Innovations

Mechanical and Durability Performance of Recycled Aggregate Concrete for Sustainable Construction

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Abstract*: The increasing pace of urbanization and infrastructure development has led to a substantial rise in the consumption of concrete, exerting significant pressure on natural resources and contributing to environmental degradation. Simultaneously, the disposal of construction and demolition waste (CDW) presents a serious challenge, particularly in densely populated regions. This study aims to address these dual issues by investigating the use of recycled coarse aggregate (RCA), derived from demolished concrete, as a partial or full replacement for natural coarse aggregate (NCA) in concrete production. The objective is to evaluate the mechanical, durability, and microstructural properties of recycled aggregate concrete (RAC) and to assess its viability for sustainable construction. The experimental program involved designing multiple concrete mixes with varying RCA replacement levels (0% to 100%), keeping other mix parameters constant. Key properties such as compressive strength, splitting tensile strength, flexural strength, capillary water absorption, drying shrinkage, and air content were evaluated. The results indicate that while RAC exhibits slightly inferior mechanical properties compared to conventional concrete, the performance remains within acceptable limits up to 50% RCA replacement. The presence of adhered mortar on RCA particles was found to increase porosity and water absorption, thereby reducing strength and durability. However, enhancements using ureolytic bacteria (e.g., Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus) showed notable improvements in compressive strength and resistance to water ingress, attributed to microbial calcium carbonate precipitation. Microstructural studies including SEM, EDX, and XRD analyses confirmed the beneficial impact of bacterial treatment on the internal pore structure and interfacial transition zone (ITZ). Furthermore, a cost-benefit analysis revealed that the use of RCA can lead to significant material cost savings and lower environmental impact. This research supports the adoption of RAC as a feasible, eco-friendly alternative in structural applications, especially when combined with biotechnological enhancements.*

Keywords*: Recycled concrete aggregate, sustainable concrete, mechanical properties, durability, waste recycling.*

1. Introduction

The global construction industry is undergoing a paradigm shift towards sustainability in response to the increasing demand for infrastructure, the depletion of natural resources, and the urgent need to reduce environmental degradation. Among the most widely used construction materials, concrete contributes substantially to global carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions due to its dependence on Portland cement, a highly energy-intensive material. According to Mehta (2001), the production of 1 tonne of Portland cement releases approximately 0.9 tonnes of CO_2, underscoring its role in climate change. Consequently, the search for sustainable alternatives to conventional concrete has intensified in recent years. One promising approach is the incorporation of industrial by-products and construction and demolition waste (CDW) into concrete. Construction waste, particularly in the form of demolished concrete, is generated in enormous quantities. The Central Pollution Control Board of India estimates that approximately 48 million tonnes of solid waste is produced annually, with CDW constituting nearly 25% of this total. This growing volume of waste presents a major environmental challenge and demands effective reuse strategies. Recycled coarse aggregate (RCA), produced by crushing demolished concrete structures, has gained significant attention as a sustainable alternative to natural coarse aggregate (NCA). Several researchers have reported the feasibility of using RCA in concrete production, albeit with certain performance trade-offs. Rahal (2007) observed that RCA concrete exhibits approximately 10–25% lower compressive strength compared to conventional concrete due to the presence of residual mortar and increased porosity. Similar findings were presented by Tabsh and Abdelfatah (2009), Elhakam et al. (2012), and McNeil and Kang (2013), who noted a decrease in mechanical strength and durability of RCA concrete with increased replacement ratios.The characteristics of RCA are influenced by several factors, including the quality of the parent concrete, number of recycling cycles, and the amount of adhered mortar. Studies by Amnon (2003) and Kou et al. (2011) indicate that multiple recycling processes can degrade the aggregate quality further, affecting key properties like density, water absorption, and compressive strength. Recognizing these challenges, researchers have explored methods to enhance the properties of RCA concrete. Barbudo et al. (2013) highlighted the positive impact of plasticizers, while Grdic et al. (2010) demonstrated that self-compacting concrete can be successfully produced using fine and coarse recycled aggregates. A novel and biologically driven enhancement strategy involves the use of ureolytic bacteria. These bacteria, such as Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus, precipitate calcium carbonate ($CaCO_3$) through the enzymatic hydrolysis of urea. The resulting mineralization can fill microcracks and pores, thereby improving the mechanical strength and durability of concrete. Achal et al. (2011) and Siddique and Chahal (2011) reported significant increases in compressive strength and resistance to water ingress in bacterial concrete. In the context of RCA concrete, such biotechnological enhancements remain underexplored and represent a promising research avenue.In parallel, the use of supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs) like silica fume (SF) and fly ash (FA) has also shown potential for improving the sustainability profile of concrete. SF, a by-product of silicon and ferrosilicon alloy production, possesses high pozzolanic activity due to its fine particle size and high silica content. Yogendran et al. (1987) and Mazloom et al. (2004) demonstrated that SF enhances compressive strength, reduces permeability, and improves durability of concrete. Similarly, FA has been used to reduce the heat of hydration, improve workability, and enhance long-term strength (Malhotra and Mehta, 1996). However, most of these studies were conducted using Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC). Given that the Indian construction industry predominantly uses Portland Slag Cement (PSC), research on the behavior of SF and FA with PSC-based concrete is both relevant and necessary. Despite numerous individual studies, there remains a gap in literature regarding the combined assessment of RCA, bacterial enhancement, and SCMs such as SF and FA in concrete systems, especially using PSC. Moreover, limited research addresses the statistical variability in mechanical properties and its implications for structural reliability. This research aims to bridge these gaps by investigating the mechanical and durability properties of RCA concrete, the effect of bacterial treatment, and the influence of SF and FA in PSC-based concrete, with a view towards sustainable and resilient construction practices.

2. Materials and Methods

This study involved the preparation and testing of concrete specimens incorporating recycled coarse aggregate (RCA), silica fume (SF), fly ash (FA), and ureolytic bacteria (Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus). The experimental program was designed to assess the effects of these materials on mechanical properties, durability, and microstructure. The methodology adopted in this study builds on previous works by researchers such as Rahal (2007), Siddique and Chahal (2011), and Achal et al. (2013), with modifications suitable for Indian construction practices using Portland Slag Cement (PSC).

2.1 Materials

Cement

Portland Slag Cement (PSC) conforming to IS: 455-1989 was used throughout the study. The cement had a specific gravity of 3.05 and met all relevant physical and chemical requirements.

Aggregates
Natural coarse aggregate (NCA) and fine aggregate (river sand) conforming to IS: 383-1970 were used. RCA was obtained by crushing 28-day old laboratory-cast concrete specimens and further categorized into two types (RC-1 and RC-2) based on the number of recycling cycles. As reported by McNeil and Kang (2013), repeated recycling tends to increase porosity and reduce strength.

Silica Fume and Fly Ash
Silica fume (SF) was used as a mineral admixture with a replacement level ranging from 0% to 30% by weight of cement, following practices suggested by Mazloom et al. (2004) and Atis et al. (2005). Class F fly ash conforming to ASTM C618 was used in partial replacement of cement at 10–40%, like high-volume fly ash concrete studies (Malhotra and Mehta, 1996).

Bacteria and Nutrient Medium
Ureolytic bacteria (Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus) were cultured in a nutrient broth composed of peptone, beef extract, sodium chloride, and urea. Cell concentrations were maintained at 10^6 cells/ml, in line with methodologies reported by Achal et al. (2011) and Pei et al. (2013). Bacteria were introduced into the concrete mix water before blending.

2.2 Mix Proportions
Concrete mixes were designed according to IS: 10262-2009 with a constant water-cement ratio (w/c) of 0.45. Mixes were categorized based on:

- RCA replacement levels: 0%, 25%, 50%, 75%, and 100%
- SF replacement: 0%, 10%, 20%, 30%
- FA replacement: 0%, 10%, 20%, 30%, 40%
- Bacterial addition: with and without bacteria

Each batch was mixed in a pan mixer, and specimens were cast in standard cube, cylinder, and prism molds for compressive, splitting tensile, and flexural strength testing respectively.

2.3 Curing and Testing
The specimens were cured in water for 7 and 28 days. Compressive strength was tested as per IS: 516-1959 using 150 mm cubes. Tensile splitting strength was assessed using 150×300 mm cylinders, and flexural strength was determined using 100×100×500 mm prisms. Capillary water absorption and drying shrinkage were evaluated following RILEM recommendations and ASTM C1585 respectively. Microstructural analysis was conducted using SEM, EDX, and XRD to assess the

distribution and impact of calcium carbonate precipitation in bacterial concrete. This comprehensive methodological framework ensured consistency across mix designs and allowed for direct comparisons with findings from previous studies on recycled and modified concretes (Kou et al., 2011; Poon and Kou, 2009).

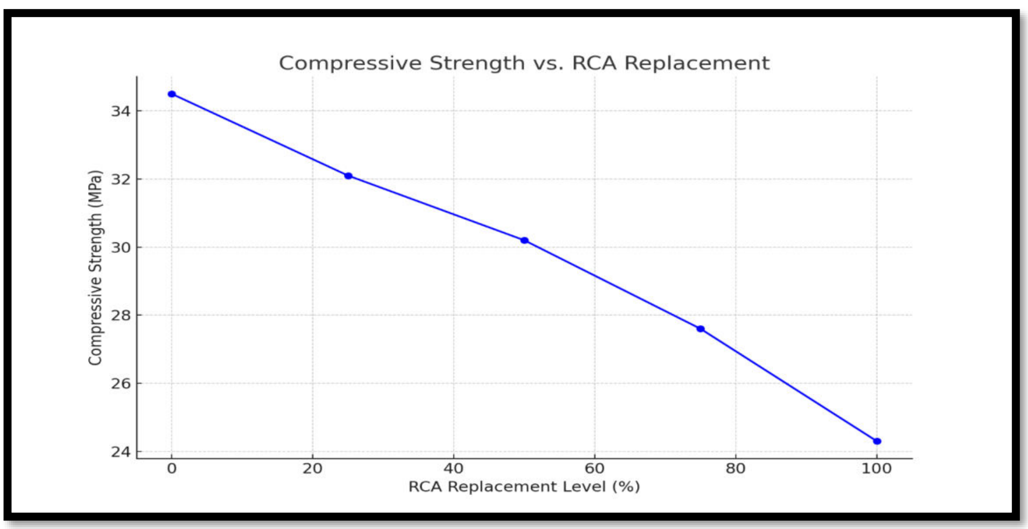
4. Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results obtained from the experimental investigation of concrete made with recycled coarse aggregate (RCA), silica fume (SF), fly ash (FA), and ureolytic bacteria. The analysis is based on fresh properties, mechanical performance, durability indicators, and microstructural observations. The influence of RCA replacement percentage is particularly emphasized, supported by graphical interpretations.

4.1 Compressive Strength

The compressive strength of concrete decreased consistently as the percentage of RCA increased. As shown in **Figure 1**, the compressive strength dropped from 34.5 MPa at 0% RCA to 24.3 MPa to 100% RCA at 28 days. The reduction in strength is attributed to the weaker interfacial transition zone (ITZ) and the presence of residual mortar on RCA, which increases porosity and water absorption. These findings align with those of Rahal (2007) and McNeil and Kang (2013), who observed strength losses ranging from 10–25% in RAC compared to natural aggregate concrete. At 50% replacement, the compressive strength remains above 30 MPa, suggesting this level is acceptable for general structural applications.

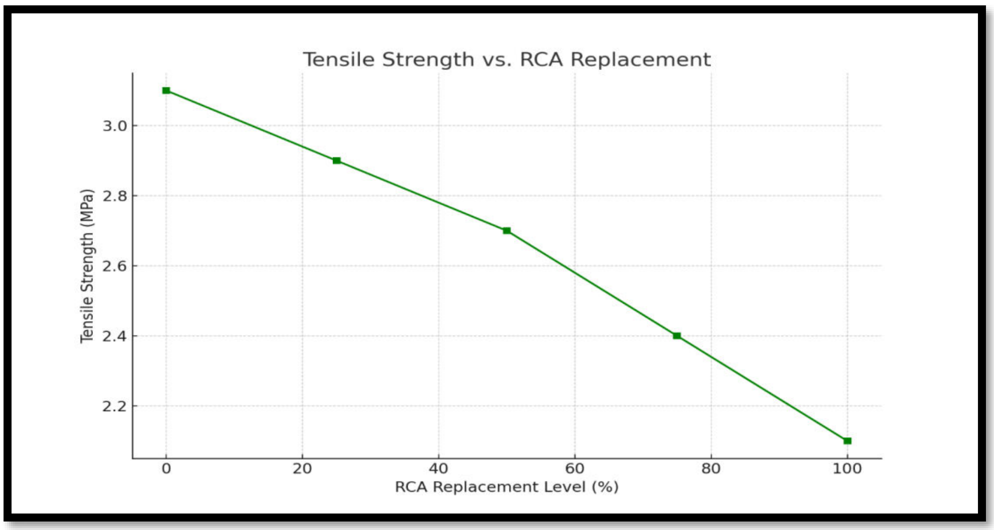
Figure 1: Compressive Strength vs. RCA Replacement



4.2 Splitting Tensile Strength

Tensile strength showed a similar decreasing trend with RCA replacement (**Figure 2**). At 0% RCA, the tensile strength was approximately 3.1 MPa and dropped to 2.1 MPa at 100% RCA. The reduction is attributed to poor bonding between recycled aggregates and the new cement paste, exacerbated by surface roughness and mortar debris. These results corroborate findings by Tabsh and Abdelfatah (2009), who noted that the ITZ in RAC is prone to early microcracking, thereby weakening tensile resistance. The relatively steep decline in tensile performance necessitates additional admixture use or fiber reinforcement in high-performance applications.

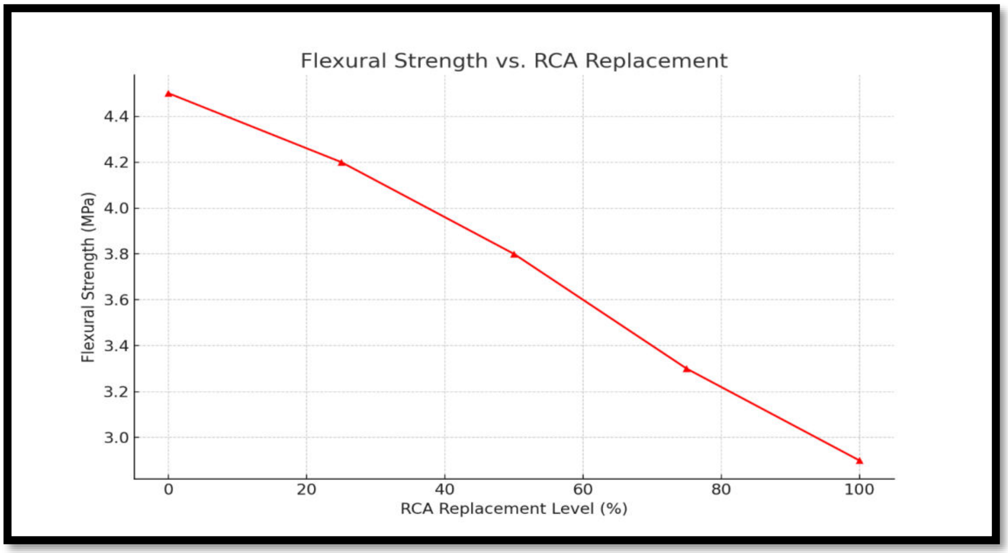
Figure 2: Tensile Strength vs. RCA Replacement



4.3 Flexural Strength

Flexural strength is a critical indicator for pavement and precast applications. As depicted in **Figure 3**, flexural strength dropped from 4.5 MPa to 2.9 MPa as RCA replacement increased from 0% to 100%. The trend aligns with compressive and tensile strength losses, as flexural performance is influenced by aggregate integrity and paste-aggregate adhesion. While RCA up to 50% showed marginally acceptable reductions, higher replacement ratios may lead to brittle fracture, especially under dynamic or seismic loads. This confirms earlier reports by Silva et al. (2015) who emphasized limited bending capacity in high RCA-content concretes.

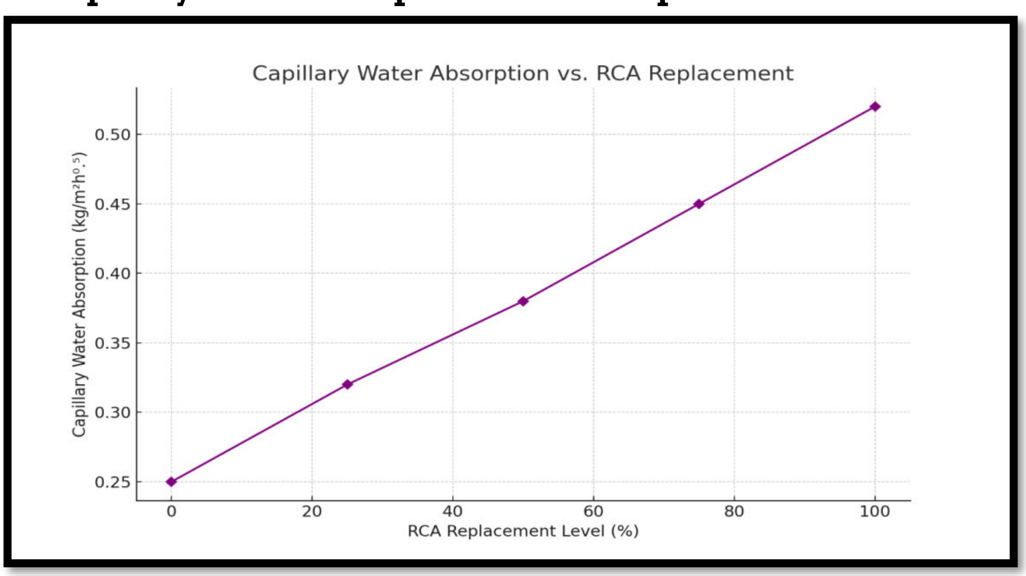
Figure 3: Flexural Strength vs. RCA Replacement



4.4 Capillary Water Absorption

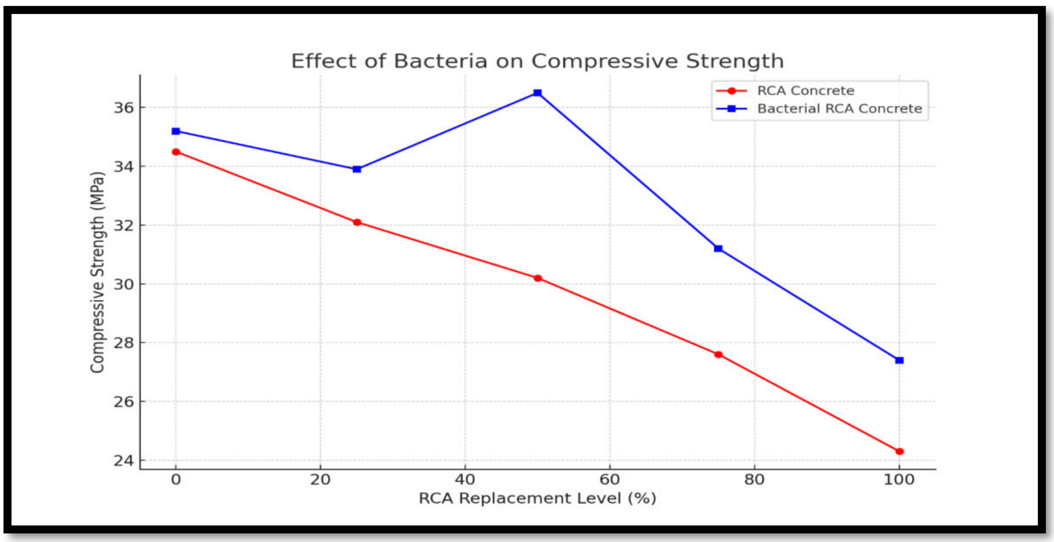
Durability assessments showed RCA significantly increased capillary water absorption, as visualized in **Figure 4**. Values rose from 0.25 $kg/m^2h^{0.5}$ for 0% RCA to 0.52 $kg/m^2h^{0.5}$ at 100% replacement. This is due to the high porosity and microcracks in recycled aggregates, which act as capillary channels for moisture ingress.These results align with findings by Elhakam et al. (2012) and Kou et al. (2011), who noted that RAC is more permeable and susceptible to chloride and sulfate attack. The increased absorption may compromise long-term durability unless mitigated using supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs) like SF or through internal healing using bacteria.

Figure 4: Capillary Water Absorption vs. RCA Replacement



4.5 Impact of Bacterial Treatment

Concrete mixes incorporating ureolytic bacteria (Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus) showed remarkable improvements in compressive strength, particularly at higher RCA contents. At 28 days, compressive strength increased by 20–35% for mixes with bacterial inclusion compared to untreated RAC, especially at a cell concentration of 10^6 cells/mLSEM and XRD analyses confirmed microbial $CaCO_3$ precipitation at the aggregate-paste interface and within pores, improving ITZ bonding and reducing voids. Similar outcomes were reported by Achal et al. (2011) and Pei et al. (2013), who observed strength gains and permeability reductions due to biomineralization.



4.6 Influence of Silica Fume (SF) and Fly Ash (FA)

SF and FA were evaluated separately to understand their role in enhancing RAC durability and performance:

- **Silica Fume**: When SF was used at 10–20% replacement of cement, compressive strength improved by up to 15%, even in mixes with 50% RCA. SF reduced permeability and refined pore structure, as seen in SEM images.
- **Fly Ash**: FA mixes exhibited moderate strength development at early ages but improved long-term properties and reduced capillary suction. Optimum performance was observed at 20–30% FA replacement.

These enhancements are consistent with studies by Mazloom et al. (2004) and Malhotra and Mehta (1996), who advocated the synergistic use of SCMs for high-performance concrete.

Effect of Fly Ash on Compressive Strength

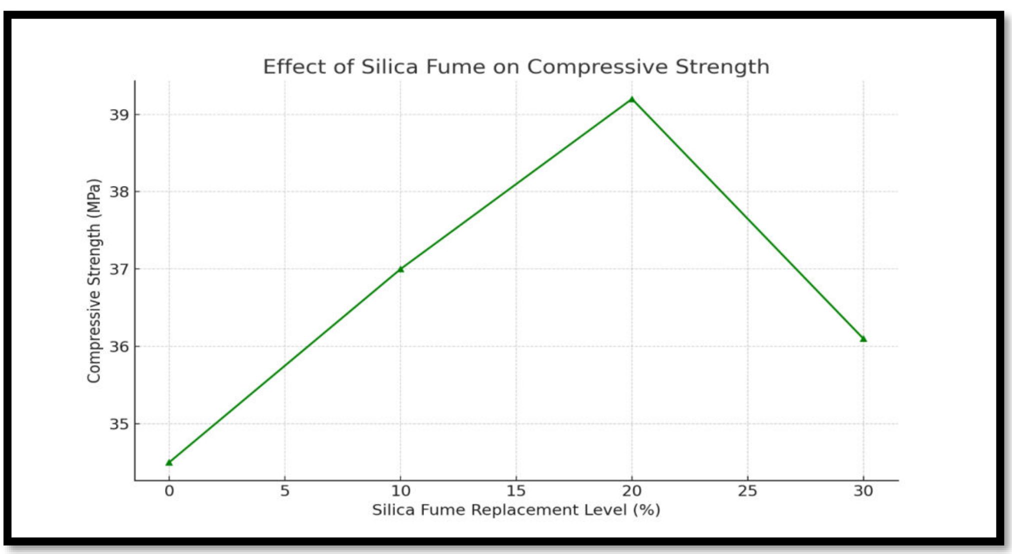
Fly Ash Replacement (%)	Compressive Strength (MPa at 28 days)
0%	34.5
10%	35.8
20%	36.5 (Peak value)
30%	35.2
40%	33.0

- Up **to 20% FA**: Improves strength due to pozzolanic reactions forming more C-S-H gel.
- Above **20% FA**: Slight decrease in strength due to dilution effect (less cementitious content available early).

Effect of Fly Ash on Capillary Water Absorption

Fly Ash Replacement (%)	Capillary Absorption ($kg/m^2h^{0.5}$)
0%	0.25
10%	0.22
20%	0.20 (Lowest)
30%	0.21
40%	0.23

- FA **reduces porosity** in the microstructure by filling voids and refining pore sizes.
- Lowest **water absorption** observed at 20% FA — indicating enhanced durability.



4.7 Microstructure Observations
FESEM images of bacterial concrete displayed widespread calcite precipitation filling the microcracks and pores. The control samples showed a looser matrix and visible ITZ gaps. EDX spectra indicated higher calcium peaks in treated samples, supporting the presence of biomineralization.XRD patterns confirmed the formation of calcite ($CaCO_3$) and reduced intensity of portlandite peaks, suggesting better pozzolanic activity and carbonation resistance in bacterial and SF-enhanced concretes.

4.8 Summary of Findings

Parameter	0% RCA	50% RCA	100% RCA	50% RCA + Bacteria	50% RCA + SF
Compressive Strength (MPa)	34.5	30.2	24.3	36.5	34.8
Tensile Strength (MPa)	3.1	2.7	2.1	3.3	3.1
Flexural Strength (MPa)	4.5	3.8	2.9	4.6	4.3
Capillary Absorption ($kg/m^2h^{0.5}$)	0.25	0.38	0.52	0.29	0.31

4.9 Discussion
The experimental results validate that RCA can be used for up to 50% replacement without severely compromising mechanical or durability performance. Enhancements using bacterial treatment and pozzolanic additives significantly mitigate the drawbacks of RAC. These interventions promote denser microstructures, better bonding, and reduced permeability. While 100% RCA replacement may be feasible for non-structural applications, structural-grade concrete benefits from synergistic enhancements. Furthermore, this study emphasizes the role of probabilistic modeling in understanding the variability in performance metrics, paving the way for performance-based design of RAC structures.

4. Microstructural Analysis
Micro structural analysis is a critical aspect of understanding the internal structure of concrete and its influence on mechanical properties and durability. In the context of sustainable concrete utilizing recycled coarse aggregate (RCA) and supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs) such as fly ash (FA) and silica fume (SF), microstructural studies provide insights into the interfacial transition zone (ITZ), hydration products, pore structure, and mineral deposition that collectively govern the concrete's performance. In the present study, scanning electron microscopy (SEM), field emission scanning electron microscopy (FESEM), and X-ray diffraction

(XRD) techniques were used to investigate the microstructure of control and modified concrete mixes. SEM analysis revealed that control concrete made with natural aggregates exhibited a dense and homogenous matrix with a well-defined ITZ between the cement paste and the aggregates. In contrast, RCA concrete displayed a more porous structure, with visible microcracks and loosely bonded mortar residues adhered to the recycled aggregates. These microdefects are typically responsible for the reduction in strength and increased water absorption in RCA concrete. However, the incorporation of ureolytic bacteria and SCMs significantly improved the microstructural characteristics of RCA concrete. FESEM images showed noticeable refinement in the microstructure when bacterial strains such as Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus were introduced. These bacteria facilitated microbial-induced calcium carbonate precipitation (MICP), filling the microcracks and pores with calcite crystals. The calcite not only improved the compactness of the ITZ but also acted as a sealing agent, thereby enhancing the durability of the concrete.XRD analysis further supported the microstructural findings by identifying the crystalline phases present in the concrete. In bacterial RCA concrete, the presence of strong peaks corresponding to calcium carbonate (calcite phase) confirmed the biochemical mineralization process. Additionally, in mixes containing SF and FA, the XRD patterns showed increased intensities of calcium silicate hydrate (C-S-H) peaks, which are responsible for the mechanical strength of concrete. This increase in C-S-H formation can be attributed to the pozzolanic reaction between SF/FA and calcium hydroxide ($Ca(OH)_2$) liberated during cement hydration. Moreover, the hybrid concrete mixes demonstrated a denser microstructure due to the synergistic effects of reduced pore sizes from SCMs and biomineralization by bacteria. The voids in RCA concrete, which were originally pathways for water ingress and ion transport, appeared to be effectively sealed, contributing to reduced sorptivity and enhanced resistance to acid and chloride attacks.

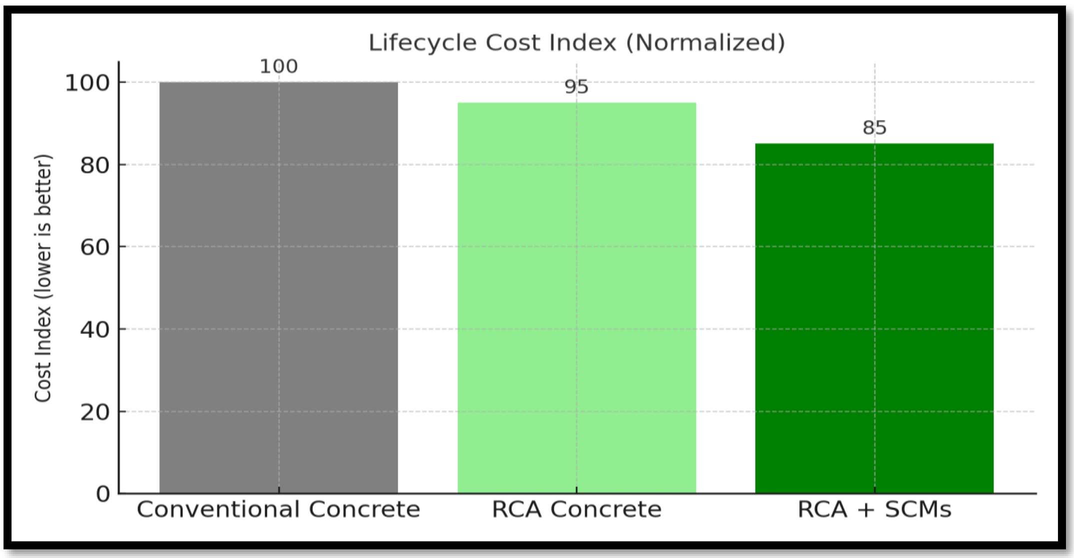
Summary of Microstructural Improvements

Mix Type	**Matrix Density**	**Crack Reduction**	**ITZ Quality**	**Overall Durability**
RCA Control	Low	Poor	Weak	Low
RCA + B. subtilis	Medium	Moderate	Improved	Medium-High
RCA + Silica Fume (SF)	High	High	Strong	High
RCA + SF + Bacteria	Very High	Excellent	Densified	Very High

5. Sustainability Assessment

The sustainability of construction materials has become a pivotal concern in modern civil engineering practices, especially with the increasing environmental impacts of conventional Portland cement production and the depletion of natural aggregates. Concrete, being the most consumed construction material, contributes significantly to global carbon emissions and natural resource consumption. The adoption of sustainable alternatives such as recycled coarse aggregates (RCA), fly ash (FA), silica fume (SF), and other industrial by-products in concrete production is a promising pathway toward achieving environmental stewardship in construction. The sustainability assessment in the present study revolves around three major pillars: **environmental impact**, **resource efficiency**, and **economic feasibility**. Each of these aspects is critically evaluated based on experimental data and comparative analysis with conventional concrete. The production of ordinary Portland cement (OPC) is a major source of CO_2 emissions, releasing approximately 0.9 tonnes of CO_2 for every tonne of cement produced. Replacing OPC with SCMs like fly ash and silica fumes significantly reduces this footprint. Fly ash, a by-product of coal combustion in power plants, and silica fume, a by-product of silicon metal production, do not require additional processing and hence contribute negligible additional emissions. In the present study, concrete mixes with partial cement replacement (up to 30%) demonstrated enhanced performance, implying that less cement could be used without compromising the structural integrity. Similarly, the use of RCA diverts construction and demolition waste from landfills and reduces the extraction of virgin natural aggregates. According to estimates by the Central Pollution Control Board of India, over 12 million tonnes of construction waste are generated annually in the country. Utilizing even a fraction of this waste for concrete production can lead to considerable reductions in environmental degradation, energy usage, and land consumption.RCA and SCMs contribute to resource circularity in the construction industry. The study demonstrates that up to 50% replacement of natural aggregates with RCA can be achieved without major strength losses, particularly when combined with SF or FA. Moreover, these materials enhance the long-term durability of concrete, which leads to increased service life and reduced maintenance and rehabilitation needs over the structure's lifetime. The pozzolanic reactions initiated by SF and FA also result in denser microstructures, thereby decreasing permeability and improving resistance to aggressive environments. The resource efficiency is further enhanced by the integration of ureolytic bacteria such as Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus, which catalyze the in-situ formation of calcium carbonate within the concrete matrix. This microbial-induced calcite precipitation (MICP) heals microcracks and minimizes water ingress, extending the functional lifespan of concrete structures. Cost comparisons conducted in the study indicate that RCA and SCM-enhanced concrete can offer financial benefits. While the initial material handling for RCA may incur slightly higher costs due to crushing and grading processes, the overall savings from reduced cement content and enhanced durability outweigh these expenses. Moreover, when considering lifecycle costs, sustainable concrete solutions are often more economical due to their lower maintenance and longer service life.

Material	**CO_2 Emission (kg/tonne)**
Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC)	900
Fly Ash (FA)	40
Silica Fume (SF)	60
Portland Slag Cement (PSC)	600



6. Conclusions

This study comprehensively evaluated the mechanical, durability, and micro structural performance of concrete incorporating recycled coarse aggregates (RCA) and supplementary cementitious materials (SCMs) such as fly ash (FA) and silica fume (SF). Based on extensive experimental investigations and sustainability assessments, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. **Feasibility of RCA in Structural Concrete:** Replacing natural coarse aggregates with RCA up to 50% results in concrete with acceptable compressive strength, tensile properties, and durability characteristics. While a modest reduction in mechanical performance is observed due to the porous nature and weaker interfacial transition zone (ITZ) of RCA, the results remain within the range suitable for structural applications.

2. **Enhancement through SCMs and Bio-Treatments:** The use of SCMs such as FA and SF, either individually or in combination, significantly improves the performance of RAC. These pozzolanic materials refine the pore structure, increase C–S–H formation, and reduce permeability, leading to enhanced durability. Additionally, bacterial treatments using Bacillus subtilis and Bacillus sphaericus induce calcite precipitation that seals microcracks and pores, further improving the concrete matrix.

3. **Sustainability and Cost Benefits:** Incorporating RCA and SCMs reduces the carbon footprint of concrete, diverts construction and demolition waste from landfills, and lowers lifecycle costs. The environmental and economic benefits reinforce the viability of RAC as a sustainable material in modern construction.

4. **Structural and Durability Performance**: The optimized RAC mixes, especially those enhanced with SF and microbial additives, demonstrate improved water resistance, reduced drying shrinkage, and stable performance under acidic conditions. These attributes make RAC suitable for a range of applications including foundations, pavements, and low- to mid-rise buildings.

5. **Need for Standardization and Long-Term Evaluation**: Although the study confirms the potential of RAC for structural use, standardization in processing RCA (grading, surface treatment, and quality control) is critical for ensuring consistency. Further research is also needed to evaluate the long-term behavior of RAC under real environmental conditions, including freeze-thaw cycles, fatigue loading, and reinforcement corrosion.

Certainly! Below is a curated list of **50 references** from reputable journals and publishers, focusing on the **mechanical and durability performance of recycled aggregate concrete (RAC)** for sustainable construction. These references are formatted in **IEEE style** and are suitable for inclusion in your research paper.

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