

Climate Justice for All

You just heard Greta who is a 16-year-old Swedish political activist working to stop global warming and climate change. In August last year, she got noticed when she started the first school strike for climate justice outside the Swedish parliament building. A few months later, her act gained momentum and she was invited to speak at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in December. Early this year, she was invited to talk to the World Economic Forum at Davos. Her words are hard hitting and have impacted millions of children and adults across the world. Her demand for climate justice has been heard by these school children who will be carrying out the Climate Strikes at more than 1600 places in 105 countries today on March 15th demanding the world leaders to take their futures seriously and treat climate change as a crisis. This movement has got so much attention that she has been nominated for Noble Peace Prize this year.

Rakesh: Hi, This is Rakesh Kamal, the Host and Producer at Suno India, a podcast platform for issues that matter. This week on The Suno India show, in the backdrop of this momentous global climate strikes, we will talk about the impact of climate change in India.

Those were some voices from the Delhi Climate strike today

In a world with such high inequity, crises such as these are what unites us all. India is the third largest emitter of CO2 but is also a country with some of the most vulnerable populations who will be negatively impacted by climate change. To understand these impacts better, we spoke to Disha Shetty, who is an independent journalist and a Columbia Journalism School Fellow. As part of her six-month long fellowship, she was assigned to cover impacts of climate change for IndiaSpend combining narrative long form journalism with data. She has been travelling the length and breadth of the country since October last year and has been meeting people on ground who have been impacted by climate change and also speaking to researchers. We spoke to Disha Shetty to understand the state of climate crisis on ground in India.

Padma: So I think one of your stories was about, the one that was report based was about, you know, how climate change will also increase conflict. So perhaps, can you just take, like, our listeners through that report and yeah. What, how, how you went about reporting that story and so on. Yeah.

Disha: Yes. So that particular report was by a European Agency which broadly said that as the climate will change and there will be more stress on resources and resources would start becoming limited, people will start fighting over it. The report also said that it would increase inequality because there will be government, certain stakeholders who will have more control over certain resources. It specifically named the Naxal movement in India and said movements like those and not necessarily only that but movements like those are likely to increase both in frequency and intensity as resources reduce over a period of time. The report also said that specifically the farming community and those who livelihoods depended on fishing would be the worst affected. And it looked at I believe data from several countries and not just India so it wasn't India specific but from all the ground reports that I have done so far, I have found that everything that they have sort of covered in that report is reflected on the grounds. So you do see a lot of fight over the resources,, so I'll give you an example, I was in Sunderbans to report on sea level rise and I was walking with this local guide who was telling about the issues there. And there was one woman who started yelling at him. And then I asked him why, and she's yelling at him in Bengali, and I asked him why she was doing that and he said, because he also helps a lot of aid coming into the area, the woman was angry that the aid that he brought in last time went to her neighbour and not her. So these are small examples but you're going to see, and that's my impression, that you're going to a lot of these kinds of small conflicts blow up over a period of time. In Honnavar in coastal Karnataka for instance, you had certain villages or small islands going

underwater, so a lot of people were losing their land. But the new land also that was forming because of soil deposition was going to the government. And then there was, and that was being given to five star hotels and other stakeholders who wanted these sea front properties. So there was a lot of resentment in the farming, in the fishing community, the community that was losing their land for reasons that weren't under their control. But the new land that basically nature was throwing up was not going to them.

Padma: what have been the most common thing that you have found across regions with regards to the impact of climate change. I mean, did you find any commonalities

Disha: I found in all the places that the impact of climate change has been happening for decades. I initially thought that I would struggle to find evidence which I had no trouble with. I, for example, in Honnavar, I was taken around this particular village that I eventually wrote about by a scientist called Prakash Mesta who took me to this location and he said there was an island right there and I'm staring at this vast Arabian Sea and I'm like, where is the island? He said, it's not there anymore. That's coastal erosion for you. So the impact was so stark. An entire island went underwater and nobody blinked. It just so happened that a lot of this land belonged to vulnerable populations, fishing communities, essentially poor communities. In Himalayas, a lot of the people that were affected initially were the farmers. Now since the tourists can see a lot of visible impact, you're hearing more about these impacts. I was surprised to find that there are a lot of studies done by Indian researchers across institutes in India. What I also found was that a lot of the state funded studies, the researchers were hesitant to talk about, whereas every time I reached out to an international expert, they were happy to comment on a particular study. So in Sunderbans for example, you've, there is no data. But the estimate suggests that thousands of people have already migrated. So migration is definitely a common theme across all my stories. You have people losing livelihoods and going in search of better opportunities but they don't necessarily see themselves as environmental migrants. So that's not how they identify, they don't identify a crop failure or salt water intrusion to the larger theme of climate change.

Padma: there are a lot of reports which talk about the impact of climate change being higher on women and children. Is impact more on women and children?

Disha: So there was two kinds of impacts. One is a base-drawn occupation. So like I said, agriculture and fishery. And the other, in terms of how does climate change affect different members of the same family. So the primary impact on women that I found was due to two reasons. One was migration. So the men would migrate out and the women were left to deal with the repercussion and take care of the children. So that is something that I saw in Orissa, I saw in the Sunderban delta region. So the men who are migrating out for better work opportunities. So women were having to shoulder disproportionate amount of household work. Apart from that, in areas where they have to fill water. So if the rainfall were showing a higher variability, they were having to walk longer. They were having to, because, for example in Odisha, there is a lot of salt water intrusion, so an entire village of like, four hundred people, sometimes depended on a single hand pump. Because all the other hand pumps were giving salty water. So you were able to see these impacts on women and because women were tasked with the responsibility of filling water for their families, it was, disproportionately, it was affecting them. Because they were walking for longer stretch, they were having to put in as much as four to five hours every day to just fill water. There were also examples of women saying that we don't drink a lot of water now, so that we don't have to fill a lot of water. I've been in one of my, in my Odisha story again, I've cross linked a story from Bangladesh done by a journalist there who spoke about all this, drinking a lot of salty water and then then the resultant hypertension was leading to higher rates of miscarriage, and affecting infant mortality and maternal mortality. And these are the effects that we could also see going forward if we continued to ignore the magnitude of the problem. In terms of children, I'm not sure what kind of an impact, I mean, nothing that I visibly saw. So I don't

think, and I haven't seen a lot of studies that focused on impact of climate change specifically on children, so I think that's a good area to, that we need to focus and see, have more research.

Padma: Did you see the climate change again disproportionately affect say, a certain caste or class of people? Or do you think like, in a village or in a community like in Sunderbans, it was just impacting everybody across the board?

Disha: So without a shadow of doubt, it was affecting certain castes and class of people more. So the caste would be the castes who are involved in fishing communities, because our caste system is based on occupation. So it was essentially these fishing communities who were living closer to the coast line. In Odisha, what I also saw is, villages tend, were divided along caste lines, so sometimes, an entire village would have just people from one particular caste. So there definitely is an intersection I'd say between class, caste and climate change in India, from what, from my observational evidence.

Padma: Did you come across climate change deniers? This is, yeah. Just curious to know if there are people in India who deny climate change.

Disha: In the expert community, not one. Among the people, not one. In fact, my first trip was to Hampta Pass in the Himalayas. And it, so, it wasn't really a planned trip. I had gone on a personal trek and I was to join this fellowship two weeks after that. And it just so happened that I started talking to a lot of people while on the trek, and that's how I found a lot of anecdotal evidence, and ended up doing interviews there. So people were very aware that it is due to global warming. So there were people who were saying, 'haan, prithvi garam ho rahi hai, isliye yeh sab ho raha hai.' So my observation was that everyone, all these affected communities, largely understood that these were changes beyond their control. There was resentment also. There were people who were saying upfront that this is because of other countries burning you know, causing pollution and here in our villages, we've got no development. Why should we pay a price? But those who were being affected by you know, these impacts, were obviously not denying climate change because it was their lived experience. And it has been a lived experience for nearly two decades in most of these areas.

Padma: There is a lot of conversation that is happening in the health and humanitarian world about the impact of climate change. Lot of reports which are attributing say the spread of Zika, the rise of dengue and even in fact there was a report that connected ebola to deforestation and climate change. So just looking at that intersection, is that something that you intend to delve more into

Disha: So I'm primarily a health journalist. And I've been bringing certain elements of impact of climate change on human health in a little, in a small capacity in most of these stories. Especially my Odisha story where I'm talking about the impact on women. It is largely the health impacts. So in, the, my next story is going to be about air pollution and climate change but it'll also have impacts on human health. This going forward, the intersection between climate change and human health, I think is going to be the biggest fall-outs and the biggest visible impact of climate change. In fact, it's very, from my interviews with experts, they were of the opinion that it's relatively easy to study the impacts of climate change on human health if we're diligent about keeping data. And this, it is an area that is getting attention.

Padma: So moving on. In terms of regulations and in terms of the government's response to this growing crisis of climate change, do you think it's doing enough in terms of the adaptation and mitigation measures

Disha: My personal opinion is that the government and the scientific community are not working together on this. so I'll talk about specific examples. In Honnavar and in Sunderbans, both places, they

were building coastal walls. Most people in the scientific community would agree that coastal walls won't work. They're just short term measures. But there isn't a lot of willingness to talk about long term solutions mainly because these solutions are hard decisions. The solution sometimes is as insane as move the entire population away from the coast, and how are you going to do that. So I think it's a huge problem that nobody wants to get into. There are also communities who don't want to move. So in Sunderbans, they are building flood water shelters, they are building coastal walls and especially because the communities are so desperate and there's so much pressure on the local administration to do something to make sure that their lands doesn't go on, don't go underwater. And their fields don't have salt water entering them. But in some cases, there is only so much that can be done. In other cases, the response has been delayed. So I recently went to Meghalaya to write about the forest there and impact of climate change. States like Meghalaya have taken the lead. They've formed a special department that is taking care of climate change. And there is a lot of awareness there. So some States have taken the lead. Most States I would say are still dragging their feet on it. And the scientific community also in my opinion has been working in silos. It's not like they don't know what's happening. But the ones within the government setup are stuck in the bureaucracy and I don't think are able to really make, push hard and make a point. And there's only little that if you're not really the decision maker, the policy maker that you can really do. You can only lobby and push the government. But I don't think at a national level the government has taken climate change seriously.

Padma: So there have been these school strikes that are happening across Europe and UK and elsewhere. Right, the climate change strikes. So just trying to understand, do you think having climate education and writing more about it like you're doing, could actually lead to like, a policy level change?

Disha: I'd say it is just one of the contributing factors. Keeping data is critical. Just maintaining data. Because your data will then give you empirical evidence of all the changes that have happened and that's going to really push policy makers. Just having data would also have more journalists take note of it. So I would say more than anything, starting with collecting data. Like in Sunderbans, I was surprised to know there isn't any study on the, you know, on the environmental impact of sea level rise. Bangladesh has a lot of studies but India doesn't. No large scale study that's looking at you know, the changes in rainfall patterns, the exact level of sea level rise, and then the impact on communities. The government should be doing all this. And it can't be 'oh it's not the State government's job, it's not the central government's job.' There are homes going underwater, why are we napping on that? So a lot of my reaction was, 'why are we not moving?' I don't understand. So definitely, data, and more research is the most important factor. And the moment we have data, I think policy will follow. And you will have more journalists writing about, the more journalists write about it, the more the civil society will increase pressure. Right now, because a lot of urban middle-class residents don't care, and the elites are not affected, it's not becoming a driver of change. So that's, that needs to change. we can't start reacting only when it affects us. If somebody else's home is going underwater, we have to react.

Rakesh: If somebody else's home is going underwater, we have to react- says Disha. As school students across the world strike demanding for climate justice, we perhaps have to pause and ask ourselves- as adults- are we letting our children and our planet down? School children doing a climate strike march might sound like a rebellious hippy movement to some but it seems like a wake-up call that they are making to the adults to start caring and act on climate.