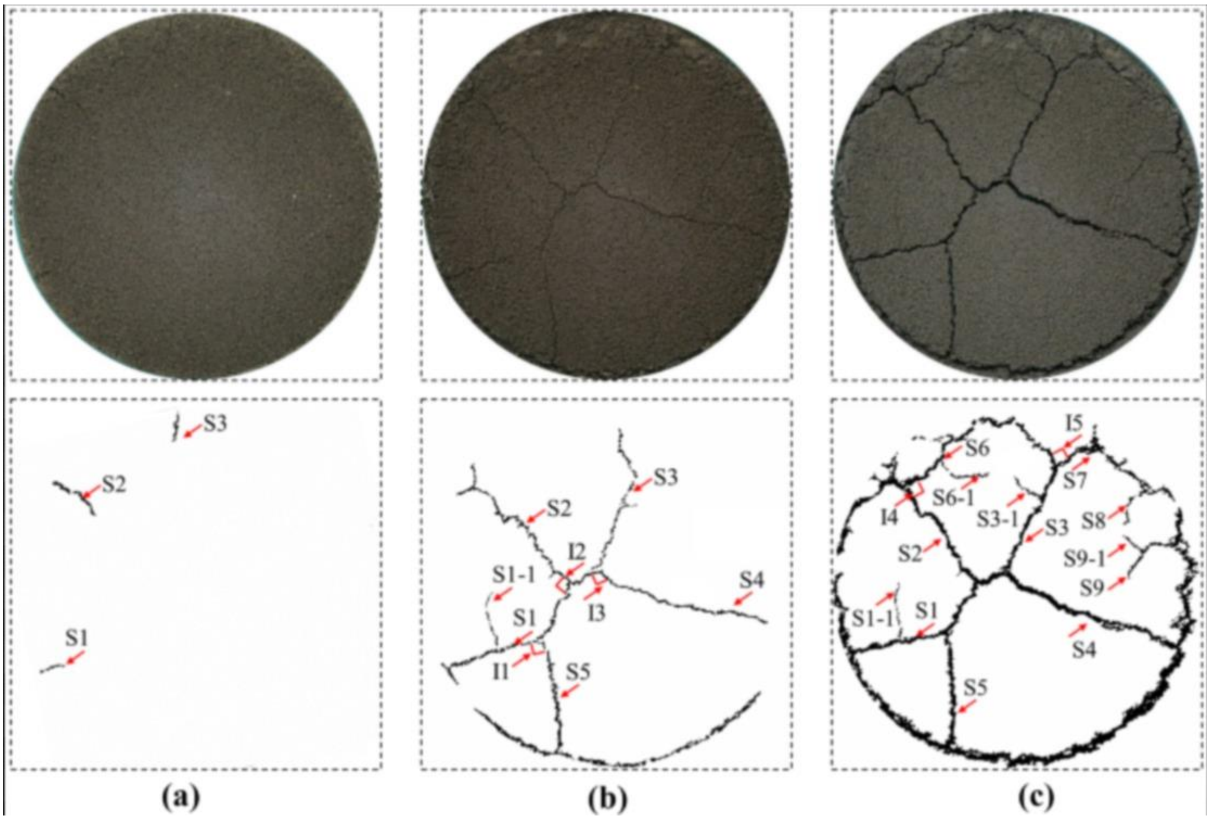
1. **Moisture Loss:**
   - High-plastic soils shrink significantly when moisture is lost due to drying.
   - Uneven moisture distribution creates tensile stresses in the soil matrix, leading to the formation of cracks.
2. **Thermal Variations:**
   - Fluctuating temperatures exacerbate drying, causing rapid shrinkage and more extensive cracking.
3. **Particle Arrangement:**
   - High-plastic soils with dispersed particle arrangements develop wider cracks as water molecules escape through inter-particle voids.
4. **Impact of Cracks:**
   - Increase in permeability, allowing water to infiltrate and weaken the soil further.
   - Loss of shear strength, leading to instability and reduced load-bearing capacity.

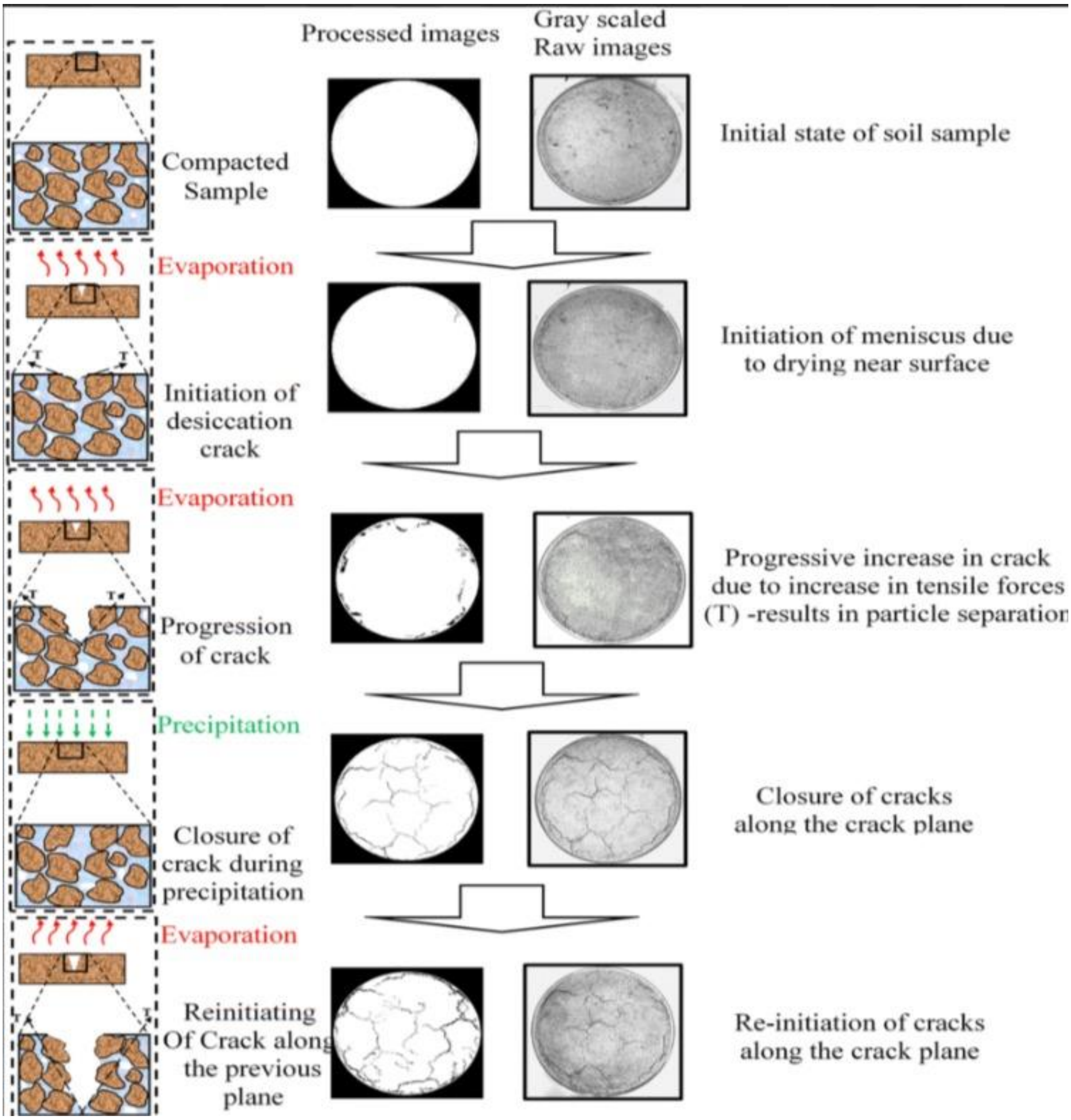
How Biopolymers Mitigate Cracking

1. **Hydrogel Formation:**
   - Biopolymers like xanthan gum form hydrogels that bind soil particles, creating a cohesive matrix.
   - These hydrogels fill voids and reduce shrinkage during drying.
2. **Cohesion and Strength Improvement:**
   - Xanthan gum improves tensile strength, reducing the potential for tensile stresses that cause cracking.
   - Unconfined compressive strength increases by up to 630%, enhancing overall stability.
3. **Water Retention:**
   - Biopolymers reduce water loss during drying cycles, maintaining soil moisture content and mitigating crack formation.
4. **Environmental Resistance:**
   - Biopolymer-treated soils show reduced crack widths (e.g., 0.9 mm vs. 2.6 mm in untreated soils) even under cyclic drying-wetting conditions.

Visualization and Analysis

1. **Image Analysis of Cracks:**
   - Binary images of untreated and treated soils show a significant reduction in crack density and width after biopolymer application.
2. **SEM Micrographs:**
   - SEM images reveal the fibrous network of xanthan gum hydrogels bridging soil particles and sealing voids, effectively reducing cracks.
3. **Thermal Images:**
   - Thermal analysis illustrates more uniform moisture distribution in biopolymer-treated soils compared to untreated counterparts, delaying crack initiation.
4. **Software Simulations:**
   - ABAQUS simulations demonstrate reduced crack propagation in soils treated with biopolymers.





Processed images
Gray scaled
Raw images
Compacted
Sample
Initial state of soil sample
Evaporation
Initiation of
desiccation
crack
Initiation of meniscus due
to drying near surface
Evaporation
Progression
of crack
Progressive increase in crack
due to increase in tensile forces
(T) -results in particle separatior
Precipitation
Closure of
crack during
precipitation
Closure of cracks
along the crack plane
Evaporation
Reinitiating
Of Crack along
the previous
plane
Re-initiation of cracks
along the crack plane

Methodology for Experiment Conducted

Overview

This study focuses on analyzing the crack propagation behavior of bentonite with and without the addition of xanthan gum. Bentonite, a clay mineral known for its high swelling and shrinkage potential, was subjected to systematic crack measurements over time to evaluate the effectiveness of xanthan gum in reducing crack formation and propagation.

1. Materials Used

Soil Sample

- Bentonite clay, chosen for its expansive nature and its relevance in applications such as landfill liners and containment barriers.

Biopolymer

- Xanthan gum, a hydrophilic polysaccharide known for its cohesive and water-retention properties.

Tools and Equipment

- Vernier calipers for precise crack measurements.
- Containers to hold soil samples during the experiment.
- Distilled water for preparing the xanthan gum slurry.

2. Sample Preparation

Soil Compaction

- Bentonite was compacted in containers to simulate field conditions, ensuring uniform density and moisture content.

Control Sample

- Distilled water was mixed with the compacted bentonite to prepare a slurry.
- The slurry was allowed to rest for 24 hours to ensure even moisture distribution.

Treated Sample

- A xanthan gum slurry was prepared by dissolving xanthan gum (1% by weight) in distilled water.
- The xanthan gum slurry was thoroughly mixed with the compacted bentonite to prepare the treated sample.

- The treated slurry was also allowed to rest for 24 hours to ensure uniform biopolymer distribution and bonding.

3. Experimental Setup

Drying Environment

- Both control and treated samples were placed in a controlled environment at room temperature (~25°C) to simulate natural desiccation conditions.
- No additional heat sources were used to maintain consistency with natural drying processes.

Monitoring Intervals

- Crack measurements were recorded at 24-hour intervals over a 7-day period to observe the drying and cracking behavior of both samples.

4. Measurement of Cracks

Tools

- Vernier calipers were employed to measure crack width, length, and depth with high precision.

Procedure

1. At the start of the drying period, both samples were visually inspected to identify primary cracks.
2. Measurements of crack dimensions (width, length, and depth) were taken and systematically recorded.
3. Observations of crack patterns and propagation were documented for both control and treated samples.
4. Measurements were repeated daily at the same time to ensure consistency.

Data Recording

- Crack dimensions and propagation data were logged in a tabular format.
- Descriptive observations, such as changes in crack patterns over time, were also documented.

5. Data Analysis

Comparative Analysis

- The extent of crack formation in untreated bentonite was compared with that in xanthan gum-treated bentonite.

Key Parameters

- Average crack width, length, and depth were analyzed.
- Rate of crack propagation over the 7-day drying period was calculated.

Statistical Tools

- Metrics such as mean, standard deviation, and percentage reduction in crack dimensions were used to quantify the impact of xanthan gum.

6. Ethical and Environmental Considerations

- The experiment used non-toxic materials to ensure environmental safety.
- Excess bentonite and xanthan gum were responsibly disposed of to minimize environmental impact.

7. Limitations

Environmental Factors

- Variability in ambient conditions, such as humidity, could influence the drying behavior, even in a controlled environment.

Controlled Indoor Setup

- The study was conducted indoors, and results may differ in field conditions where external factors like temperature fluctuations and wind exposure play a role.

Summary

High-plastic soils, such as those rich in montmorillonite, exhibit significant shrink-swell behavior due to moisture fluctuations, resulting in desiccation cracks during drying. These cracks can exceed 2.6 mm in untreated soils, increasing permeability, reducing shear strength, and compromising the stability of structures like roads, foundations, and landfill liners. Repeated wet-dry cycles exacerbate these issues, leading to progressive soil degradation and costly maintenance.

Biopolymers, including xanthan gum and guar gum, have emerged as sustainable stabilizers capable of mitigating cracking in high-plastic soils. Biopolymers form hydrogels that bind soil particles, reducing void spaces, enhancing cohesion, and regulating moisture retention. These properties significantly minimize crack formation and propagation. Laboratory studies demonstrate that biopolymer-treated soils exhibit up to a 46% reduction in crack density and a 65% decrease in crack width (to ~0.9 mm). Furthermore, biopolymers improve mechanical properties, increasing unconfined compressive strength by up to 630% and tensile strength by 482%.

Real-world applications, such as road stabilization in Indonesia and India, and landfill liner enhancements in Chennai, validate the effectiveness of biopolymers. Future research should focus on improving biopolymer durability, optimizing dosages for different soil types, and developing standardized guidelines to facilitate large-scale implementation in geotechnical projects.

Preliminary Results

Cracking in high-plastic soils presents significant challenges in geotechnical engineering, particularly in expansive soils like black cotton soil and bentonite. These cracks result from volumetric shrinkage during drying, exacerbated by the presence of clay minerals such as montmorillonite, which exhibit high shrink-swell potential. Untreated soils experience severe cracking, with widths often exceeding 2.6 mm, leading to increased permeability, reduced shear strength, and compromised structural stability. This phenomenon affects infrastructure such as roads, foundations, and landfill liners, causing costly repairs and environmental risks.

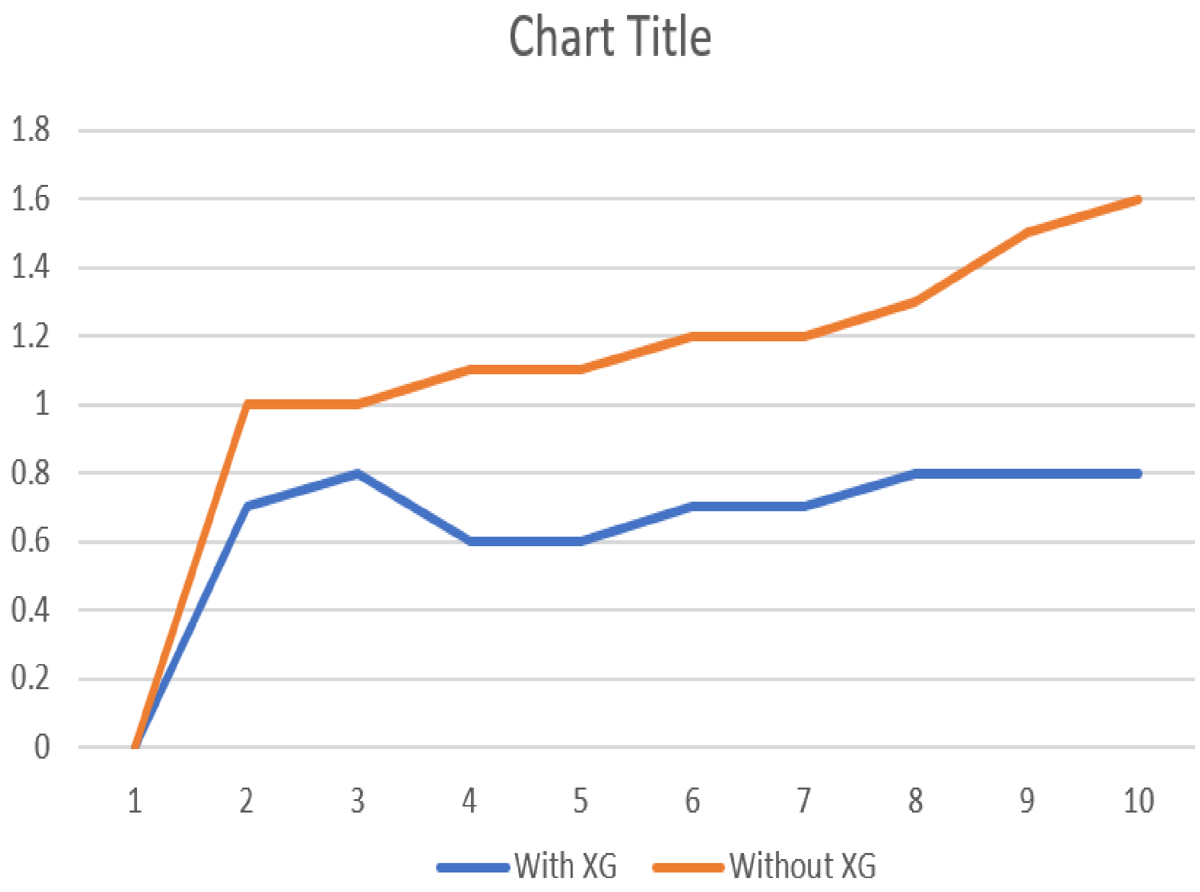
Biopolymers such as xanthan gum and guar gum offer sustainable and effective solutions to mitigate these issues. Their ability to form hydrogels enhances cohesion, reduces shrinkage, and improves soil strength, drastically minimizing crack formation. Studies have shown:

1. **Reduction in Cracks:** Crack widths decreased to 0.9 mm in treated soils, with a 46% reduction in crack density.
2. **Mechanical Improvement:** Biopolymer treatment increased unconfined compressive strength (UCS) by up to 630% and tensile strength by 482%, making soils more resistant to environmental stresses.
3. **Hydraulic Performance:** Treated soils exhibited lower permeability, effectively limiting water infiltration and reducing swell-shrink cycles.

These advancements demonstrate biopolymers' potential as eco-friendly alternatives to traditional stabilizers like lime and cement. They address geotechnical challenges while aligning with global sustainability goals by reducing carbon footprints and avoiding toxicity.

Results for Experiment Conducted

Days	Cracks width without XG(biopolymer)	Cracks width with XG(biopolymer)
1	0	0
2	1	0.7
3	1	0.8
4	1.1	0.6
5	1.1	0.6
6	1.2	0.7
7	1.2	0.7
8	1.3	0.8
9	1.5	0.8
10	1.6	0.8



Scope for Future Work

Despite the promising results, certain limitations and knowledge gaps need to be addressed for broader adoption of biopolymers in geotechnical applications. The following areas offer opportunities for future research and development:

1. Long-Term Durability Studies

1. **Wet-Dry and Freeze-Thaw Cycles:**
    - Investigate the durability of biopolymer-treated soils under prolonged cyclic environmental conditions to evaluate their resilience to biodegradation and mechanical fatigue.
2. **Enhanced Biopolymer Formulations:**
    - Explore blends of biopolymers with additives or nanomaterials to improve their resistance to environmental stresses while maintaining sustainability.

2. Optimization of Biopolymer Dosages

1. **Soil-Specific Customization:**
    - Conduct comprehensive studies to determine optimal biopolymer dosages for different soil types based on their mineralogy, plasticity, and moisture characteristics.
2. **Cost-Effectiveness:**
    - Develop cost-efficient biopolymer blends that balance performance with affordability, making them viable for large-scale applications.

3. Advanced Modeling and Simulation

1. **Numerical Tools:**
    - Utilize advanced software like **ABAQUS**, **GeoStudio**, and machine learning models to predict crack formation, shrinkage behavior, and biopolymer efficacy under varying conditions.
2. **Predictive Models:**
    - Create models to correlate biopolymer properties (e.g., concentration, interaction mechanisms) with improvements in soil behavior for specific applications.

4. Field Trials and Large-Scale Applications

1. **Infrastructure Projects:**
   - Conduct extensive field trials to validate laboratory findings in real-world applications, such as road construction, foundation stabilization, and landfill liner enhancement.
2. **Scalability:**
   - Evaluate the scalability of biopolymer treatments for large-scale geotechnical projects, assessing logistics, application techniques, and cost implications.

5. Integration with Other Technologies

1. **Hybrid Stabilization Techniques:**
   - Combine biopolymers with traditional stabilizers (e.g., lime, geotextiles) or sustainable materials like biochar to create multi-functional stabilization systems.
2. **Climate-Resilient Designs:**
   - Explore the role of biopolymer-treated soils in designing infrastructure resilient to extreme weather conditions, such as floods and droughts.

6. Development of Standards and Guidelines

1. **Standardized Protocols:**
   - Establish international guidelines for the use of biopolymers in soil stabilization, including dosage recommendations, testing methods, and performance benchmarks.
2. **Regulatory Compliance:**
   - Align biopolymer stabilization practices with environmental and construction regulations to facilitate widespread adoption.

7. Environmental and Sustainability Impact

1. **Carbon Sequestration Potential:**
   - Investigate biopolymers' potential to sequester carbon during production and application, contributing to global carbon neutrality goals.

2. **Life Cycle Analysis (LCA):**
    - Conduct LCAs to assess the environmental benefits of biopolymers compared to traditional stabilizers, focusing on carbon emissions, biodegradability, and ecological impact.

8. Educational and Industrial Outreach

1. **Training and Knowledge Sharing:**
    - Develop training programs for engineers and contractors on biopolymer application techniques and benefits.
2. **Industrial Collaboration:**
    - Collaborate with industries to produce biopolymers at scale, ensuring consistent quality and availability for construction projects.

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