

## CHAPTER 7

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# Social Mobilizations for Climate Action and Climate Justice in India

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### Introduction

In September 2019, more than 300 representatives of farmers' organizations, trade union federations, indigenous people's organizations, fisher groups, women's organizations, environmental groups, and a few progressive political parties from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and various parts of India met in Hyderabad. This four-day-long convention concluded with the founding of the South Asian People's Action on Climate Crisis (SAPACC). The delegates voiced their concerns about the anticipated effects of the impending climate crisis and 'critiqued the inadequacy of governments' policies' (Adve 2019). In the past, India's climate activists focused almost exclusively on multinational corporations and the governments of industrialized countries, who are responsible for causing the climate crisis. They argued that questioning the Indian government would 'dilute' the demand for holding industrialized countries accountable. Therefore, the SAPACC's public critiques of India and other countries in South Asia marks an important shift in the evolution of climate movements in the region.

Social movements and civil society organizations work within the complex politico-economic and institutional context of India. On the one hand, the Constitution of India is regarded as highly progressive, affording citizens a variety of civil and political rights and freedoms and a scaffolding of democratic institutions that are functional to some extent. This context is particularly conducive for the functioning of civil society institutions that focus on relatively less controversial

and apolitical questions, for example, Gandhian organizations dedicated to the 'welfare' of the poor, or those promoting tree-planting programmes. On the other hand, organizations advocating for the rights and entitlement of the poor, and those demanding effective enforcement of constitutional provisions and a welfare state, often confront a state that is extremely opaque and highly vindictive (Banerjee 2008). This 'Janus-faced nature of the postcolonial state' explains why some types of environmental movements thrive in Indian society while others face violent threats (Kashwan 2017, 10). Yet these contradictory workings of the Indian state must be understood in the context of global capitalism and its domestic beneficiaries. Instead of weakening state control in the wake of economic liberalization in the early 1990s and beyond, the Indian state has transformed into a highly centralized and extractive state that abuses its authority blatantly to selectively reallocate land and other natural resources (Rajan 2011).

This chapter situates the emerging climate justice movements in India in this broader political and economic context and the long-standing patterns of state power that led us to the present moment. Primarily, it examines three streams of social mobilizations: (a) conventional climate activism in India, focused mainly on the Global North and large corporations, (b) various people's movements that have advocated for holding governments in both the Global North and South accountable for their failure to address the environmental and climate crises, and (c) contemporary climate movements, including the youth climate movement in India. I bring together these three strands to investigate how their confluence may reshape climate politics and the pursuit of climate justice in India. Toward this end, this chapter analyses the political implications of the various forms of environmentalisms in India (Mawdsley 2004; Baviskar 2019). It also scrutinizes the claim that climate change presents a fundamental challenge to India's environmental movements (Lele 2012; Swarnakar 2019).

A key insight presented in this chapter is that scholarship on both Indian environmentalisms and Indian climate movements requires a more nuanced and fuller engagement with politics. This includes the multiple ways in which environmental and climate movements respond to and engage with policymaking processes and the institutional structures of the state. The next section outlines the key arguments concerning the political entanglements and draws implications for environmental social movements. It develops an analytical lens to examine how movements deploy a plethora of skills, resources, and narratives in different political spaces, both nationally and internationally. The third section uses this lens to examine how three of India's best-known environmental movements deployed various strands of environmentalisms and how it affected for their key constituents.

This is followed in the fourth section by a discussion of the three strands of climate movements in India and their likely consequences for the pursuit of climate justice. The concluding section synthesizes insights from analyses of India's environmental and climate movements to reflect on challenges concerning political accountability in India.

### **The politics of environmentalisms in India: an analytical lens**

The scholarship on environmentalisms in India has contributed varied approaches to understand social action concerning the environment. The most prominent of these concepts is 'environmentalism of the poor', which is defined as 'actions and concerns in situations where the environment is a source of livelihood' (Martinez-Alier 2014). In the face of increasing threats to the environment and natural resources, people whose livelihoods depend on these environmental resources are likely to mobilize in favour of environmental protection. This has prompted some to refer to this form of mobilization as 'livelihood environmentalism' (Ramesh 2010). The environmentalism of the poor is often juxtaposed against 'elite environmentalism', which involves 'a class of ex-hunters turned conservationists belonging mostly to the declining Indian feudal elite and ... representatives of international agencies' (Guha 1989, 3). These networks of transnational elites advocate for an elite environmentalism that is structured to 'transplant the American system of national parks onto Indian soil' (Guha 1989, 3). This model of elite environmentalism has been adopted quite fervently by India's burgeoning middle classes who seek to mimic the lifestyle of middle-class Americans and consider weekend trips to national parks in SUVs (sport utility vehicles) as an indication of their environmental commitment (Mawdsley 2004).

Amita Baviskar has further developed and broadened these arguments in her work on bourgeois environmentalism, specifically in the context of urban environmental campaigns. Baviskar defines bourgeois environmentalism as 'the (mainly) middle-class pursuit of order, hygiene and safety, and ecological conservation ...' (Baviskar 2019, 110). This form of environmentalism emphasizes a "clean and green" environment, aesthetically slick and sanitized – without looking at one's complicity in creating environmental problems in the first place' (Ganesan 2020). Here, the middle classes mobilize universalistic discourses of 'citizenship', 'civic concerns', and 'public interest', but with the very specific intent of excluding the poor (Baviskar 2019). As such, the concept of bourgeois environmentalism draws attention to the influence of the multiple layers of sociocultural reality that shape the environmentalism of India's influential middle and upper classes.

Building on this rich scholarship on various forms of environmentalism, this chapter seeks to bring a sharper focus to the political dimensions of the different types of environmentalisms. Its approach is inspired by the vast scholarship on social movements in India and abroad (Swain 1997; Ray and Katzenstein 2005). As several of the contributors to the volume edited by Ray and Katzenstein (2005) argue, the Indian state has always exercised a very strong influence on the functioning of social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The (im)balance of power between state actors and society has changed significantly from the Nehruvian era's tolerance of social movements to the blatantly authoritarian regime that is in power now (Kashwan 2014; Sud 2020).

The foundations of Indian bureaucracy were laid during colonial rule when bureaucratic structures were not intended to be accountable to society at large. As a result, India's bureaucracy is considered 'over-developed', with very little social control and democratic accountability (Haque 1997). This incongruence between bureaucratic powers and democratic control has only widened in the post-independence era, as popular access to state apparatus has become a means of social power. This also means that civil society organizations in India are less likely to be effective compared to those in countries with relatively stronger mechanisms for state accountability. Understanding the drivers for success of environmental and climate movements requires a deeper analysis of their relation with state institutions, including the judiciary and administrative apparatus responsible for upholding environmental and climate regulations. While mass social movements are no match for the unaccountable and unforgiving authority of the Indian state, some movements have scored important successes, especially via judicial interventions in cases such as the Samatha judgment, the Niyamgiri judgment, and the judgments in response to the legal advocacy pursued by Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) (Banerjee 2008). We need to evaluate the strategies adopted by environmental social movements, and the extent to which they have been successful, in the context of the highly asymmetric power of market and state actors.

Two analytical strategies are central to the arguments I make in this chapter about the politics of the different forms of environmentalism. The first of these relates to the Habermasian 'public sphere', which is defined as 'the social space in which different opinions are expressed, problems of general concern are discussed, and collective solutions are developed *communicatively*' (Wessler and Freudenthaler 2018, italics added for emphasis). This chapter argues that the scholarship on the different varieties of environmentalism must build on, but go beyond, an investigation of the nature of the 'public sphere' (Baviskar 2019, 110). Even in the best of circumstances, articulation of grievances in the public sphere is merely the first step. Such grievances

must then be addressed through prioritization and allocation of resources, which is the domain of politics beyond the narrow debates of the public sphere (cf. Mehta 2013). Knowing this and intent on serving their constituents, social movements strategize to respond to a given political environment. Such strategies could range from increased efforts to strengthen their grassroots presence, networks, and popularity to appealing to middle-class urban supporters, who, until recently, were relatively well-protected against the oppressive tactics of the state (Sinha 2021). Such a contextualized approach to judicious decision-making takes on board social, cultural, and political factors and processes that shape the decision-making of movements and counter-movements (Koopmans 2005).

This chapter broadens existing analyses of environmental and climate movements by focusing on the extent to which movements enter and navigate various political spaces and processes. It also recognizes that social hierarchies and the socio-economic status of movement participants shape movements strategies. This allows for the possibility that a movement's outcomes can have very different meanings and implications for various groups within a diverse pool of supporters and followers. One central argument is that movements may adopt multiple frames, environmental discourses, and political strategies, some of which may seem contradictory to an external observer. The next section applies this approach to investigate three of India's most prominent movements.

## **India's environmental movements and environmentalisms**

Three of the most renowned environmental movements in India are the Chipko movement, the Silent Valley movement in Kerala, and the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA) movement against the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). They offer a useful snapshot of the varying ways in which movements engage with different political spaces using diverse frames that resonate differently with various sections of society. To be clear, my goal is not to present an exhaustive analysis of these movements or to argue that political processes were the only determinants that shaped their outcomes. Instead, it is to demonstrate that in addition to the most commonly talked about factors, political factors also had long-lasting consequences for the movement's supporters and participants.

### **Chipko movement, Uttarakhand Himalaya**

Chipko (literally, 'hug the trees') was spearheaded by Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal (DGSM), a local Gandhian organization founded in 1964 with the mission

of establishing forest-based enterprises that create local employment opportunities. However, the forest policy favoured city-based contractors over grassroots groups such as DGSM. The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was the forest department's refusal to grant DGSM the permission to harvest ten ash trees that they could use in a workshop on making the tools needed for subsistence farming. Shortly afterward, in March 1973, the forest department allowed a sporting goods company to harvest 300 ash trees from the same forest, which triggered what metamorphosed into the famous Chipko movement (Jain 1984). The main organizers were individuals involved in local production forestry and wood-processing work who aimed to secure local control of forests for forest labour co-operatives (FLCs). While women did play an important role in the movement, their central concerns were not dramatically different – they mobilized to demand local control over forest resources that are crucial for small-scale farming and forest-based subsistence. Yet Chipko is often portrayed as an environmental or ecofeminist movement (cf. Rangan 1997). Neither of these terms is an accurate depiction of the grassroots movement that the men and women of Uttarakhand Himalaya began.

Chipko's most widely known leader, Sundarlal Bahuguna, was a timber contractor who transformed himself into a radical green leader. Scholars suggest that this move was linked possibly to Bahuguna's realization that this would help him get closer to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, whose love for the environment was well-known (Sinha, Gururani, and Greenberg 1997). Eventually, Bahuguna and Indira Gandhi's non-environmental considerations of social and political influence resulted in a 15-year ban on harvesting trees in the Uttarakhand hills, which, in turn, brought international fame to the movement (Baviskar 2005, 165–166). The frames and strategies that Chipko's male leadership employed had significant negative consequences for the men and women of Uttarakhand Himalaya who participated in the grassroots protests. This is evident from interviews that Gayatri Devi, one of the prominent women leaders and the president of the Mahila Manga Dal of Doongri village, gave many years later.<sup>1</sup> Responding to a question from the environmental weekly, *Down to Earth* – which asked her 'What did you get out of Chipko?' – Devi said,

... we never got anything out of it. The road to our village is yet to be constructed and water is still a problem. Our children cannot study beyond high school unless they can afford to go and stay in a town. The girls simply cannot do that. Now they tell me that because of Chipko the road cannot be built because everything

<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Devi was in Delhi to receive Government of India's Vrikshamitra Award in 1986 for the role that villagers of Doongri played in Chipko.

has become *pariyavaran* (environment) oriented nowadays. *Hamare haq haqooq cheen liye gaye hain.* (Our rights have been snatched away) ... My first fight will be for the road, *pariyavaran wale chahe kuchh bhi kare* (and let environmentalists do what they will). (Mitra 1993)

Two of the key local women leaders of Chipko, Gayatri Devi and Gaura Devi of Raini, have stated ambivalent views about Chipko's success (Linkenbach 2001). Their testimonies, as well as those of others, suggest that the popular narratives surrounding the Chipko movement were influenced quite significantly by the political ambitions of its male leaders. To be clear, rural women did lead local mobilizations, but the rationale and arguments of the local women leaders were not the ones that dominated headlines. One of them explicitly denied ever having hugged trees. In at least one instance, Bahuguna is alleged to have presented a random woman as one of the leaders of the Chipko movement (Linkenbach 2001). Chipko was hyped nationally and internationally because of its appeal as a purist environmental movement (Rangan 2000). Yet the narratives of grassroots environmentalism popularized by the Chipko leadership have been deployed by other environmental movements and middle-class environmental activists.

The creation of the Nanda Devi National Park and Biosphere Reserve in the heart of Chipko land has exacerbated feelings of disenchantment among the local people, especially the Bhotias (Dogra 2002). While much of the natural sciences literature on the reserve makes clichéd references to the local communities' love for the environment, the Bhotias deployed the Chipko narratives to contest the exclusionary park-based model of conservation. Moreover, they proposed a new model of community-based tourism for 'the transformation of our region into a global centre for peace, prosperity and biodiversity conservation' (Bosak and Schroeder 2004, 6). Many Bhotias also circumvent the park-related restrictions to collect and market cordyceps, a medicinal fungus that grows in high-elevation meadows in the region (Caplins, Halvorson, and Bosak 2018). For some local community groups, the pendulum of Chipko history has swung back to where it started – that is, to the assertion of local rights to and control over the region's natural resources.

### Silent Valley movement

The Silent Valley movement was led by scientists, teachers, and professionals and enjoyed significant popularity among the middle and upper classes (Jasanoff 1993). The Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP), the grassroots science literacy group that spearheaded the movement within Kerala, sought to arm people with the 'weapon of

scientific knowledge' to help them overcome their state of underdevelopment (Menon 2012). The Silent Valley movement leveraged social and political mobilization to ensure environmental protection for the valley and contest the feasibility and desirability of new hydroelectric dams. Though restricted primarily to the middle and upper classes, the movement yielded benefits for ecology and society, including for the poor fisherfolk and peasants living on the banks of the Kuntipuzha river. Kuntipuzha is the only undammed perennial tributary of the Bharathapuzha river, with upstream catchments originating in the Silent Valley and Mukurthi National Parks (Shaji 2015). By some measures, it is reasonable to refer to Silent Valley as a 'people's movement that saved a forest', as argued by Shekar Dattatri, whose documentary on Silent Valley brought him international fame (Dattatri 2015). The then prime minister, Indira Gandhi, is also credited for the movement's success. However, Gandhi's support for Silent Valley was hard-won.

N. D. Jayal, the then joint secretary for forests and wildlife, played a crucial role. During a visit to the valley, Jayal watched a slide show on the richness of the valley's flora and fauna, which made him sympathetic to the cause. However, his realistic assessment was that the demands to save it 'would cut no ice with the government' (Warrier 2018). So, instead of working through the government machinery, Jayal requested the famed ornithologist Salim Ali to intervene. Ali wrote to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who was also 'overwhelmed by letters from overseas' (Ramesh 2017, 271). This included a letter from the director-general of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), who received a prompt response from Gandhi decrying 'a Marxist Government in Kerala which is anxious to go ahead with the project' (Ramesh 2017: 270). Gandhi set up the M.G.K. Menon Committee to investigate the matter. In its final report, the Menon Committee expressed serious concerns about the proposed dam because of the threat it posed for the valley's ecological diversity. The success of the Silent Valley movement was because of the strong support it received from India's middle-class environmental activists and political elites. Such support notwithstanding, even under the greenest PM India had, it took the combined might of highly influential public figures, both within the government and outside of it, to stop the dam.

### **Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)**

The NBA was founded in 1985 with the explicit goal of securing the rights and livelihoods of people affected by the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP). In 1985, the World Bank approved \$450 million for the SSP, which was the largest of dozens of large dams planned under one of the world's largest multipurpose projects, the Narmada

Valley Development Project (NVDP) (Mathew-Shah 2015). The NBA's multifaceted mobilization, as I shall discuss further, forced the World Bank to exit the SSP in 1993 and constitute a World Commission on Dams (WCD) in May 1998, with Medha Patkar as one of its members (Vombatkere 2016). The NBA also successfully mobilized the government to establish a policy framework for the rehabilitation and resettlement of project-affected people. This did not prevent the construction of the dam, which was completed in 2015 (Satheesh 2019).

The NBA started off with demands for fair resettlement and rehabilitation, but it also took up some environmental demands with the aid of influential environmentalist groups within India and abroad. Some scholars have argued that the NBA successfully brought together 'the red politics of class struggle ... and the green politics of preserving and conserving the environment' (Ganesan 2020). However, others argued that NBA's alliances with international NGOs *shifted* its focus 'from rehabilitation and resettlement to environmental sustainability ... [which] made the movement internationally visible ... (Shah et al. 2019, 20). They argue that large and resourceful environmental NGOs headquartered in the Global North 'privileged the "green" component at the cost of the "red"' (Shah et al. 2019, 20). Indeed, the NBA's decision to include an environmental agenda resonated with middle-class environmental sensibilities at home and abroad. However, the NBA's reliance on middle-class Indian activists and global environmental groups must also be seen in the context of the Indian state's refusal to engage with its demands seriously (for an extensive discussion, see Banerjee 2008). Moreover, one cannot ignore the fact that the support of national and international environmental groups was instrumental in forcing the World Bank to initiate a series of reforms that also prompted the Government of India to develop a rehabilitation and resettlement policy framework.

The increasing influence of urban and cosmopolitan activism also gave rise to questions of representation within the NBA. A prominent local Adivasi leader asked if 'to say yes to everything that is said, to participate in activities, fill water in tubs, sweep the floor, cook food, wash utensils, carry news about NBA activities to villages, wash other peoples (*sic*) clothes; are these the main task for Adivasi activists? Is this the Adivasi leadership?' (Dwivedi 1998, 176). When another Adivasi activist asked one of the top NBA leaders 'Why are there no Adivasis in the NBA leadership?' his response was: 'Our village-level leaders are all Adivasis' (Omvedt 1997). Such a response validates the complaints raised by the local Adivasi leader mentioned above. The NBA's support base was also entangled in local caste hierarchies as 'the *majority* of affected villagers who were active participants in the Andolan consisted of relatively prosperous upper-caste farmers from the fertile plains' (Baviskar

2019, 32, italics added for emphasis). Yet the movement's metropolitan supporters projected that the movement predominantly comprised

... hill adivasis, picturesque in their traditional clothing, holding bows and arrows, defending a lifestyle based on benign co-existence with nature. Such performances portrayed adivasis as 'ecologically noble savages' such that saving them was coterminous with saving the river and forests. (Baviskar 2019)

This validates the argument that NBA mobilization tapped into middle-class and 'Western' conceptualizations of a marginalized community fighting to protect the pristine environment within which they live. In India and elsewhere, Adivasis and indigenous people have been stereotyped and essentialized within environmental conservation, which simultaneously continues to pay homage to indigenous rights to territorial sovereignty (Kashwan 2013; Sinha, Gururani, and Greenberg 1997). Yet it is difficult to draw strong inferences in an abstract analysis such as this. We must assess the NBA's success in addressing the multiple challenges that it confronted within the context of repressive state responses and limited resources to sustain a mass movement, especially if the movement had to maintain its support among Adivasi peasants (Banerjee 2008).

### **Indian environmentalism: what succeeds?**

The discussion above shows that three of the most celebrated environmental movements in India relied very heavily on middle-class and international supporters who prioritized environmental concerns over the subsistence interests of local communities. However, each of these movements confronted very different circumstances, which is why their comparative analysis offers important lessons.

Silent Valley was a middle-class environmental movement that did not address questions of social justice (Omvedt 1987). Most importantly, the movement had support at the highest level of the political establishment. The male leaders of the Chipko movement portrayed it as a women's tree-hugging movement, an image that was central to academics and activists presenting Chipko as an instance of ecofeminism (for an extensive critique, see Rangan 2000). And finally, some activists within the NBA deployed simplistic and essentialized images of hill tribes living in harmony with nature, but such discourses were also accompanied by strong arguments in favour of securing local communities' rights to natural resources. However, contrary to the other two movements, the NBA faced a hostile state, which used extra-legal violence against NBA supporters and allied groups (Banerjee 2008).

Paul Routledge makes a strong argument for the scholarly responsibility to appreciate the imperatives the NBA faced to present an ‘unambiguous ... public image’ after smoothing over ‘complexities and nuances within everyday realities in the Narmada valley’ (Routledge 2003, 266). Tania Murray Li makes a related argument, suggesting that many social movement strategies are similar to ‘creating an ant path’, allowing them to ‘push boundaries, opening up the terrain for progressive politics ... while operating within the lines of intelligibility of transnational donors or government departments’ (Li 2014: 229).

These questions regarding the broader context dominated by a state co-opted by crony capitalists, the specific nature of state–movement relations, resource mobilization, representation, and political strategies should be at the core of any investigation of contemporary climate movements, which will invariably face similar challenges.

### **Climate movements and climate justice in India**

For the better part of a quarter century of global climate negotiations, every key constituency in India has presented a unified position regarding India’s climate strategy. Ironically, even as civil society lent its support to climate nationalism, the Government of India’s position went through a gradual but perceptible change, especially after the failed Copenhagen Conference of Parties (CoP). At the Cancun CoP, India’s Minister for Environment and Climate Change, Jairam Ramesh, made an ‘impromptu addition’ to his address at the high-level segment of the climate talks: ‘All countries must take binding commitments under appropriate legal form’ (Ramesh 2015). While there was much consternation at this changed stance, none of this has led to meaningful climate action. The following discussion illustrates that the history of activism for domestic climate justice is much longer and its roots are much deeper than is sometimes apparent from the present scholarship on climate governance in India.

### **History of domestic climate justice activism in India**

Many of India’s social activists joined hands to form the Indian Climate Justice Forum (ICJF), a coalition of Indian and international groups that mobilized on the occasion of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change’s (UNFCCC) Conference of the Parties-8 (CoP8) meeting in October–November 2002 in New Delhi. It was meant to be a platform for marginalized groups and their representatives who are often left out of United Nations (UN) negotiations. The ICJF

organized a Climate Justice Summit, which was attended by the National Fishworkers' Forum from Kerala and West Bengal; farmers from the Andhra Pradesh Vyavasay Vruthidarula Union (Agricultural Workers and Marginal Farmers Union); Adivasis representing the NBA from the Narmada Valley; indigenous people of the North-East states; and representatives from disaster prone areas in Orissa. Participants at the summit highlighted inequities within India – such as the instance of migrant workers in Delhi who came to the city to work as rickshaw-pullers and construction workers because they had been displaced by coal mining, floods, and drought. These rickshaw-pullers were the target of middle-class environmentalist campaigns to bring order to Delhi's streets (Baviskar 2019). Reflecting on the ongoing controversy, a rickshaw-puller commented, 'The rich people drive around this district of Delhi one person to a car – they are contributing to the pollution. We do not make any pollution yet we are banned from ... work' (Khastagir 2002).

The risks of market actors making inroads into global climate governance, which these protests in Delhi flagged, turned out to be quite prescient. The Bali Action Plan, which was agreed upon at CoP13 in December 2007, catalysed a reliance on markets, ostensibly with the goal of promoting cost-effective climate mitigation. The Bali Action Plan institutionalized the use of forests as a means of climate mitigation by '[r]educing emissions from deforestation and forest degradation (REDD) in developing countries' (UNFCCC 2007). The Bali conference also proved to be a fountain of global and transnational climate justice mobilizations in various parts of the Global South. Soon after, activists engaging with issues in various sectors of the economy founded the India Climate Justice (ICJ) collective. The ICJ drew inspiration from the deliberations of the Durban Coalition for Climate Justice. The ICJ newsletter, *Mausam* (literally, 'weather' in Hindi), published with the support of UK-based activists Jutta Kill of FERN and Larry Lohmann of Cornerhouse, UK, sought to start a public conversation on climate in India.<sup>2</sup> *Mausam* debuted with a sharp critique of the dominant framework of international equity as the sole measure of climate justice:

You cannot deny a sovereign nation its developmental energy, and the necessary, absolutely necessary, emissions, argues the government. The mainstream media; the political, scientific, and economic fraternities; and many 'responsible' NGOs echo the view. Yes, there is a climate crisis. But we did not create it, and necessary adaptation and mitigation measures will be taken; a national climate action plan

<sup>2</sup> These groups included the North Eastern Society for the Preservation of Nature and Wildlife (NESPON), the National Forum of Forest People and Forest Workers, and Nagarik Mancha, Kolkata.

is on board. ... Yes, but who are 'we'? Who 'are' the nation we celebrate? What defines 'development'? (Ghosh 2008, 2)

These climate activists did not necessarily see a conflict between the goals of international and domestic climate justice or fear that demanding comprehensive global and national climate action would overshadow longstanding environmental struggles within the country (cf. Dubash 2019). For example, the articles published in the very first issue of *Mausam* criticized India's increasing energy consumption, cautioned about biofuel's detrimental effects on India's commons and commoners, and exposed the 'scam' of CDM (the Clean Development Mechanism under the Kyoto Protocol).<sup>3</sup> Despite levelling a strong critique of both global and national policies, these groups continued to strongly support the principle of Common but Differentiated Responsibility (CBDR). Yet the more eclectic positions these groups developed were not sufficiently represented in international forums, in part because transnational networks, like the Climate Action Network, only supported groups that aligned with discourses of international equity.<sup>4</sup>

### Indian climate movements today

The post-Paris scenario of global climate (non)action seems to vindicate most of the arguments that climate justice groups like ICJF made over a decade back. This includes the argument that the Government of India should be held accountable for its environmentally destructive models of development. Some of the key figures in the ICJ collective are also involved in the founding of the SAPACC, which seeks to foster science-based climate action by engaging with core constituencies within key sectors in the Indian economy. The first elected coordinator of SAPACC, Sudershan Rao Sarde, is the former director of the South Asian Regional Office of the International Metalworkers Federation (IMF). The first SAPACC convention, held in September 2019, saw a significant participation of union leaders; they recounted the wise words from Sharan Burrow, general secretary of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC), who often says to her fellow trade unionists: 'There are no jobs on a dead planet' (Adve 2019).

Not all mainstream trade union leaders are on board, though. Some of them argue that their members are unwilling to support the SAPACC position that India needs

<sup>3</sup> Past and current issues of *Mausam* are filed at <http://www.thecornerhouse.org.uk/resources/results/mausam%20taxonomy%3A14> (accessed 26 December 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Personal video interview, India Climate Justice activist, 10 June 2020.

to transition from coal and other fossil fuel-based energy sources to renewable energy.<sup>5</sup> The positions of various workers across India are very different from those of organized trade unions, who continue to stand by longstanding notions regarding India's supposed national interests. However, the trade union sector has also expanded, with the emergence of new unions such as the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI) founded in 2002. The NTUI seeks to provide an independent, democratic, and militant voice to working people in India. It is a member of the Trade Unions for Energy Democracy (TUED).<sup>6</sup> The NTUI links emission reductions with questions of social justice and development. It advocates for better regulation of the energy sector to address the climate crisis, while also pursuing 'a transition that recognises the development needs of people in the South and the key role of Labour in this process' (Mathews, Barria, and Roy 2016).

The recent uptick in youth movements in response to the climate crisis seems to be a promising avenue for a new wave of mobilization. While social media offers a low-cost and user-friendly way of making an immediate connection with the youth, India's gaping digital divide means that a heavy reliance on social media is likely to produce a movement that is skewed toward upper-middle- and upper-class youth. These biases manifested during a march to protest the government's failure to act in response to the ongoing climate crisis and stem environmental degradation. A man employed as a security guard asked a young activist carrying a placard and shouting slogans as part of the march, '*Yeh morcha kis liye kar rahe ho aap log?* (What are you guys marching for?)'. The activist struggled to articulate the core message (Joshi 2019). While Joshi attributed this awkward situation to a 'language gap', the gap between India's young climate warriors and the majority of India's population is more substantive.

Notwithstanding the aforementioned gap, India's youth environmental and climate movements are already making an impact. Youth movements spearheaded social mobilization contesting the Indian government's efforts to dilute Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) guidelines. In response, the union environment minister, Prakash Javadekar, complained about receiving 'multiple emails with the subject name similar to "EIA 2020"' (Agarwal 2020). The Delhi

<sup>5</sup> Personal video interview, India Climate Justice activist, 10 June 2020.

<sup>6</sup> TUED is a global, multi-sector initiative working to advance democratic direction and the control of energy in a way that promotes solutions to the climate crisis, energy poverty, the degradation of both land and people. It responds to the attacks on workers' rights and protections. <http://unionsforenergydemocracy.org/about/about-the-initiative/> (accessed 26 December 2021).

police blocked the websites of the Let India Breathe campaign for 26 days and of Fridays for Future India (FFFI) for two weeks, apparently because they found their contents ‘objectionable’, depicting an ‘unlawful or terrorist act’, and proving ‘dangerous for the peace, tranquility and sovereignty of the [sic] India’. Moreover, the service providers for these websites were issued a notice under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) (Adve 2021). The Indian government’s repressive tendencies came to the fore recently when Disha Ravi, a Bangalore-based activist of the FFFI, was arrested for editing a Google document circulated by youth climate activist Greta Thunberg for mobilizing support for farmers protesting against the Modi government (*The Wire* 2021). Disha Ravi’s arrest had a ‘chilling effect’ on youth movements (Rakesh 2021). However, Ravi has led from the front, releasing a brave and insightful statement after she was granted bail in the Thunberg dossier case. It is worth quoting the following long excerpt from this statement:

I also realized, during my time in custody, that most people knew little or nothing about climate activism or climate justice. My grandparents, who are farmers, indirectly birthed my climate activism. I had to bear witness to how the water crisis affected them, but my work was reduced to tree plantation drives and clean-ups which are important but not the same as struggling for survival. Climate Justice is about intersectional equity ... It is a fight alongside those who are displaced; whose rivers have been poisoned; whose lands were stolen; who watch their houses get washed away every other season; and those who fight tirelessly for what are basic human rights. We fight alongside those actively silenced by the masses and portrayed as ‘voiceless,’ because it is easier for savarnas to call them voiceless. We take the easy way out and fund saviourism rather than amplify the voices on ground. (*News Minute* 2021)

India’s youth movements, especially under the leadership of young activists from diverse backgrounds, is a source of hope for India’s environmental and climate movements.

### **Conclusion: toward transnational mobilizations for accountability in climate action**

The history and evolution of India’s environmental and climate movements, which I have surveyed in this chapter, demonstrates one undeniable fact. Middle-class or bourgeois narratives of environmentalism are extremely popular, both at home and abroad, especially among those who hold power in the status quo. However, as my analysis shows, in each instance, it also produces negative consequences

for marginalized groups whom the movements seek to serve. It also shows that middle-class environmentalism is not just an urban phenomenon. On the other hand, elements of middle-class environmentalism in rural and forest contexts are entangled in 'new traditionalist discourses' that essentialize 'local communities' to appeal to romantic notions of rebellious and virtuous peasants standing up to exploitative market and state actors (Sinha, Gururani, and Greenberg 1997). Despite these and other longstanding critiques of 'the local trap', in which outsiders falsely assume that 'localized decision-making is inherently more socially just or ecologically sustainable', the romantic and essentialized portrayal of 'community' has endured within Indian environmentalism (Purcell and Brown 2005).

These discursive frames led to outcomes that reinforced inequalities within the complex field of transnational advocacy. For example, the NBA's Western supporters evoked 'moral outrage and a sense of duty ... to act on behalf of the Narmada people', while neglecting the ways in which the forces of capitalism emanating from the Global North were implicated in those injustices. These efforts were directed towards 'a localized, bounded community ... on the basis of humanitarian concerns rather than emerging from global issues of interdependency [and] ... a common struggle with the people of the Valley' (Shukla 2009, 141). We observe these very effects across different scales of advocacy within India – such as between the NBA's urban middle-class supporters and its local constituents. However, in a different political context, the NBA could have spawned into an alternative political project, one which would have focused on developing, rather than assuming as given, the principles and practices of 'equity, equality, participation, and ecological responsibility' (Sinha, Gururani, and Greenberg. 1997, 89–90).

The main lesson here is that instead of conceptualizing India's climate movement or climate justice movement as a monolithic phenomenon, it is important to investigate how diverse – and at times competing – frames and discourses of climate justice become part of climate governance debates in India. Careful scrutiny of environmental justice debates in India offers deep insights into the politics of competing frames. While indigenous rights are increasingly being recognized within the global community, some of India's prominent conservationists refuse to accept these arguments. Bittu Saigal, the editor of the *Sanctuary Asia* magazine, has referred to the enactment of the Forest Rights Act as Indian 'democracy's lowest hour' (Kashwan 2013). Shekar Dattatri, who gained fame via the Silent Valley movement, has referred to the forest rights movement as a means to 'grab land' (Dattatri 2019). According to two noted ecologists, Dattatri 'selectively mines the ecological literature' and engages in 'intentional obfuscation' to 'manufacture a perception' that the recognition of forestland rights contributes to forest degradation (Rai and Bawa

2019). The progress made by forest rights movements in India has, therefore, been undermined by a counter-movement run by India's elite conservationists.

India's climate justice movement will need to confront not just climate deniers and climate action delayers, but those who actively dismiss considerations of social justice in India's climate policy. Climate movements, including youth movements, need to engage with mass constituencies, learn from them, and support them. Social mobilization has proven most effective when it is structured as a process of engagement between a plurality of actors committed to the goals of strengthening state accountability and democratic governance (Kashwan 2017). Engaging with and strengthening domestic institutional arrangements to demand accountability of powerful market and state actors is not just a justice agenda, but a pre-requisite for effective climate action (Kashwan and Kodiveri 2021). This argument also resonates with scholars of international negotiation, who have argued that despite a longstanding focus on questions of international climate justice, India's climate policies do not demonstrate any serious appreciation of climate science, which would have brought to centre stage India's own climate vulnerabilities (Raghunandan 2019). While this chapter has focused mainly on domestic governance, transnational engagements can also be a fruitful avenue to bring about transformative change. The potential for such outcomes is enhanced when climate justice is 'reconceived as multiscalar with multiple entry points, and the interaction between scales [are] ... made explicit' (Fisher 2015).

The foregoing analysis has shown that realizing equity and justice are contingent on the processes used to manage such cross-scale coalition-building. Yet any such analyses and strategies must account for the formidable barrier that the broader political and economic context – including the nature of the Indian state – creates against the pursuit of social, environmental, and climate justice. Contemporary climate movements in India and elsewhere have an opportunity to learn from India's rich, albeit chequered, history of environmental movements.

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## The House with No Windows

Interviewee 10 has a joint family of 9  
10 people live in a thatched house  
At the border of Karnataka and  
Tamil Nadu

The thatched house has two rooms  
A kitchen and a room of everything else  
The house is dark even in the daytime  
Gaps in the thatched roof  
Send sharp streaks of light  
Cutting the air like a knife  
His wife is applying cow dung on  
the walls

Interviewee 10 takes me to the house  
of his best friend

‘The house of seven rooms,’ he says  
An enclosed courtyard opens to the sky  
Awash with sunlight  
We are not welcomed inside  
We sit on the inviting veranda  
And talk about the potted plants in the  
14 windows

The talk turns to their friendship  
The best friend says,  
‘We are best friends, but he can never enter  
my house. Never! We are different’

—Praneeta Mudaliar

This excerpt from Praneeta Mudaliar’s  
poem captures a fundamental truth  
about India. Caste is omnipresent—it  
shapes how social, cultural, economic,

political, legal, and educational systems  
work. Even more importantly, caste is  
inscribed in our physical infrastructure  
and geography. It determines which  
places one is permitted to enter or not.  
The social structures of caste, along  
with class and gender, also influence  
whether the sun brings joy in an open  
courtyard or whether it is a source of  
heatstroke from working long hours on  
a construction site. Yet, for some reason,  
caste is invisible in much of the research  
on the environment and climate crisis in  
India.

The rules, norms, and conventions  
that underlie the caste system may be  
less visible in some places and at some  
times, but they have not weakened.  
The variegated nature of India’s caste  
hierarchy makes it infinitely more  
complex, much older, and more deeply  
ingrained in our lives than, say, the race  
system in the United States. Trauma  
runs through the lives of Dalits and  
other marginalized groups, as invisibly  
and as constantly as blood flows in our  
veins; it is part of who we are. As the  
worsening impacts of the climate crisis  
decimate our infrastructure and drown  
us in our filth, it will further aggravate  
the repressions and brutalities of the  
caste system.