



Issue Brief

Climate Justice in India & the Pacific Islands: Challenges & Potential



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Abstract

Climate justice is recognizing that climate change affects people and impacts poor and vulnerable people more than wealthy, privileged people. It links environmental, economic, social and intergenerational justice. Although climate change concerns and affects everyone, its causes and effects are unevenly spread. Effective action must not only be environmentally sound but also socially just and economically fair. This article holistically looks at climate justice in context of India and the Pacific islands, evaluating the overlaps between the two regions and suggesting a way forward.

Introduction

Climate justice in India has developed over the years, influenced by the nation's distinct socio-economic context, environmental issues, and participation in global climate forums. Prakash Kashwan, a prominent expert in environmental politics and climate justice, has extensively examined how environmental governance, equity, and justice intersect with each other in India. Kashwan's views on climate justice highlight the profound socio-economic disparities and the historical accountability of various stakeholders in combating climate change. This paper explores some of his perspectives within the historical context and the state's role in climate justice.

Kashwan emphasises that colonial-era land and resource policies in India set the stage for contemporary environmental inequities. The dispossession and marginalisation of indigenous groups and rural populations during the colonial period have had enduring effects, which are evident in today's climate justice struggles. Post-independence, India's prioritisation of rapid industrialisation and economic growth often overlooked environmental and social justice concerns. Large infrastructure projects, such as dams and industrial complexes, displaced vulnerable communities, deepening historical injustices. Despite the state's top-down policies, India has a strong history of environmental movements advocating for justice. Grassroots movements like the Chipko Movement and the Narmada Bachao Andolan have significantly influenced the conversation around environmental justice in India.

Kashwan asserts that climate justice in India must be viewed within the broader framework of social and economic inequalities. He underscores the necessity of climate policies that address these inequities to ensure that marginalised communities are not adversely affected by climate impacts.

The Key Challenges to Climate Justice

1. **Poverty and Marginalisation:** A large portion of India's population lives in poverty, with marginalised groups such as Dalits, Adivasis (indigenous peoples), and rural communities still suffering from environmental degradation and climate change. These populations often lack access to resources, making them more vulnerable to climate-related disasters like floods, droughts, and heatwaves.
2. **Industrialisation and Urbanisation:** India's focus on rapid industrialisation and urban growth has frequently resulted in environmental damage, including deforestation, air and water pollution, and biodiversity loss. Major projects such as mining, dam construction, and the development of industrial zones have led to community displacement and ecosystem degradation, raising significant concerns about climate justice.
3. **Agricultural Vulnerability:** Agriculture, which sustains a significant part of India's population, is highly vulnerable to climate change. Unpredictable rainfall, rising temperatures, and shifting weather patterns threaten food security and livelihoods, especially for small-scale farmers.
4. **Lack of implementation in Environmental Laws:** Although India has numerous environmental laws and policies, their implementation is often weak due to a lack of political will, insufficient resources, and corruption. This gap between policy and practice undermines efforts to achieve climate justice.
5. **Global Inequities in Climate Action:** India's challenges in achieving climate justice are also influenced by its position in the global climate framework. The principle of "Common But Differentiated Responsibilities" (CBDR) reflects India's belief that developed countries, which are responsible for historical emissions, should lead climate action and provide financial and technological support to developing nations like India, so it'll create an ultimate and proportionate balance in the international system for Climate and Environment Justice.
6. **Cultural and Indigenous Rights:** Many of India's marginalised communities have strong cultural and spiritual ties to their land and environment. Development projects and environmental policies that disregard these connections can lead to cultural erosion and the loss of traditional knowledge, which is crucial for sustainable environmental management.

7. **Gender Inequality:** Women, particularly in rural areas, are immensely affected by climate change due to their roles in agriculture, water collection, and household management. However, they are often excluded from decision-making processes related to climate policy, which can perpetuate gender inequality.

8. **Extreme Weather Events:** India geographically is at the position of being highly vulnerable to climate change, with frequent extreme weather events like cyclones, floods, and droughts. These events have been affecting poor and marginalised communities, who often live in disaster-prone areas and lack the resources to recover from such events.

The ultimate challenges to climate justice in India are deeply intertwined with the country's historical inequalities, socio-economic disparities, and the pressures of rapid development. India has been a significant player in the climate justice discourse, particularly within the Global South, emphasising historical responsibilities and equity in climate action. Addressing these challenges requires a holistic approach that includes the voices and needs of marginalised communities into climate policies, ensures equitable access to resources, and demands greater accountability and transparency in environmental governance. Moreover, India's position in the global climate regime necessitates a balance between pursuing economic development and fulfilling its commitments to global climate action, all while ensuring that the most vulnerable populations are protected and empowered.

India's Stance on Climate Change at International Level

India's approach to climate change at the International stage has seen a lot of evolution over time, mirroring its increasing influence in international climate discussions, its focus on development, and the urgent need to tackle climate issues. During the early years of global climate discussions, particularly in the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the 1997 Kyoto Protocol, India adopted a strong "Development-first" strategy. As mentioned previously, this stance was based on the principle of "Common but Differentiated Responsibilities" (CBDR), which stressed the importance of prioritising economic growth and poverty reduction, arguing that developed countries, due to their historical role in generating greenhouse gas emissions, should lead efforts in reducing emissions while also providing financial and technological assistance to developing nations.

In the 2000s, India began to adjust its stance, recognising the need to balance economic growth with environmental protection.

This period saw India becoming more active in international climate negotiations, such as the 2007 Bali Action Plan, where it supported the concept of "nationally appropriate mitigation actions" (NAMAs) for developing countries, with the condition that developed nations provide necessary support. India also began prioritising renewable energy and energy efficiency as central elements of its development strategy. The launch of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008 marked a significant advancement in India's approach to climate change, outlining strategies through various missions focused on solar energy, energy efficiency, and sustainable agriculture.

The 2015 Paris Agreement was a turning point in India's international climate policy. India played a key role in the agreement, ensuring that the principles of equity and CBDR were included. Later in 2022, under its updated Paris Agreement commitments, India pledged to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33-35% by 2030 from 2005 levels and to increase the share of non-fossil energy in its power generation capacity to 40% by 2030. India's leadership in the International Solar Alliance (ISA), launched in 2015, further demonstrated its dedication to global climate action. The ISA seeks to promote the use of solar energy in sun-rich countries, particularly those in the tropics, and is a key element of India's strategy to foster sustainable development and reduce dependence on fossil fuels.

In recent years, India has continued to strengthen its climate commitments, setting even more ambitious targets for renewable energy. At the 2021 COP26 summit in Glasgow, India unveiled its "Panchamrit" strategy, which includes goals such as achieving 500 GW of renewable energy capacity by 2030, reaching net-zero emissions by 2070, sourcing 50% of its energy from renewables by 2030, and cutting total projected carbon emissions by one billion tons by 2030. India has also consistently emphasised the need for climate finance and technology transfers from developed nations to aid its climate actions. It has argued that developed countries must honour their commitments under the Paris Agreement to provide \$100 billion annually in climate finance to support developing countries.

Climate Change and the Pacific Island Nations:

The Pacific Island Countries (PICs) often overlooked in mainstream global politics discourse are a group of islands situated at the confluence of the Indian and Pacific Oceans converge. The grouping comprises the Cook Islands, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. The region is at the receiving end of the climate crisis and continues to struggle with the catastrophic changes induced by global warming. Generally viewed as a global issue affecting all nations of the world, the climate crisis affects the developing countries disproportionately. Within the overarching bracket of developing nations, the Pacific Island countries constitute one of the most vulnerable groupings. A study suggests that the sea levels in the Western Pacific are rising at an accelerated rate of three to four times the global average. This vulnerability is further fuelled by their “small populations, limited resources, remoteness, susceptibility to natural disasters, and fragile ecosystems. The adverse impacts of the climate crisis are not limited to only sea-level rise but also coastal inundation, frequent flooding and saltwater intrusion into freshwater sources. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) in 2023 drew the world’s attention towards a global bleaching event, with signs of mass bleaching observed in the Pacific since February 2023. This is the fourth recorded global bleaching event

The Pacific Islands are also experiencing more frequent droughts and increased humidity as a result of climate change. These climate-related impacts are affecting food and water security for the Pacific. Pacific Island nations experience exacerbated extreme weather events such as super cyclones due to climate change. Climate change has increased the frequency of king tides, cyclones and storms, which have resulted in damaged infrastructure. Crops and staple foods are unable to grow in coastal areas due to soil salinisation.. As the menace of climate change worsens, the livelihoods of people inhabiting Pacific islands continue to be adversely impacted, especially those who rely on coastal agriculture, subsistence hunting and gathering. It is projected that climate change will increase ocean acidification which will impact the viability of fisheries and aquaculture in the Pacific. Climate change impacts every facet of island life including the economy and tourism as well as cultural sites, place-based traditional practices and ceremonies. Climate change inevitably violates several human rights granted by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and therefore becomes a cardinal issue in global politics.

On his visit to Samoa on 22 August 2024, the UN Secretary-General António Guterres urged climate justice for Pacific nations beset by rising oceans calling it an existential threat for millions.

India and the Pacific Island Nations

India and the Pacific Island countries have had amicable historical, cultural and diplomatic ties. In 1981, Mrs. Indira Gandhi was the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Fiji. In 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Fiji and Papua New Guinea in order to reinvigorate its ties with the region.

The Pacific Island Nations are a powerhouse for critical resources and thus important for India's economic development. In the current landscape, the Pacific islands also form an important part of India's larger Indo-Pacific approach considering their proximity with strategically significant maritime trade routes especially in the wake of China's increasing footprints in the region. China is the PIF's biggest trading partner, after Australia and New Zealand and has swiftly increased its diplomatic engagement with the region cornering the United States and its allies. In the last decade, the South Pacific region has gained prominence in terms of its economic, political and strategic relevance and India's vision of Free and Open Indo Pacific cannot be attained without meaningfully engaging with the Pacific Island Nations.

Recognising this threat posed by China, India ramped up its engagement with the region and conceptualised Forum for India-Pacific Islands cooperation in November 2014. The 3rd Forum for India-Pacific Islands Cooperation (FIPIC) Summit was held in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea on May 22, 2023 wherein a 12-point development program that targeted key areas such as healthcare, cyberspace, clean energy, and support for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Pacific Island Countries was floated. The region also occasionally features as part of India's larger Act East Policy.

On 6 August 2024, the President of India Mrs Droupadi Murmu was in Fiji as part of her 2 day visit. This visit was monumental because she became India's First Head of State to visit the island nation. She also held bilateral talks with Fijian President Ratu Wiliame Maivalili Katonivere wherein she was conferred with the highest civilian award of Fiji – Companion of the Order of Fiji. The visit is important both from the lense of India's security strategy vis a vis the Indo-Pacific and India's support to the Pacific Island Nations vis a vis Climate Change. During her address to Fiji's Parliament she reaffirmed that "As a powerful voice of the Global South, India will keep pushing the developed countries for both climate finance and climate technology. We will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Fiji and other ocean states for climate justice" Tackling the spectre of climate change is a common concern for both India and the Pacific Island nations.

India's expertise and technological advancements in the realm of renewable energy has the potential to phase out fossil fuel emissions across the globe and mitigate the ramifications of global warming. India continues to collaborate on ways to mitigate the adverse impacts of global warming on these nations in a plethora of ways.

In 2023, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar and Fiji's President Wiliame Katonivere jointly launched a project funded by India to install solar power systems in the official residences of Pacific heads of state. This two-year project, costing more than \$ 1.3 million, has been largely funded by the Indian government through the India-UN Development Partnership Fund. India is also considering expanding its Solar Technology and Application Resource Centre (STAR-C) initiative operated by the International Solar Alliance to a number of Pacific Island Countries. The main objective of this programme is to generate a robust network of institutional capacities within the members of International Solar Alliance in order to enhance the quality of infrastructure necessary for uptake of solar energy product and service markets.

India also remains committed to supporting the Pacific Islands Forum's 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific ensuring the sustainable long-term development of the region. Collaborative efforts and knowledge sharing initiatives between the two regions can facilitate the development of indigenous renewable energy solutions tailored to local needs and thus leading to efficacious targeting of the issue.

As the world prepares for COP-29 taking place in Azerbaijan, Baku between 11-22 November, New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG) referring to Article 9.3 of the 2015 Paris Agreement which deals with climate finance is likely to be the most important issue. The United States and the developed nations of the world want this provision to be voluntary whereas India and the other global south on the other hand want this to be in accordance with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities considering that the countries of global north have contributed the most to this problem besides having the resources to mitigate climate related adversities. The performance loss and damage fund constituted at the Conference of Parties 27 at Sharm el-Sheikh has been unsatisfactory at large and the developed nations of the world need to walk the talk.

The fault lines are clear and it is the perfect opportunity for India to leverage its close ties with the United States to reach a meaningful consensus wherein the issues of global south are adequately addressed and the existential threat to the Pacific Island countries is redressed.

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