

How the Climate Justice Movement in South Asia Took a Big Step Forward Last September 23, 2019

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The climate justice movement in South Asia, and India in particular, took a significant step forward last September 23, 2019 with the launch of the South Asian People's Action on Climate Crisis (SAPACC).

Over 300 people representing farmers' organisations, trade union federations, indigenous people's organisations, fisher groups, women's organisations, environmental groups and a few progressive political parties, from Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and many parts of India, met over four days in Hyderabad.

Participants in the meeting discussed key impacts of the climate crisis, critiqued the inadequacy of governments' policies, presented ways forward and demanded that the UN and various governments declare a planetary climate crisis.

A broadening movement

The formation of the SAPACC and this meeting were significant for at least four reasons.

I. A variety of participants

One, its constituents are geographically wide and politically varied. Its co-organisers include the North Indian and Nepali farmers' organisation, the Nature-Human Centric People's Movement, the Bhoomi Sena (which organises Adivasis in Maharashtra), the National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM), the Lanka Sama Samaja Party from Sri Lanka, Vikalp Sangam, Ecologise (a collective that runs a popular website), the All India Forum of Forest Movements, Yuva Bharat, etc.

As SAPACC convener Sudarshan Rao Sarde pointed out at a large convention of trade union members, the campaign rests on two pillars: climate science and mass mobilisation. Large organisations coming together on an issue considered too abstract for a movement only a few years

ago is a significant shift. It reflects the climate's intensifying impact in South Asia and how the issue has exploded in the public consciousness in India, and worldwide, over the past year.

Other key participants included trade union federations such as the HMS, AITUC and INTUC; the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC); Bangladesh Poribesh Andolan and Metallic Labour Union from Bangladesh, the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, and a couple of Indian Left parties. Students, scientists, teachers, public health researchers and urban climate activists also participated.

"The climate crisis is too vast and complex a problem, impossible for a single organisation or social force to tackle it," Sagar Dhara, a co-convener, told this author on the meeting's sidelines. "A rainbow coalition like this is necessary. Also, clearly, we need new strategies and organisational forms that are more horizontal and nimble. Traditional structures won't work."

II. To be feted, not flayed

Two, the involvement of organisations engaged in people's struggles expands the boundaries of the climate justice movement. These boundaries are necessarily a bit fuzzy. Local people organised by the Bhoomi Sena in Maharashtra against the proposed bullet train or others fighting to protect wetlands in coastal Andhra Pradesh may be motivated not by climate change but by wanting to preserve control over their lands, other resources and livelihoods. But their struggles address climate change directly and indirectly, such as preventing wasteful carbon dioxide emissions due to the operation of a bullet train between Mumbai and Ahmedabad to benefit only the elite and the companies building it, or through preserving carbon sinks like forests, grasslands and coastal wetlands.

In addition to these direct gains, these struggles underline the centrality of the commons and remind us that individual measures necessary but not sufficient. We need to organise collective responses to preserve natural resources and to combat the climate crisis. These movements merit our thanks and our support.

However, the state has brutally repressed many of them - in [Niyamgiri](#), [Thoothukudi](#), [Puthuvypeen](#), [Kashipur](#), Sompeta and many other places. Protestors are shot, some are killed, others are thrashed with lathis. The police have filed false cases against countless protestors, hundreds of whom continue to languish in jails around the country.

Some attendees flagged concern about impending repression in Hyderabad. But any understanding of 'climate justice' needs to incorporate the idea that such struggles need to be feted, not flayed.

III. Greater awareness

Three, such coalitions allow concerns about climate change to expand to and deepen within different social movements. Gabriele Dietrich, a trade union organiser and an NAPM advisor, said, "We can now go tell our women's organisations in Tamil Nadu" that women's groups elsewhere are discussing climate change "and that they should take it seriously."

Underprivileged women, in this author's view, are the single largest social group in South Asia to be affected by the climate crisis. And for the climate justice movement to encompass more, it will need to better understand both its impact on this social group and adopt a sharper gendered perspective on development.

IV. Trade-union participation

Some trade unions around the world have been engaging with the impending energy transition away from fossil fuels, and critically analysing changes to workers' jobs and rights due to this shift, under the banner of 'Trade Unions for Energy Democracy'. In India, however, trade union engagement with climate change has been hesitating at best. Unions are concerned about how an energy transition will impact jobs, say in the coal or auto sectors.

The participation of large trade unions in SAPACC was one of the meeting's more positive outcomes, and this hopefully is a sign of deeper engagement to come. Unions everywhere would do well to heed the words of Sharan Burrow, the ITUC general secretary, conveyed via video at a large convention attended by hundreds of multiple union members: "There are no jobs on a dead planet."

The next steps

Parallel sessions on the climate crisis placed many suggestions about ways forward on the climate crisis.

Saraswati, of the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture, said agriculture needs a "holistic approach" and that "the importance of forests, birds, bees, insects" should all be recognised. Participants also agreed on the importance of agroecology, crop diversity, promoting the cultivation of millets and agriculture that reduces methane emissions.

"For sustainability, an important question is what fraction of the workforce must remain in agriculture," Shreekumar, who has been running an alternative farm in south Karnataka for 12 years, said. "The agriculture we need henceforth should not just produce food in a sustainable manner but also repair the damage already done to the soil, as well as restore water resources and biodiversity."

A session on resilience emphasised that the climate crisis is a collective problem that needs collective solutions. This is difficult in cities, where the notion of community is weak but which have higher carbon emissions.

This said, there have been energetic climate protests in cities in recent months. Some participants proposed that urban authorities will need to place sector-wise carbon reduction plans with clear targets in the public domain. Disaster management plans also need to be in the public domain, to better deal with calamities such as the floods in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

In a session on climate change and public health, led by two professors at the Indian Institute of Public Health, Hyderabad, people discussed specific steps under heat action plans in certain cities, including the provision of water, cooling spaces, early warning systems and painting roofs white. Comprehensive heat action plans ought to be implemented across towns in India; only a few cities currently have them.

Neither ecosystems nor the way climate impacts them respect political boundaries, so both the people and governments need to cooperate in South Asia to tackle the problem. Activists from Nepal said no amount of money could compensate glacial melt and other damage to the Himalayan ecosystem. Instead, the deadline to reduce emissions sharply should be strictly implemented.

Others suggested upgrading emission cuts under the Paris Agreement, freeing knowledge of technological solutions from protections afforded to other intellectual property, and cutting financing for fossil fuels. Organisations also proposed stopping all activities that would damage mangroves and coral reefs.

In all, the participants were essentially rooting for a different development trajectory to tackle the climate crisis.

What's in a name?

The coalition's name itself reveals an important shift in how climate activists everywhere perceive the issue. People have dropped the milder 'climate change' and 'global warming' for 'climate crisis', 'climate emergency' and 'global heating'. But some have rejected the term 'emergency', widely used nowadays in the UK among other places, over concerns that the political elite could exploit it and because it invokes memories of India in the mid-1970s.

However, it is impossible to overstate the crisis's enormity. If emissions are not reduced, and sharply so, a combination of heat and humidity will render many regions of South Asia unliveable. The ambient temperature will surge beyond our bodies' physiological ability to lose heat, with certain death for anyone who stays outdoors for even a few hours.

Accelerated sea-level rise will displace tens of millions in Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, Maldives and Pakistan. The UN Emissions Gap report [published last year](#) says that the "original level of ambition" vis-à-vis emissions "needs to be roughly tripled for the 2° C scenario and increased around fivefold for the 1.5° C scenario." This translates to cutting 18-30 billion tonnes of carbon-dioxide-equivalent by 2030 from the 53 billion tonnes a year currently.

It is in this context that two of the SAPACC's key demands - sent to the UN secretary general before the body's special session on September 23 to discuss the climate crisis - ought to be understood. First, that the UN should immediately declare a planetary climate crisis. Second, that the UN should ensure developed nations reduce their greenhouse-gas emissions drastically to reach net-zero levels by 2030, and of developing nations by 2040.

Net-zero stands for a rate of emissions that matches rates at which forests, grasslands and the oceans sequester carbon. This should be non-negotiable and binding. Some of the world's most important planetary ecosystems are the cusp of, or have already crossed, tipping points; we need to act before matters become utterly irreversible. We have no time to lose.

Nagraj Adve's booklet Global Warming in the Indian Context: An Introductory Overview (Manchi Pustakam 2019) has been translated into Hindi, Kannada and Tamil.

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