# RE

## Mental Health
## & Climate Justice

# FRAME

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**ISSUE NO. 5**
DECEMBER 2022

THE MARIWALA HEALTH
INITIATIVE JOURNAL

## Message from the Founder

Even as we continue to adapt to living in a global pandemic, this year has seen other viral infections, heat waves, and floods the world over. There is also a growing global food crisis fuelled by rising prices of food, fuel, and fertiliser due to the war in Ukraine and climate change. Closer home, India has slipped the ranks in the Human Development Index and the Global Hunger Index.

Alongside this, India ranks 135 among 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 and at 146, is the worst performer in the world in the 'health and survival' sub-index. This rising inequality despite economic progress is alarming. These issues are serious and relevant for me as a mental health funder. For instance, food insecurity is a risk factor for both mental and physical health. In the last issue of ReFrame, we explored how food insecurity can not only lead to a higher probability of non-communicable diseases but also increase health costs and poverty.

Unfortunately, our approaches to health care (mental and physical) and health policies do not adequately consider our context and social inequalities. Our health systems also fail to account for discrimination and violence that arise from the way society is structured. For example, poverty and homelessness have links to mental illness and an increased risk of gender-based violence for women. These inequalities are further exacerbated by disease outbreaks and climate change. While India works to tackle child marriage, there have been significant spikes in their numbers. Young girls in the Sundarbans are forced into marriage due to climate emergencies such as storms and rising sea levels which lead to land loss and a fall in farm productivity. The knock-on effects of this may include rising levels of domestic violence, adolescent pregnancies, and mental and emotional distress.

There is an urgent need to do things differently. There is an over-reliance on medical experts, academic experts, and credentials rather than taking a systems-thinking approach to public health. This is clearly a problem for health and health inequalities as the majority of research is done in and for the wealthiest and healthiest countries. As philanthropists and corporate funders, our emphasis on scale, on national or 'large' professional development organisations also play a role in this. However, as it is amply clear, more psychiatrists or more services will not help us address the mental health consequences of food insecurity and multidimensional poverty.

Thus, I am convinced that we must break out of the 'business as usual' mode and renew our efforts to support our vast and vibrant network of community-based organisations - especially those that cannot access foreign funding. I believe that stepping out of our comfort zones, funding outside of those whom we may know personally, funding in varied geographies, or supporting community-based organisations that may not have access to networks of privilege is an investment towards equity - in health, education, and society.

**HARSH MARIWALA**

## Note from the Editor

Discourse on climate change has intensified in recent years as heat waves, floods, and hurricanes have impacted developed countries in the last three years. While a fair proportion of responsibility for greenhouse gas emissions, global warming and environmental impact is attributable to the Global North, low-middle income countries (LMICs) are more vulnerable to the repercussions of climate change.

Bangladesh faces cyclones, earthquakes, droughts, and floods regularly as one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Approximately 135 million people in Bangladesh have been affected by disasters in the last 20 years, including loss of life, injury and homelessness. This exacerbates issues of psychosocial distress, poverty, livelihood, food insecurity, and access to education. Similarly, Haiti and Malawi have also suffered as their systems are unable to address droughts, hurricanes and floods, resulting in widespread distress.

In parallel, mental health has also drawn more attention, especially around the pandemic. While discussions around the intersection of climate change and mental health are nascent, it is clear that both disciplines are Euro-centric and have a top-down scientific expert approach. Discourse neglects, (often deliberately) the effects of industrial economies, electronic waste dumping, deforestation for elite settlements, and the disproportionate impact of western neoliberalism on the environment.

The seamless shift to finding "solutions" without acknowledging that countries have been facing disasters for over 20 years makes it easy to predict that the intersection of the two fields will reflect hegemonic narratives. This is already visible in research and policy - which is scientific, biomedical and disproportionately Global North led. Thus it was necessary to centre experiences from South Asia, one of the regions said to be hardest hit by climate change, in this issue.

While the ambit of ReFrame has always been South Asia, there has been a focus on India. As it occupies a hegemonic role in this region, it was even more important to ensure representation from countries such as Bhutan, Pakistan and Afghanistan. We tried hard but failed to bring narratives from the Maldives which is often neglected as part of South Asia but is critical in terms of climate change issues faced by Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

However, it is not enough to draw lines based on Global North versus Global South - which is, reductive, as binaries tend to be. While Western imperialism and its legacies are named and visibilised, Global South countries also engage in settler colonialism and neo-liberal economics that continue to oppress marginalised communities. This is reflected across the lines of caste, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and disability.

India's indigenous groups - Adivasi/ Tribal ethnic communities continue to face the brunt of extractivism, settler politics, and the destruction of natural resources. Yet, Adivasi and other indigenous communities worldwide are at the margins of both climate and mental health discourse. The communities most vulnerable to, and most impacted by climate extremes and mental health systems are the ones most marginalised in both fields' narratives, research, services, and policy. So, this issue also focusses on how disabled persons are invisibilised and oppressed in

specific ways in both of these discourses. Individualised narratives of climate activism and mental health are also classist, casteist, and ableist, in addition to being ineffective.

That is why disability justice and social justice must be a central lens for addressing mental health and climate change by acknowledging the existence of power imbalance, contexts of oppression, both in terms of vulnerability to and lack of access to recourse. The North-South divide obfuscates and invisibilises shared oppressions and stands in the way of building movements and allyship. Thus, starting with this issue of ReFrame, we hope to foreground voices from historically marginalised folx from any geography and not just South Asia.

Therefore, the first section, "Re-vision", in ReFrame, begins by building perspective on shades of power and justice through indigenous, disability, and caste lens; that challenge hegemonic approaches. Alice Barwa and Kyle Hill discuss Adivasi/Indigenous identities, knowledges, and prescriptions on climate justice and mental health. Dr. Ingole and Camellia Biswas reflect on climate injustice and Dalit distress. Ayisha Siddiqa challenges Eurocentric approaches to youth mental health and climate change, while Dr. Asha Hans details challenges faced by women with psychosocial disabilities during disasters.

The "Contexts" section explores how climate change and advocacy affect folx in varied settings, from Adivasi activists to young Afghan citizens to disabled persons. Dayamani Barla writes on historical and ongoing engagement with climate justice; Ahmad Nisar details the mental health implications of conflict, environment, and poverty in Afghanistan; Chhaya Namchu focusses on the adversities and solidarities of women in transboundary river regions. Candice D'Souza writes on the structural exclusion of disabled persons in climate change and disaster relief; Kusala Wettasinghe traces the need for a climate change perspective in crisis-hit Sri Lanka's progressive Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) field. Rituraj Phukan addresses the exclusion of indigenous communities from the Eastern Himalayas and Abhishek Annica details how climate change needs to centre disability justice.

The final section, "Engage" shares on-ground examples, such as Manshi Asher's documentation of youth-led struggles and collective action in the West Himalayas, while another piece locates mental health and community-led work in the Darjeeling Himalaya socio-ecology. Contributors from Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action write on environmental justice in urban landscapes, and Kumar and Nair write on mental health in Kerala's coastal communities. Using the example of Majuli, Assam, Oja lays out policy recommendations while Choden explores the need for disability to be foregrounded in Bhutan's policy frameworks. Finally, Mitra explores questions of parenthood and climate change in the therapy room.

Working on this issue of ReFrame, I realise that issues of accessible and affirmative mental health have been referred to as gaps for far too long when, in fact, these are systemic failures.

*Raj*

**RAJ MARIWALA**

'Indigenocracy'- bringing together notions of citizenship with responsibility towards one another and the environment.

DR ABHAY XAXA

# Mental Health & Climate Justice

# Re-vision

*What is the need for mental health and climate change to permeate each other's isolated, expert-led discourses? What is the paradigmatic change needed in conversations of CLIMATE CHANGE, MENTAL HEALTH, and their INTERSECTION? How does privileging voices from the margins inform mental health and climate change? How does climate justice shape mental health understandings of vulnerability and resilience?*

Frameworks
Paradigms
Structures

# Building Solidarities:

## Climate Justice and Mental Health

BY RAJ MARIWALA, SANIYA RIZWAN

SOLASTALGIA

OCCUPATIONAL HEAT STRESS

NIGHT-TIME HEAT

ECO-ANXIETY

HOT DAYS

RISING TEMPERATURES

FACED BY WORKERS

YOUNG PEOPLE

FARMER SUICIDE

POORER SLEEP

SELF-HARM
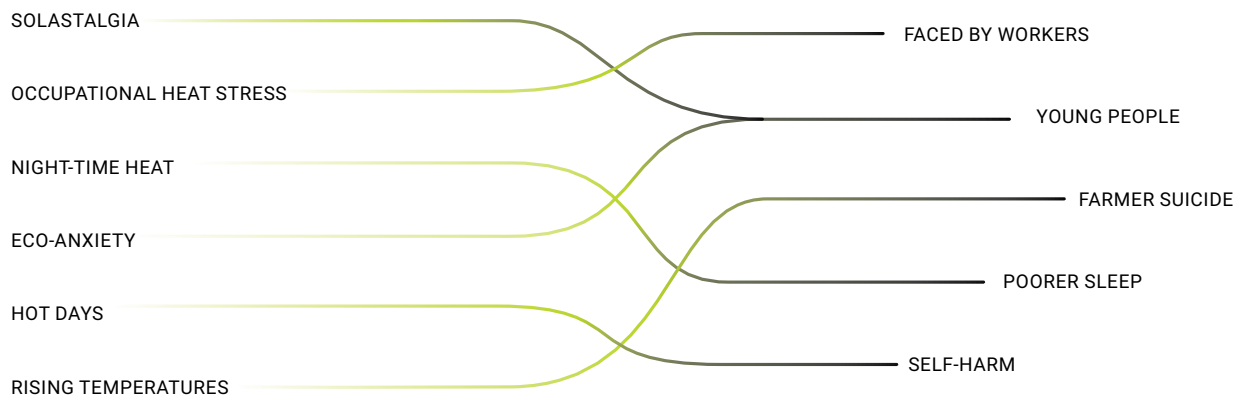
Among the many urgent issues of contemporary times, climate change and mental health have garnered much attention over the last few years. Both have been given space in international diplomacy summits, national legislatures, and academic circles. However, the discourses on climate change and mental distress are currently overlooking the interlinkages between the two arenas as well as their need to intervene in each other's isolated spheres.

Climate change emergencies are deeply linked to psychosocial distress and structural oppression. Night-time heat is associated with poorer sleep, leading to deteriorating mental health. Hot days have shown links with self-harm. Rising temperatures have been correlated with farmer suicide. There are documented effects of occupational heat stress faced by workers. Mental health academia and literature explore the concepts of eco-anxiety (fear of environmental destruction and climate disasters) and solastalgia (distress caused by a changing environment or homeland due to deforestation, floods, etc.), especially among young people. Both climate change and mental health disproportionately affect the well-being of people at the margins of society, such as indigenous and rural communities, disabled people, queer people, oppressed castes and races, and working-class communities. They also share attributes: western-dominated, expert-led, individualised discourse, deep interlinkages to systemic and policy failures, as well as structural oppressions.

ReFrame V aims to discuss such questions as: What is the need for mental health and climate change to engage with each other's isolated discourses? Who are the stakeholders to be represented in this intersectional discourse? How do we design preventive policy and rehabilitation for climate-related distress? How do we build solidarities between the mental health and climate justice movements?

## Legacies in Climate Oppression and Mental Health

Immanuel Wallerstein's theory of World Systems (1974) explains how different countries can be divided into the "core" and the "periphery," where the former represents the white colonial nations and the latter are the oppressed countries that exist only to satisfy the needs of the core. The power distance holds true for the impact of climate change as well. For example, South Asian nations are experiencing hotter weather, longer monsoons, increased droughts, and consequently higher vulnerability to civil conflict induced by resource hoarding. The droughts in Afghanistan have kept 23 million Afghans unfed. The 2020 cyclone Amphan has displaced five million Indians and Bangladeshis. Further, disasters have been seen across Nepal and Bhutan, with the Maldives on the verge of being submerged.

Underlying colonialism was the economic ambition of profits, material exploitation, and market creation, which impoverished communities and natural resources in Asian, African, Latin American, and Middle Eastern nations. This legacy continues with harm unequally distributed as the West reaps the benefits of profit with control over global resources while the side effects reverberate across low and middle-income countries (LMICs), as they continue to be the source of natural resources and dumping grounds for industrial waste while remaining on the periphery of decision-making and lacking access to build protective mechanisms, healthcare, and rehabilitation systems.

These legacies, systemic failures, and disproportionate harms are also reflected in mental health: more than 80% of persons living with mental illness live in LMICs. The dominant frameworks of the psy-disciplines were also exports of colonialism and continue to retain Eurocentricity. Whether it is the asylum, the biomedical and neutral scientific approach, or the idea of the mind-body divide, the default voice in current praxis is white, western, and able-bodied. The profit imperative has also been a significant part of psy-disciplines, whether it was in the establishment of asylums, sanatoriums, or psychopharmacology in the aim of a functional, productive labour force.

This default is unspoken and powerful, and the Eurocentric is reflected in approach, research, and praxis. For example, youth in LMICs have been living through natural hazards with interrupted education, trauma, and loss for years, yet, it is only recently that climate change is being discussed as a subset of youth mental health. This is visible in definitions of eco-anxiety or the fear of climate change, which differ greatly between youth in LMICs who have experienced life disruptions, distress, and forced migration as a result of climate change and current definitions that use words like "observation of climate change effects", "non-specific worry," and "indirect impacts".

## Is it individual? Is it natural?

Climate change and mental health narratives focus on individual attributes and behaviours, as well the lifestyle factors as both predecessors and required targets of change. From educational institutes to government advocacy programs, the focus remains on the individual, with bans on plastic straws, the treatment gap, of talk therapy or psychiatry, saving electricity, counselling for students in educational institutions, using bucket showers, self-help, psychopharmacology, and reducing individual carbon footprints. This detracts from the systemic and

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● Mental Health
● Climate Crisis
▲ Research
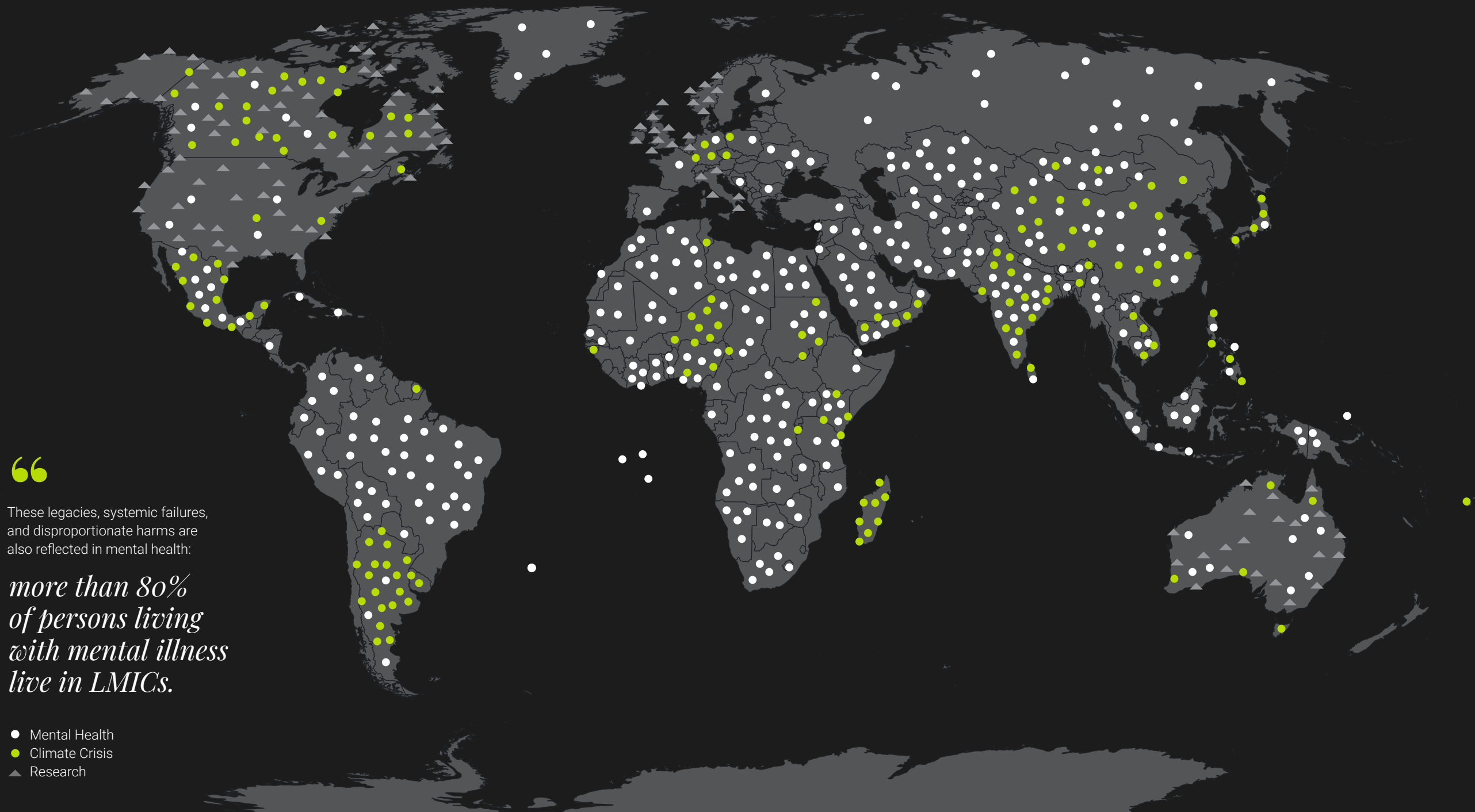
structural factors that influence, inform, and distribute climate change or mental health.

Not only are individualised narratives of climate protection, disability, and mental health inaccessible, but they can also be classist, casteist, racist, and ableist. The ability to choose straws, take downtime versus working, choose bicycles over cars, eat healthy or organic, and other "lifestyle changes" require privilege.

In both the spheres of climate change and mental health, marginalised communities are exposed to systemic vulnerabilities that lead to or compound psychosocial distress and/or exposure to natural hazards. The state of Kerala recently reported its fishing community as being at high risk of suicide due to livelihood concerns due to disasters and changing marine patterns. Similarly, rural communities and/or agrarian societies more dependent on primary resources are at higher risk due to the combination of natural hazards with a lack of access to health care, socio-economic security, and gaps in policy. The World Health Organisation has found that 24.9 million people are displaced every year due to hazardous climate conditions (heavy rainfalls, cyclones, and earthquakes) that push them to the margins of "statelessness". Communities already experiencing poverty and living near coastal borders are

**THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION HAS FOUND THAT EVERY YEAR**

# 24.9M

PEOPLE ARE DISPLACED DUE TO HAZARDOUS CLIMATE CONDITIONS PUSHING THEM TO "STATELESSNESS"

the most vulnerable to the risk of climate migration. This lays bare the systemic failures in both climate change and mental health discourse: natural hazards are a given, but it is policies, priorities, and systems that turn some hazards into disasters. This further cascades into increased psychosocial vulnerability.

A stark example is refugee communities, which are exceedingly vulnerable to climate-related hazards. This intersects with a lack of livelihood rehabilitation, food, and housing security; cultural and linguistic alienation; lack of citizenship recognition; and increased poverty and violence. Similarly, migrant workers are adversely affected by neo-liberal economic priorities and gaps in policies such as lack of access to stable employment, housing, social safety nets, education systems, and health care. For both of these populations, it is institutions, policies, and geo-

political dynamics that increase vulnerability to disasters as well as diminish access to rehabilitation and support services. For example, of the Bangladeshi population that survived the 2019 flood, 57.5% experienced suicidal ideation, whereas 5.7% and 2.0% made a suicide plan and attempted suicide, respectively.

## Social justice, climate justice, and mental health are intertwined

Adivasi communities and other indigenous communities have experienced a historic engagement with climate oppression. Since pre-colonial times, but especially exacerbated during colonial capitalism and further during

neo-colonial development projects, tribal settlements have been targeted for their resources. The advent of multinational and transnational commodity production displaced many indigenous communities of their homeland and livelihood, inducing generational trauma of displacement, insecurity, and infrastructural neglect from the state.

The settler colonisation projects in both the Global North and South states have targeted the lands of indigenous communities. Such dominant notions of development lie in opposition to tribal knowledge of the natural environment, history, culture, and livelihood. As a marginalised community in both discourses of mental health and climate change, there is no space given to indigenous knowledge, ways of living in harmony with nature, or ways of building resilience that lie at the intersection of wellness and the environment.

Disabled communities, too, share a unique relationship with climate oppression and climate activism. The latter doesn't involve consideration of accessibility and disability affirmation in its advocated suggestions, such as "use paper straws" and "boycott cars," when public transport remains hostile towards disabled people. This is juxtaposed with the relative invisibility

of persons with disabilities in policy planning, pre-and post-disaster. Additionally, the rate of disability itself increases during disasters or emergencies due to direct trauma, distress, breakdown of support and welfare services, and a lack of rehabilitation planning and resources.

Multiple marginalised disabled persons are disproportionately exposed to both climate risks, and mental health risks as well as forced migration, homelessness, livelihood insecurity, and inaccessible care. Hence, climate change combined with a disability doesn't just create mental distress but also increased vulnerability to familial, political, and social neglect, and a lack of structural protective mechanisms and integrative policy worsens the impact of the natural hazard.

**Building Solidarity and Allyship**
Climate justice and mental health advocacy face parallel hegemonic narratives: the expert-led top-down approach and the decontextualised individualisation of consequences and "solutions". Climate change and the psy-disciplines also share the common ancestry of colonialism. Hence, not only are imperialist nations disproportionately responsible for climate change and dominating mental health but also LMICs and marginalised communities are peripheral in both

climate justice and mental health discourse. In both arenas, the most privileged narratives continue to be the most visible ones.

Such vicious cycles of marginalisation and oppression are perpetuated not only as a result of past colonisation or its continued legacy but also as a result of local socio-cultural stratifications, state and powerful non-state actors adhering to similar neoliberal systems of development, and the cantering of those with privileges of gender, sexuality, caste, religion, class, and able-bodiedness.

For example, recent Census data from India reveals that 71% of Dalits are landless labourers working on land they do not own, while in rural areas, 58.4% of Dalit households do not own any land at all. With rising water scarcity, Dalit communities, who were already excluded from access to communal resources, are further disadvantaged. Segregation and untouchability are denying them access to natural resources like water and thereby threatening their survival. Any deviance from the norms of ownership is deterred through socially sanctioned violence on the ground and a lack of affirmative policy implementation. Natural hazards such as floods and droughts further amplify structural exclusion and survival and cause chronic and

**71%** of Dalits are landless labourers working on land they do not own

acute stress and hopelessness. Similarly, queer-trans communities face homelessness due to discriminatory housing policies, documentation failures, and familial abandonment. This often results in people having no choice but to settle in geographical areas prone to climate disasters.

Even within relief measures, social status determines access to rehabilitation, healthcare, and accommodation. After the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, the Aravanis, a trans community residing in India, were denied access to shelters, visibility in death records, and access to rehabilitation schemes. They faced abuse and harassment by officials and administrative systems. In 2021, a trans climate activist, one of the organisers of the "People's Climate March" in Pakistan, faced targeted gender-based violence (sexual, verbal, and physical assault) by police authorities.

**Policy and Affirmative Action**
"Development" paradigms tend to be equated with progress and the pursuit of quality of life but are dictated by Western and unsustainable industrial, neo-liberal

economic motives. The role of the environment, labour chains, unpaid care work, and a structural lack of fundamental human rights, are among the multiple factors that enable this model of development to continue. The above factors remain invisibilised, unaccounted for, or devalued in both the mental health and climate change arenas.

Thus, both require a review of colonial residues and the status quo of economic and political systems. Each also requires a shift in its narrative from being centred around development, "progress," and the productivity of people to bringing about care and systemic change. This is impossible as long as the political power of hegemonising climate discourse remains in the hands of "experts" who are situated in the Global North, even as they continue to accumulate knowledge and set research agendas built on drawing data from the Global South. There needs to be a radical re-envisioning of mental health care in policy and services for climate-induced distress. Such conversations have to surpass the search for biological causal links behind distress. Mental health advocacy needs to rally for more than therapeutic access and clinician rooms. In both community care and clinical intervention, we need to incorporate a rights-based

lens and equip practitioners to respond to structures of oppression, that is socio-cultural, economic, geopolitical, and policy-based.

It is important to navigate climate distress through affirmative lenses informed by an understanding of class inequality, historical uprooting, generational loss, colonial history, and racial, casteist, and gendered inaccessibility to recourse. Psychosocial justice demands fighting against the reification of climate disasters and their effects as inevitable, unstoppable consequences.

Further, beyond the mainstream ideas of resilience and "fighting back from adversity," clinical work needs to go beyond just "cognitive appraising" and contribute to the network-building of tangible avenues toward employment, housing, and food security for uprooted communities. Approaches to conflict zones, disaster areas, and refugee resettlement need to redefine the goals of empowerment as a sustained process and not a short-term product.

The voices of marginalised indigenous communities, rural feminised labour forces, disabled communities, homeless people, queer trans folx, and industrial labourers are informed by the

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subaltern experience of climate injustice and its mental health impact. Climate policy and mental health policy will only see integration and pedestalisation of rights when efforts of all climate protection, post-disaster material, and community rehabilitation will be anchored in peer groups, community organising, social safety nets and, people's movements by those at the margins of both climate and mental health systems. Radicalising climate policy and mental health in a more just and humane direction will require disproportionate bias and prioritisation of people and communities, not material success.

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**Saniya Rizwan** is a student of Psychology and Sociology interested in working and researching around arenas of justice and mental health.

# Locating Adivasi Self within Environmental Justice

Politics of Adivasi identity, Knowledge, and Care

BY ALICE A. BARWA

Despite the Supreme Court's historic judgement in 2011, which stated that "The ancestors of the present tribes or Adivasis (Scheduled Tribes), were the original inhabitants…", the Indian government fails to recognise Adivasis as Indigenous people of India at international fora. This has further distanced Adivasis from the key dialogues, not just on the national but on the international level, which impact their ways of life. In this article, I have shared my personal negotiations with Adivasi identity, narrative struggles that delegitimise Adivasi knowledge and belief systems, and how it locates Adivasis within the larger environmental justice discourse.

## Understanding 'Adivasiyat'

As a second-generation migrant in a metropolitan city, identifying as an Adivasi has been a path riddled with questions about my *Adivasiness,* both from within the community and outside. It has often led to isolation whenever I failed to locate myself in either space. Unequal power structures within which Adivasi identity is located further contribute to this identity crisis. This prompted me to explore young Adivasis' consciousness of their Adivasi identity and the role of formal education in framing it in my Master's thesis. My research focused on young Adivasis from the age group of 15 to 25. Through thematic analysis, I identified that one of the prominent markers of identifying as an Adivasi for the participants was a notion of a native place, along with a sense of community, traditional practices, and language. The participants shared how they imagined their native place when they heard the word Adivasi, which also came with a sense of belonging as families and community introduced them to their imagined way of 'Adivasiness' or 'Adivasiyat', and how changing seasons, agricultural cycles, animals, and plants within their ecology have been central to the celebrations and traditional practices they follow as Adivasis. Jaipal Singh Munda (1952), an Adivasi writer, political leader, and sportsperson also repeatedly stated the significance of land to Adivasi identity while addressing the Constituent Assembly:

"…When we think of submerging a village, we think merely of the submersion of lands and the houses. But we forget that there are things that an Adivasi values very much…their Sarnas, the sal or other groves where most of the worship is done by them. They think very highly of their burial called Sasana…the Minister, has he any idea of the spiritual rehabilitation of the men I have spoken of? Of course, we can not reproduce the groves but we are going to destroy their worshipping places…believe me there is much that the rest of India has to learn from Adivasis in regard to the rhythm of life."

Hence, the slogan "Jal-Jungle-Jameen" used by Adivasis not just asserts land sovereignty but autonomy, too.

ILLUSTRATION BY: SAHEB RAM TUDU
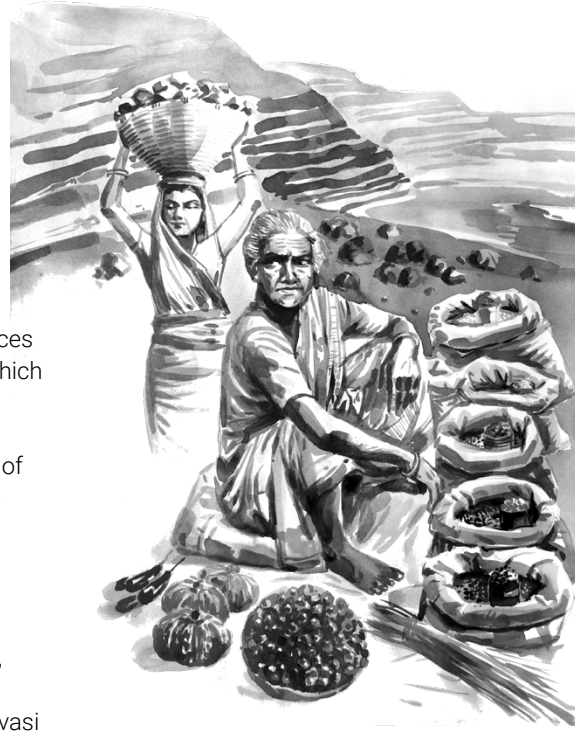


## Narrative struggle

Today, when we talk about environmental justice, we dismiss Adivasi knowledge systems, belief systems, and their histories of resilience - central to which is a way of life based on egalitarian principles, a continuum of nature, ancestors, and humans, and symbiosis between human and the animal kingdom. As opposed to the anthropocentric worldview, which is normative, here the world is a holistic creation of interdependent components. The absence of Adivasi voices is most apparent in the textual knowledge, where (upper) caste epistemologies and euro-western epistemologies continue to overshadow the Adivasi epistemologies. One need not look further than the school textbooks, which play a dominant role in what students learn.

While reviewing my niece's class seven English state book of Chhattisgarh, I came across a chapter titled "Dear Diary...", which narrates from a child's perspective their visit to Bastar, where the writer has reduced the people of Adivasi communities of Bastar to props on the roadside as they write, "...the Bastar tribes in their traditional costumes add to the natural beauty of the region." The text provides no social or cultural

context to the readers and reduces Adivasis to something exotic, which was one of the ways Adivasis were viewed by anthropologists during the colonial era. This act of "othering" often results in young Adivasis disassociating from their social identity. Growing up, it becomes a constant struggle to fit into the (upper) caste and euro-western norms of morality, mannerism, beliefs, and culture. This forced erasure of one's Adivasi identity leaves young people feeling inferior, and with a loss of belongingness to a community.

It is vital to look at the active role the Adivasi community plays in society and their contribution to sustaining the environment; the omission of the same from textbooks becomes part of the larger politics of knowledge that continues to delegitimise Adivasi epistemologies. Throughout history, Adivasis have struggled not just against the British but also the Dikus (outsiders), Zamindars, and Zamindari systems. The absence of resistance movements of Adivasis in history books is to invisibilise the Adivasi narrative that continues to challenge the colonial conservation practices, which are capitalist, classist, and casteist in nature. Similarly, their environmental struggles go beyond growing more

trees or 'No-Plastic' campaigns as taught in environmental studies books. It's resisting the coal mines, the building of dams, expansions of expressways, and entry of tourism (even eco-tourism) that are viewed as vital to the state's developmental plans. Bacigal states, that in a settler-colonial society, degradation of the land is viewed as "normal", necessary for the continued growth of wealth, and the effects on the Indigenous bodies as an "acceptable risk". For Adivasis, freedom from oppressors' greed is still further away.

## Within environmental discourse

Despite the recognition of Forest Rights Act, 2006, and Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 or PESA in Scheduled Areas of India, Adivasis continue to face brutal evacuation due to non-implementation or

improper implementation of these constitutional rights. Non-recognition of Community Forest Resources (CFR) rights, uncertain rainfall, and an overall decline in agricultural output negatively impact the Adivasi peasant economy. Taking away Adivasis' self-reliance and sense of identity limits Adivasis' options to choose, forcing them to take up low-paying jobs, migrate, and for women to work as domestic workers or even get trafficked. None of these come with any sense of security and safety, from financial to physical and mental well-being.

The resistance movements often come with a sense of helplessness as people in power keep getting away with false solutions and greenwashing. Even peaceful agitations, documentation, and virtual engagement come with constant anxiety as Adivasis continue to face the most brutal form of state oppression due to the imposed identity as a Naxalite which has been generalised to all Adivasis and Adivasi regions. Raising a voice has harsh consequences for Adivasis, who lack the social and economic capital to safeguard themselves. Amidst this, as vocal young Adivasi, we constantly negotiate between the fear of losing our land, culture, and language and the fear of being

falsely incriminated and harassed by the oppressors, in real-time as well as on social media, for speaking up.

In the larger discourse, we face constant epistemic exploitation. The act of reliving our inter-generational traumas, and the responsibility to educate the privileged person about the nature of their oppression falls on us. Berenstain points out how epistemic exploitation results in unrecognised, uncompensated, emotionally taxing, and coerced epistemic labour. It's tiring to stand in front of your oppressors and explain what is missing and wrong with the narrative. Under their (upper) caste and euro-western gaze, we have to face gaslighting and skepticism that results in overwhelming exhaustion, with little to no emotional support circles.

Most learning and unlearning by privileged people are limited in theory and not extended in action when implementation and recognition of Adivasi rights are demanded. We are handed token representations, while we demand radical system change, within which the Adivasi voices are expected to be the perfect victims of oppression that takes away our chance at humanising ourselves away from the oppressors' lens. This imperialising, hegemonising

lens on Adivasi identity is imposed externally as well as internally, as we often forget that identities are fluid and are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture, and power. This often leads to immense self-doubt, lack of confidence, and the sense of never being enough despite constantly and critically engaging with Adivasi discourses. Self-care amidst all this becomes a protest against the traumatic colonial, casteist, classist, and capitalist experiences we go through while reclaiming our rights to "Jal-Jungle-Jameen", Adivasi knowledge and belief systems. Though even the protest, in its most literal sense, is a privilege reserved for people of certain caste, class, gender, race, and religion.

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**Alice A. Barwa** completed her M.A. in Education from Dr. B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi (AUD), in 2022, and is from the Oraon Adivasi community, a native of Chhotanagpur Plateau, Chhattisgarh. She has been an advocate for Adivasi rights and voices as a member of an Adivasi youth collective named @TheAdivasiPost, and has been an Adivasi youth representative at UN Climate Change Conference in Glasgow, Scotland, in 2021. Her research interests include education, culture, sociology, and linguistics.

ADVOCACY

# Indigenous Climate Justice:

## Anticolonial Prescriptions for the Anthropocene

BY KYLE HILL

Climate justice represents a reparative framework and a moral imperative in the arc of settler and Indigenous relations, while also presenting an opportunity for Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges to become principal stewards of planetary health. Such an ethos is foundational in recognising the interconnectedness of Indigenous Peoples and Mother Earth, while also privileging the Rights of Nature and invoking the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous communities to land claims. Furthermore, these principles have served as the bedrock of the United Nations Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples, with Article 25 stating, "Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their traditionally owned or otherwise occupied lands, territories, waters, and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities for future generations...".

From Indigenous perspectives, the Land and all of creation, are closely related and require our respect, care, and responsible stewardship. Key to climate justice and what this movement represents for Indigenous communities is conveyed in the following tenets:

**1** Values, systems, and institutions responsible for anthropogenic causes of climate change are also responsible for the social and ecological determinants of Indigenous health, and legacy of colonialism in Indigenous communities;

**2** Recognising Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges as a formal conduit of our interdependence with land and ecosystems, as decolonising approaches for climate change adaptation and Indigenous health is paramount; and,

**3** Honoring sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous communities, formalising Indigenous rights, and rights of nature are imperative as a reparative framework.

Indigenous knowledges and belief systems regard population and planetary health as one unifying source, a harmonious existence sharing ecosystems. For this reason, among others, Indigenous people care for approximately 80 percent of the earth's biodiversity, despite inhabiting only 22 percent of the earth's surface. In recognition of this critical relationship to the sustainability of our planet, the United States government elevated Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges in their capacity to adapt and/or mitigate climate change. Such an accord, recognising the importance of Indigenous lifeways, cultures, and spirituality to the lived environment is monumental considering that the legacy of colonial subjugation led to the near total eradication of American Indian Peoples from the continental U.S.. In many respects, the Western, Eurocentric values that perpetuated the genocide of Indigenous peoples in North America during this period of colonisation are also

responsible for anthropogenic causes of climate change. As such, Indigenous communities view the Anthropocene, driven by globalisation and capitalist virtues, as colonialism all the same. In the interest of climate justice and health equity, however, Indigenous-led grassroots movements and community activism have deployed several campaigns recognising the failure of capitalism to not only protect the interests of Indigenous communities but also its complicity as one of the main drivers of climate change. As a result, Indigenous Peoples globally recognise the importance of movement-building in asserting sovereignty and self-determination, while also advocating for the rights of nature, as Natural law.

The most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change identified Indigenous peoples as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change as a result of their dependence on their lands and ecosystems. This is supported by

extant literature on climate change and associated health risks, which indicate that critical impacts unduly burden communities that suffer from inequity in social determinants of health. Within the U.S. and Canada, Indigenous communities experience lower life expectancies, higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, and poorer educational attainment, per capita, than other races. Such inequalities have been persistent and longstanding. Moreover, we understand that climate change further exacerbates existing social and health inequities by disrupting access to traditional food systems such as maize and corn, decreased water quality, and increasing exposure to health and safety hazards, including vector-borne illnesses related to rising air and water temperatures.

Altogether, climate change impacts are projected to be severe for the 576 tribal nations, due to the dependence on land to sustain traditional lifestyles, cultures, and food systems.

> *...impacts of climate change on the mental health of Indigenous Peoples are rooted in the cumulative insults of settler–colonialism, as well as contemporary violations of Indigenous rights and inequities in social and ecological determinants of health.*

Among other risks, melting sea ice, rising air temperatures and surface water temperatures, and extreme precipitation events are projected to have profound effects on tribal cultures and economies. Moreover, forced acculturation as a technology of settler-colonialism has resulted in shifts from a traditional and culturally-mediated lifestyle for many Indigenous communities. This is precisely the case of the nutrition transition because of colonial policies prohibiting traditional subsistence methods, which were responsible for disproportionate rates of obesity, diabetes, as well as mental and physical health comorbidities in many Indigenous communities in the U.S.. Similarly, contemporary impacts of climate change on the mental health of Indigenous Peoples are rooted in the cumulative insults of settler-colonialism, as well as contemporary violations of Indigenous rights and inequities in social and ecological determinants of health. Importantly, Ferrell and colleagues estimated

that the cumulative reduction in American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) lands vis-à-vis Settler-colonial and associated federal-Indian policy was 98.9 percent, with 42.1 percent of Tribal Nations losing any Land claims, altogether. Furthermore, the 1.1 percent of lands that AIAN populations retained, were in regions experiencing a higher sensitivity to climatic change, specifically, decreased annual precipitation and increased annual days of extreme heat. Finally, the authors estimated the average forced migration of Indigenous communities in the U.S. to be 239 km, which proved to be very disruptive to the continuity of Indigenous sustainability practices and Land stewardship. Consequently, Indigenous communities experience historical trauma and loss associated with the legacy of colonial subjugation. In addition, ecological grief associated with the loss of connection to Land and place, and subsequent ecological changes over time have contributed to sometimes

overwhelming levels of complex grief within Indigenous communities. Disruptions to the sense of place and associated ecosystem changes have had deleterious impacts on cultural connectedness, and sense of identity, further challenging the dependability of Indigenous traditional ecological knowledges and lifeways. Such disruptions within Indigenous communities have been linked to substance use, suicidal ideation, general distress, depression, and social isolation. Finally, climate-induced migration or mobility has been recognised as particularly distressing when the lived environment no longer supports Indigenous lifeways and cultures. Finally, in many Indigenous territories, there is a sense of pervasive hopelessness due to the leasing of land, via eminent domain or otherwise, for mining, logging, oil, or gas energy infrastructure projects.

Though, if the persistence and survival of Indigenous Peoples,

their cultures, spirituality, and close relationship to the Earth's most delicate ecosystems have taught us anything, it is the capacity of Indigenous Traditional Ecological knowledges to steward health and wellness at social and ecological levels despite great adversity. Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies import a perspective vital to the survival of humanity and the persistence of our planet. In recognition of this, it is imperative to support the revitalisation of Indigenous languages, cultures, and lifeways, as they hold the capacity to adapt and mitigate climate change. At the same time, we must dedicate resources and allocate efforts to implement policies that decolonise the Anthropocene and give Land back to Indigenous Peoples, globally.

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LAW AND POLICY

# Women with Psychosocial Disabilities

## Intersecting Disasters and Climate Change

**BY ASHA HANS**

ILLUSTRATION BY: MOHITH MOHAN

### Introduction

Disasters exacerbate existing gender inequalities and women with disabilities specifically find themselves excluded from Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) efforts and plans. As increasing disasters are the outcome of climate change, we cannot disconnect it from considerations of gender and disability. Gender is one of many factors that influence how we are impacted by and respond to climate change. Women are, however, not a homogenous group, and women with psychosocial disabilities are disproportionately affected by existing social discriminatory attitudes[1]. Extreme weather conditions ranging from floods, cyclones, and forest fires to heat waves, weak monsoons, excessive or less snow to unseasonal rains are responsible for the risks confronting their lives and livelihoods. We need to, however, highlight how women's experiences are uniquely shaped by the way that social norms and laws intersect with the different dimensions of DRR and climate change.

### Methodology

This article is the outcome of fieldwork conducted in Rajnagar Block of Odisha, India during May and June 2022. This region is routinely affected by severe cyclones and a sea-level rise that has been eroding the coast. Data was collected from 50 households and one FGD conducted in the Kaintha village cluster. The data brought to light the issues women with psychosocial disabilities living in the Mahanadi Delta of India face.

Currently, the policy focus on mitigation is at the international level, where disability is marginalised. On the ground, adaptation matters to people, especially when it comes to those with multiple marginalisations such as women with psychosocial disabilities.

### Mahanadi Delta and the impact of climate change on women with psychosocial disabilities

For this article, only psychosocial disability case data has been included: Padma is 30 years old and hails from the Mahanadi Delta on the Odisha coast of India. As the sea level rose, her village was washed away and the family was forced to move inland. They had been farmers and now their land was lost. For the sake of her physical and food security, Padma was married off to a farmer when she was just 15. She lives with a psychosocial disability, and when her husband passed on, and with three children to take care of, her mental health worsened. Padma took on farm work to provide for her children, but the challenges never abated. The sea rose again and salinated her land, forcing the farming to be abandoned. Today, she lives in a small, one-room thatched house on the edge of the eroding sea coast that continues to be affected by frequent disasters. She has joined a demand-driven livelihood program for the Indian rural population called NREGA (National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) which provides work for 100 days in a year, but neither work days nor wages have been regular. Her eldest daughter, only 12-years-old, has left school and is waiting to get married. The sons attend a nearby

school where mid-day meals are provided to the students. Despite the vulnerability consequent to loss of livelihood, Padma has found work and maintains social contacts within the village. She has, however, found no place in the government's relocation planning or adaptation plans for climate change.

Originally from a coastal village that no longer exists, Jyotsana moved to a smaller village with her fisherman father and family. Fishing as an industry has had limited growth in this region, and as the fish quality deteriorated, so did the family income.

As the sea surged, Jyotsana's mother began to fear that the water would enter their home. The trauma affected her capacity to work and 14-year-old Jyotsana had to leave school to take care of her siblings. Her mother's mental anguish was deepened by the loss of the community that had originally existed around them. To ensure that she would be around people she had known before, the

family decided to move closer to a relocated colony. This helped her find  mental support and relief. Jyotsana's father meanwhile started a micro business to be able to pay for their food. Though India's Public Distribution System (PDS) is designed to help ensure food security for underprivileged communities, Jyotsana's family hasn't been able to access it as they have no papers to prove their identity. These records are tied to geographical location and there is no allowance for portage of entitlements. So, the family continues to live on the edge of nutritional insecurity.

Kanchan lives within the Mahanadi Delta hotspot region and belongs to a community that has been designated as  Scheduled Caste. The breeze here is strong, and the constant stress of the sea level rising and moving inland has affected her psychologically. The effect on her has been severe enough to cause a stroke that has led to paralysis. A frontline (ASHA - Accredited Social Health Activist) worker, she can no longer earn as her mobility is limited due to inability to

access a wheelchair. Life at home is challenging due to the unavailability of a toilet inside. Kanchan admits that the situation has led to suicidal ideation, and that she has not been able to even reach the sea so as to consider drowning. Her son has now migrated and the remittances from him have been providing for her food and medical care.

**Research Outcomes**
Though the cases cited in this article are few, they affirm emerging evidence of intersecting vulnerabilities that disasters and climate change can create in women's lives. We need to take into account that women with psychosocial disabilities, as referred to in the case of Padma, Jyotsana, and Kanchan, are among the most 'resource poor' within a community. This is due to poor access to education, lack of income or low/irregular income, social exclusion and limited access to decision-making, and little access to or control over those resources which would facilitate adaptation. The legal support provided by India's Mental

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*...disability considerations will allow for more inclusive climate change solutions to be created.*

Healthcare Act, 2017 is limited, and the National Action Plan on Climate Change overlooks disability rights. Women's awareness of the legal and administrative provisions of the 'Guidelines on Disability Inclusive Disaster Risk Reduction' (2019) of the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), and of its guidelines on 'Psycho-Social Support and Mental Health Services in Disasters' (2009) is low. The voices of women are not heard in the climate and disaster

conversations, especially because disability considerations will allow for more inclusive climate change solutions to be created.

**Conclusion**
Community support provides women with disabilities the resources to survive. Adaptation strategies of migration and livelihood schemes have been important strategies for survival as well. As climate change constitutes a serious and escalating threat to the lives, health, and safety of populations around the world due to extreme weather events, this article would contribute to the extremely inadequate research evidence available on the impact and the input of women with psychosocial disabilities, concerning climate change.

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HUMAN RIGHTS

# Caste, Climate (In)justice, and the Dalit Distress

## How Unjustified Processes Create Barriers to Accessing Public Resources

BY PRASHANT INGOLE
AND CAMELLIA BISWAS

### Introduction

The oppressive nature of the Indian social order continues to keep marginalised masses at the margins. The unequal distribution of resources has strengthened inequality in terms of accessibility of land, water, air, and other important spaces. This piece aims to discuss the distress and psychosocial impacts on the marginalised masses in general and the Dalit masses in particular, in relation to climate (in)justice. In addition, it will also reflect on the difference in reading the lived reality through the marginal as well as the anti-caste lens in context to the mainstream approach to climate justice.

An important study on the effects of climate change indicates that vulnerability and injustice are interrelated and are context-dependent. They are unevenly distributed within and among groups and individuals from socially-disadvantaged communities. Marginalised communities with pre-existing chronic health disorders, low socioeconomic status, and children living on the margins are especially susceptible to the health effects of climate change and may have a limited capacity to adapt. Frequently, these groups lack the social and financial resiliency required to adapt, manage, and recover from new environmental dangers or climate stress. The conventional emphasis on physical health can and should be expanded to include mental health and wellness.

Climate justice is a subset of environmental justice. It explores the relationship between race, ethnicity, caste, class, and gender with regard to the burden of environmental degradation and the dangers connected with technological progress. The climate justice movement, in general, should have been inclusive as it impacts all sections of society, but as our consciousness gets constructed through the hierarchical social order, thereby one would be able to see that our fight for environmental rights is different, our needs are different, and our demands are different. Bramka Jafino, Jan Kawakkel, and Behnam Taebi in their work on procedural justice and climate change elaborate that procedural justice and distributional justice are two fundamental facets of climate justice. Procedural justice guarantees democratic decision-making that includes the opinions of all individuals affected by climate change. Distributional justice ensures that the costs and benefits of tackling the problem of climate change are spread equitably and in accordance with responsibility and capacity. If we see roughly, as Suraj Yengde mentions in his book *Caste Matters* (2019) - "casteism touches 1.35 billion people. It affects 1 billion people. It affects 800 million people badly. It enslaves the human dignity of 500 million people."

### The burden of the social order

If one looks at the structure of any village in India, one would see that houses of people from lower caste communities are mostly situated at the end of the village, at the margin. It is also a place where garbage and dirt from the upper caste people's houses is thrown, and without any other option, the lower caste communities will have to bear the burden of the unbearable smell and the dirt. Similarly, if you look at the *jhopadpatti* (slum) areas in the cities, they are also places where mostly marginalised people are settled. These areas are generally located near the garbage dumping depot, railway lines, and also factories. There is not much difference between village life and city life for the Dalits and the marginalised masses. The only difference that can be noticed after the migration is that these people can bypass the bonded labour systemic exploitation which still persists in many forms in many villages, and can somehow survive in the cities by doing daily wage labour.

### Living through unjustified processes

The everyday reality of caste-inflicted distress remains the same, with an additional burden of class through which the waste from the dominant community houses is thrown near the slum areas. The undignified work and undignified lifestyle factor in at the psychosocial level, which becomes a reason for the creation of distress among the Dalits and the marginalised people. What is common between these spaces is that there is a clear structure of caste and class through which climate injustice is inflicted in various ways. Along with these psychosocial factors, the lack of education, unemployment, an unguaranteed daily wage system, and the consumption of a polluted environment adds to the unjustified processes. The Dalit distress has become mundane, it has also become normalised. Climate (in)justice for the Dalits is not an isolated matter but what impacts the mental and physical health of the community at large.

What we have understood so far is that caste is a major indicator of any kind of affect and effect on, and progress and regress of any community in India. It is also a major barrier in terms of equal access to resources. Mukul Sharma mentions that "while the operational guidelines of the programme (Jal Jeevan Mission, 2024) emphasised the use of modern technology, it did not even once mention the linkages between caste and traditional or modern water supply systems in India. That, too, when caste conflicts over water have become more widespread and intense." Taking a cue from Sharma, Dalit resistance many times is read as a social justice movement but we believe it is a superficial way of looking at the Dalit experiences. To understand the Dalit life, a cross-cultural psychological analysis might be an important approach - the ways in which the distress and psychosocial factors impact the Dalit livelihood inflicted by the upper caste society. What is a more important indicator along with the caste is the Dalit distress that can be added to understand the Dalit socio-cultural aspect, through which discriminatory practices are imposed by the superior castes, and that segregates the lower caste communities from the public access at large.

### Concluding remark

We need deliberate efforts to meaningfully integrate the views of marginalised people to avoid individualising and normalising environmental and climate impacts, and to focus on the social and political causes of environmental and climate change. We must facilitate, mobilise, and agitate; hold not only policy-makers, polluting industry, and governments accountable but also the caste system which has created these fissures of injustice. Voices of the oppressed and the marginalised communities against their environmental discrimination are not heard. In order to do so, we must de-centralise the power because doing justice differs when one has unequal rights. The mainstream policy-makers need to change their perspective in looking at the climate justice movement; it should have an inclusive approach.

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CAPACITY BUILDING

# Civic Spaces in Times of Climate Crisis

## Why Psychology Needs to Rethink what it Means to Heal in A Dwindling World

**BY DR. GARRET BARNWELL**

ILLUSTRATION BY: ATHULYA PILAI

The world is at a dangerous crossroad. Our dependence on extractive resources is pushing the earth to a new, hotter, and more barren reality. If psychology truly wants to be fit for purpose in this new reality, it must defend civic spaces.

Climate change is more severe and widespread than previously expected. Most of the world's ecosystems upon which life depends have been irreparably harmed.

Disasters, such as mass species die-offs, droughts, and famines are occurring at unprecedented levels. This destruction is inseparable from a demand for resources that is so unsustainable that the Earth cannot keep pace, lacking the ability to replenish itself annually[1]. In fact, it would take almost two Earths at this time to do so. Climate-related devastation is expected to dramatically worsen over the next two decades[2].

Much of this destruction is part of a larger arch of colonial capitalism — or the varying but globally-networked systems of labour, financial flows, and conceptions of property that constituted colonial economies.

Within these structures, imperial powers saw colonies as sources of raw materials or "resources" for distant metropoles. Thus, extractivism or the "particular way of thinking and the properties and practices organised toward the goal of maximizing benefit through (resource) extraction" — was a key facet of colonial capitalism.

Today, although most colonial administrations have been dismantled, systems of extractivism remain pervasive — whether enacted through states or the corporations they support. Life within this logic, as Vandana Shiva explains, is treated like an open-access system, where local ways of being in the world, such as a sense of community as well as

sovereignty and public participation, are not only undermined but seen as threats to extractivism. As a consequence, civic space is critically under threat.

Psychology has played a perverse role in this process. In using terms like 'climate anxiety' to describe climate-related distress, mainstream psychology risks pathologising and individualising distress resulting from the violence of capitalism. Historically, in placing the responsibility for distress on the individual's internal psychic reality — or at most, on the family — psychology conceals how capitalism operates, and societal suffering.

Yet, suffering does not circulate through our lives and relationships as some passive response to anxieties about these crises. Rather, these anxieties arise as part of our experience of alienation, marginalisation, and exclusion in society that stems from ways of

privileging capitalism — including extractivism — that destroys ways of life and societal bonds.

As under colonialism, extractivism's proponents today still largely make the rules: they help develop weak environmental regulatory frameworks, for instance. At other times, they spearhead deals for extractive projects in the name of "development" and "progress," but that often neglects rights to participation and self-determination for affected communities.

Today, capitalism is reproducing the same colonialist, racist logic that deemed much of the world's population living on the margins expendable. This is particularly true at points of extraction, where United Nations Special Rapporteur, David Boyd says communities are transformed into "sacrifice zones" where environmental degradation, pollution, and unjust social arrangements pose extreme threats to well-being.

A critical dimension to these unjust social arrangements that create suffering is the status of civic space. Civic space is defined as the ability to organise, communicate, and participate meaningfully without hindrance or the threat of harm.

The closing down of civic space allows extractivism to create conditions in which residents who might organise, communicate, and seek meaningful participation to oppose extractivism are deemed a threat. Being labelled as a threat, in turn, sanctions silencing, exclusion, and physical violence toward community and environmental defenders.

This contributes to the wanton approval of deleterious mining and logging projects, the murders of land and environmental defenders, and other human rights violations.

Thus, these subjugating acts that close down civic space may, in turn, create significant anguish among those who resist - not by choice, but because of their very locality.

For many around the world, it is not climate change as some abstract weather occurrence that is distressing, but rather the grating against colonial capitalism in one's daily life. Our pain indicates to us that there is something wrong with the colonial world order that seeks to repress differences in being and worldviews.

We need to resist the erosion of civic space and actively accompany one another, share experiences, and shoulder the risks.

Those who are effectively resisting often do so for the well-being of their community and find strength, hope, and meaning in these solidarities.

As mental health workers, we must be more active in documenting the psycho-political threats to civic space and in strategising together ways of resisting them and of promoting other ways of being in the world. Instead of perpetuating extractive dynamics, our practices must be connected to community struggles and feed into processes that contest power.

Gone is the luxury of being a neutral observer.

In our re-orientation, we can also learn from indigenous psychologies, radical psychoanalysis, and other critical psychologies to find new languages and ideas to name and contest colonial capitalism's tactics, including the misuse and abuse of our intimate lives. Most importantly, we should be led by those resisting and asserting other ways of becoming in the world.

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# Climate Anxiety:

## An Illness of the System

**BY AYISHA SIDDIQA**

Anxiety isn't always a bad thing. In fact, it can serve an important function: it alerts humans to danger so that we can evaluate risk and take adequate action to protect ourselves, physically and psychologically. Nevertheless, eco-anxiety – or, anxiety about ecological degradation, including climate change – is often brushed aside as a trivial fear about the future when, in reality, it's much more serious than that.

As Dr. Caroline Hickman, one of the leading authors of a global survey of children and young people's experience with climate anxiety, puts it, "Climate anxiety is a signifier of mental and emotional health." But if one were to probe further, eco-anxiety becomes an inadequate term to encompass all the mental health damage that climate change causes. Importantly, however, climate anxiety is not experienced equally among people in the Global South and the Global North, and neither does it impact the mental health of White people the same way as it does Black, Brown, and Indigenous people. Just like the physical damage of the climate crisis is endured disproportionately by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People

of Colour), so are the mental health consequences of the climate crisis.

Utah Phillips[1] once said, "The earth is not dying, it is being killed, and those who are killing it have names and addresses." And these names and addresses point to the fossil fuel industry and governments. It is not coincidental that these governments happen to be mostly in the Global North.

Researchers at the University of Bath conducted a survey of over 10,000 young people aged 16 to 24 from 10 different countries. They discovered that 60 percent of the youth felt "very" or "extremely" worried about climate change. 45 percent of them reported that climate anxiety affects their daily lives, with more than three-quarters believing that the future is frightening.

**From activists on the ground**
Disha Ravi is an activist with Fridays for Future[2] from Bengaluru, India. Although Bengaluru is a landlocked city, she has noted that her city does not have the infrastructure it needs to withstand heavy monsoons. And over the past few years, heavier rains have generated

significant damage. According to Disha, even if her city could withstand the heavy rain, it would be immensely difficult to ensure protections that match the increasing frequency of the monsoons.

Her "eco-anxiety" never seems to go away because she doesn't know when her home will flood again – but the fact that it will flood is guaranteed. For Disha, this means she is in a chronic state of worry. What does it mean if *entire generations* suffer from anxiety related to the stability and habitability of their surroundings? States' failure to stop climate disasters threatens children's human rights as they deal with the serious mental health consequences of climate change.

Farzana Faruk lives in Dhaka, Bangladesh, and only after she joined Fridays for Future did she hear of the term "eco-anxiety," although she and the people around her have felt it for as long as she can remember. When just 11, Farzana witnessed Cyclone Aila displace more than one million people in the country. She recalls that those fleeing from the cyclone felt many pains when leaving their land behind, including the guilt

> ## *What does it mean if entire generations suffer from anxiety related to the stability and habitability of their surroundings?*

of not being able to save it. The loss she describes is more complex than not having a roof over one's head; it's a feeling of pain similar to that felt when a loved one is suffering.

Farzana considers herself privileged because she has not yet experienced a loss of the scale that the thousands coming to Dhaka as refugees after losing their homes have. However, Farzana is not safe in Dhaka. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's Global Liveability Index, Dhaka is the fourth-least liveable city in the world as of 2020. UNICEF estimates that one billion children — nearly *half* of all kids on Earth – are at "extremely high risk" due to climate change.

Almost every child on Earth has already been exposed to at least one major climate hazard. How can children in places like Dhaka escape the mental burden of the constant looming threat of displacement?

### Problematising climate "anxiety": the inequality of mental health consequences

Taking action against climate change by protesting, striking, and so on does not eliminate or even meaningfully diminish climate anxiety for those witnessing climate impacts unfurl in real-time. That means there's an important distinction to be made between the post-traumatic stress that people like Farzana and Disha experience and the pre-traumatic stress people like Tori – who lives in the Global North — experience. The term eco-anxiety does not include the nuance between the stress that occurs, for example, as a result of watching your home flood (like Disha has), and that which occurs as one anticipates climatic disasters that have not yet occurred. The psychological impacts of anxiety resulting from the loss of safety, habitat, and loved ones are also different from *fear of a future* where these conditions occur, as these current losses have already altered children's neural pathways.

To make this distinction more concrete, during the week of April 26, 2022, parts of Northern India and Pakistan reached 46-47°C in dry bulb temperatures, with wet bulb temperatures ranging from 22-23°C. Though the fear of temperatures like this becoming the norm in Europe may trigger climate anxiety, for people living through boiling weather *right now* the anxiety they feel produces a different degree of trauma - people are dying coming to and from work, and schools are shutting down due to the heat.

That's why I would argue that the research conducted, for example, by the University of Bath is incomplete – because the questions all relate to a fear of the distant future. The argument of "futures being threatened" is one Disha and Farzana both vehemently disagree with because it discounts the present reality of young people as well as the psychological damage the climate crisis is currently inflicting on people. It also homogenises

trauma by making the climate anxiety experienced by those who have endured and witnessed climatic disasters in close vicinity the same as those who have not.

Nylah Burton, author of "People of Color Experience Climate Grief More Deeply Than White People" (2020), explains how "climate anxiety" as often discussed in the mainstream can be akin to white fragility. That's because, at best, it makes the trauma Black, Indigenous, and Brown people in the Global South experience equal to white climate anxiety in the Global North. And, at its worst, it puts the climate anxiety that white people in the Global North face on a higher pedestal of emotional distress, thereby discounting the long history of colonialism, imperialism, and racism which has allowed the climate crisis to flourish.

For example, Inuit and Aboriginal youth are reporting higher rates of suicidal ideation and depression linked to the loss of nature and nature-based activities. This

exposure to the natural world is not just recreational for native youth but also a pivotal part of their culture, education, and family histories.

The focus on protecting the future is an extension of individualistic culture because, according to this logic, white people and people in the Global North should focus more on what they *might* lose than on protecting Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples from further loss. This disparity is clearly visible in the resources and professional help being allocated to support people in the Global North with climate anxiety in contrast to the dearth of mental health support offered to climate refugees and people in the Global South dealing with panic attacks, nightmares, and fear.

Tori, an activist from the UK, shares that in her country there seems to be a push and understanding among mental health professionals that climate anxiety and those experiencing it deserve adequate resources. But the discussion

needs to go further than the symptoms the climate crisis is causing because climate anxiety is not an illness of individuals but an illness of the system. It cannot be cured or treated individually until governments can guarantee a safe and liveable future for their citizens.

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**Ayisha Siddiqa** is a tribal, Pakistani environmentalist, and the Co-Founder of Polluters Out and Fossil Free University. Her work focusses on the rights of marginalised communities while holding polluting companies accountable at the international level. She has organised multiple school strikes for climate since 2019, in addition to campaigns on human rights defence, climate finance, UN climate treaties, and indigenous people's rights. Ayisha is currently serving as an advisory council member for the Global Commons Alliance and Climate Vanguard.

# Context

*How can climate-related mental health engage with difficult conversations of DELIBERATE POWER EQUATIONS rather than viewing both mental health and climate consequences as natural givens? In which ways do identities of caste, nationality, ethnicity, religion, gender, ability, occupation, class mediate between 'risk factors' such as drought, overgrazing, floods, earthquakes, and the intensity of their implications? How can conversations of therapeutic care go beyond clinician rooms to policies of rehabilitation, citizenship, livelihood security, public healthcare and housing?*

Power
Justice
Lived Realities

LIVED EXPERIENCE

# Songs of the Forest

## Exploring Climate Justice through the Lens of Global Economy, Development, and Capitalism

BY DAYAMANI BARLA

At midnight on 5th July, it rained with a thunderstorm. I woke up to a crystal clear sky the following morning with a 39-degree exhibit on the mercury. The mind was in a continued state of restlessness as the body was drenched by heat and humidity.

Ulta Rath Mela was to be observed on 9th July. Paddy transplantation and planting of finger millet in upper land would be completed by Rath Mela, according to farmers. Green cover of farming on upper land in Godda and Gondli areas would captivate eyes.

However, farmers were not even able to plough their fields this year. The lands were not even prepared to sow the seeds in the first place, thanks to the evasive nature of pre-monsoon showers this year. Monsoon rain was nowhere to be seen till the first week of June.

A folk song was suddenly stuck in my memory today; it goes like this-

*Aiso Ka Akaal Barekha Gay Nayo*
*Bari Bhetre Leva Chhitaye re*
*Na Leva fute Na Leva pake*
*Khees jane ke maare re*
*Khees jane ke maare re*

(In this year's famine, the monsoon and rain situation has gone downhill. After a delay in rain, a deluge commenced spontaneously. The time was not right for planting the paddy crop in the field; hence it was sown in a garden beside the residence. Due to untimed planting of paddy, it did not produce grains. It angered the male guardian of the house, so he is beating his wife.)

This captures the deleterious effect of climate change on the social, economic, cultural, and mental status of the tribal farming community.

Climate change has the most adverse impact on the tribal community which is deeply integrated with nature's life cycle, thereby threatening their social, economic, and cultural existence.

Extreme fluctuation in the rain cycle is leading to deficit rainfall-heavy rain and drought-famine. This is turning the fertile land into barren land and it is resulting in migration in tribal communities. The aforementioned folk song encapsulates their sorrow.

Nature-oriented tribals' social, economic, and cultural lives grow along with nature's life cycle. A feeling of new prosperity beckons with the growth of new leaves and flowers in the spring season. *Putkal* and *koynar* greens grow side-by-side. Banyan, Ficus virens, Ficus religiosa fruits start ripening. The women and children of the village spend a considerable time sitting under the tree and doing handicraft works while starling, crow, parrot, and other birds chirp from the fruit-laden branches of the tree.

Nature adorned with new leaves and flowers also invites the tribal community to celebrate 'Sarhul Parab' (Sarhul Festival). This is the spring of life, which imbibes us with the hope to live.

Seeing the chirping birds, they sing a song –
*Chote mote pipar gacche, kauva, maina suga bhari gaeile, kahe kahe suga, maina se bhelai jhagra, kahe kahe kauva, suga se bhail jhagra*

(There is a small Ficus tree, on it all types of birds including crow, starling, parrot live, sometimes they quarrel, why are crows fighting with starlings?)

As leaves start falling from trees, the whole of nature also simultaneously harbours hope for new life, with new leaves starting to take the place of old ones. The cotton tree adjacent to the village is laden with red flowers, and the mango garden of the village is also covered with flower buds. The Mahua tree has also started to bloom. Dhelkata, Koreya, and Shorea robusta trees are covered with milky flowers. In the jungle, safflower, mahua, and jam trees laden with red-violet leaves have started to emanate a message of life and struggle to the people.

The melodious voice of the cuckoo makes honey bees hovering in the mango groves brim with enthusiasm. There are many such trees in which flowers have started blooming along with twigs and leaves.

But today's market and capitalist economy are adopting every trick up their sleeve to separate tribal communities and the forest land from each other. Every effort is being made to flip the long-enduring harmony between the tribal society and the forest into a searing, sour relationship. All this conspiracy is being hatched to establish the monopoly of capitalism on natural resources by isolating tribal society and nature from each other.

Due to the so-called development projects, over 2 crore tribals of Jharkhand have been displaced. Only 25 percent of these displaced people have been rehabilitated. The rest of the evicted are struggling every day to arrange for one meal.

There isn't a grain of food in their stomach. They don't have shelter to live in, clothes to wear. They are not getting basic medical treatment and are dying.

The displaced community, who were once the proud and rightful owners of their lands, now own nothing. They have become coolies and bonded labourers. After being uprooted from their ancestral land, the tribal women are forced to wash utensils in the metropolis.

As per the 2001 census, the tribal population in the state has been reduced to a mere 26 percent. Today, 56 percent Dalit and 59 percent tribal women are suffering from anaemia; almost 83 percent of the children are moderately or severely malnourished. The pertinent question remains - what did the displaced tribal people get? A study revealed that out of the 3738 labour force in Jharkhand, 45.05% was unemployed. Why?

The suffering of the displaced locals in the name of development has raised many critical questions in front of the state and the country. It is well known that the politicians, government machinery, political system, and the law and order of the country have no answers to these questions. Forests are being destroyed in the name of industrialisation. Industrialisation has robbed nature of its pristine greenery, including farmlands, rivers, lakes, and waterfalls, and turned the landscape into a barren desert, with demonic chimneys spewing black smoke.

To take part in the development, the tribal people of Jharkhand have sacrificed all of their resources such as water, forest, land, house, and farmlands which were nurtured by their ancestors.

Countless mines and factories like HEC, Bokaro Thermal Power, Tenughat, Chandrapura, Lalpania Dam, CCL, BCL, ECL, Chandil Dam, Tata Steel Plant, UCL Uranium Mines,

Chidiya Mines, Bauxite Mine, Chandil Dam, Patratu Thermal Power Plant, Tata Steel, Kohinoor Steel, Verma Mines, Rakha Mines, Karampada, Kiriburu, Baduhurang and Mahuldih were set up on their ancestral lands.

However, the tribals are not the beneficiaries of this development. Instead, they were left with epidemics like displacement, migration, unemployment, hunger, malnutrition, disease, air pollution, and water pollution.

Earlier, we used to be very close to nature. Despite being less educated, society was much happier, more stable, and more organised. At that time, wild animals, insects, and birds were all our companions and more symbiotes. In other words, there was harmony among nature, the environment, animals, and human. It was this harmony that empowered us to fight all epidemics and adversities.

Today, the country has reached new heights of development. Everything is now global - global world, global capital, global market, global economy, global warming, and global pandemic. This global capital is dangerously weighing the whole earth, environment, and human civilisation against profitability. This is the very reason why economic profit is superseding nature, the environment, and human life. The grave result of this is staring right down at us. We are experiencing

heavy rain in the summer season and hot weather during otherwise rainy days; hot weather in the winter and cold weather in the summer.

The pace of development is so fast in the world that nature has changed its very own inherent character and pace. Not only this, but nature has also changed its overall essence. There used to be dense green forests, hills covered with greenery, and rivers flowing with gushing water. Agricultural fields used to be covered with paddy, pea, barley, and other crops. The farmers would relish all kinds of leafy vegetables. All of this green landscape and vegetation are disappearing rapidly and sprawling concrete palaces are taking over this space.

This blind race of development gifted the coronavirus pandemic to the country and the world. According to a report, the death toll due to the pandemic was severely high in polluted metros. However, the death toll in rural tribal areas was, astoundingly, very low. Perhaps, the rationale behind this is that the rural tribal areas are still in synergy with nature and the environment.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, people were searching for oxygen beds in hospitals in exchange for lakhs of rupees. Similar cases of the desperate search for oxygen cylinders were observed, and thousands of lives were lost. This pandemic has

given a stark message to the country, that the oxygen which is given by nature for free and in abundance to humanity should be protected. The struggle of the tribal communities to protect the water, forest, and land also provides a similar message.

The tribal community strongly believes that our history, social values, and linguistic-cultural existence cannot be compensated or rehabilitated in any way. That is the very reason why tribal communities are ready to sacrifice their lives to protect the land and environment across the globe, and refuse to accept any model of development which comes at the cost of environmental destruction or degradation.

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**Dayamani Barla** is the first Indian journalist to hail from the Munda tribal community. She writes about the protection of forests and land, has been active in many mass movements, and has raised her voice for the rights of the tribal community. She has received many awards for rural journalism. She still runs the tea shop that she had set up in 1996. Her shop acts as an economic support system for continuing social work. She firmly believes that social justice can be achieved only if we save our water, forest land, and ecological environment.

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CAPACITY BUILDING

# Climate Injustice:

## Why Crisis-Affected Sri Lanka Needs a Climate Change Perspective on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support

BY KUSALA WETTASINGHE

Sri Lanka is currently experiencing a profound economic (and political) crisis. Massive sovereign debt, rapid inflation, depletion of foreign exchange reserves, and consequent shortages of fuel have impacted all aspects of life – from the availability and affordability of food to basic services like health and education. An overwhelmingly peaceful uprising in response to the mismanagement of the economic crisis succeeded in unseating the incumbent President in July 2022, but at the time of writing, his successor has declared a state of emergency and launched a crackdown on protesters.

There are serious concerns about human security and meaningful stability required to ensure the food, livelihoods, and safety of citizens, given the depth of Sri Lanka's economic problems and anticipated shortfalls in domestic food production. The field of Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) in Sri Lanka is mobilising to respond to this overwhelming

crisis, drawing on past experiences of work during conflicts, disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst the Sri Lankan discourse on MHPSS over the past decades has been progressive in many ways, one perspective that it has not yet adequately engaged with is that of climate change as a key factor impacting the well-being of people. Below, I hope to illustrate how climate change is already impacting vulnerable communities in Sri Lanka, and it is vital that the MHPSS field recognises and addresses this.

### Responding to chaos: mental health and psychosocial support

The MHPSS sector in Sri Lanka has evolved with the humanitarian crises that have affected the country. Since the 1980s, Sri Lanka has witnessed ethnic pogroms in July 1983 and during the escalation of a separatist war that lasted for three decades; the Marxist youth insurrection and brutal state repression in the late 1980s; the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004; post-war recovery and

continued challenges; Easter Sunday bomb attacks in 2019; and the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. A brief overview of the trajectory of MHPSS responses in the country clearly illustrates the adaptation of approaches and strategies in the face of diverse crises. MHPSS responses were challenged with different facets of MHPSS needs and different parameters within which support for such needs could be provided.

The predominantly bio-medical approach of psychiatric and counselling services of the early 1980s gradually broadened to consider 'psychosocial' issues that caused suffering. Strengthening community resilience through collective initiatives to enhance people's capacity to cope; innovative interventions to link formal mental health services with local healing practices which had wide social acceptance among communities; a greater focus on networking, capacity-building, and advocacy for the integration of psychosocial

considerations into diverse service mechanisms; and helping build strategic connections across vertical and horizontal service provision systems characterise a few of the key strategies that shaped the broad-based psychosocial approach.

Over the years, the MHPSS sector in the country has evolved to acknowledge and engage with social, material, economic, and political determinants of well-being. However, one dimension that is rarely given explicit consideration is that of climate change. Exploring the role of climate change as a factor in people's well-being is especially important in Sri Lanka as it is highly vulnerable to climate change as an island and a tropical country.

The National Adaptation Plan for Climate Change in Sri Lanka (NAP, 2016) notes the following key climate change risks faced by the country - increase in the atmospheric temperature; changed patterns of rainfall and longer spells of dry weather; increase in frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as drought and floods; and a rise in sea level.

**The distress of climate injustice**
Even today, the effects of climate change impact the mental health and psychosocial well-being of Sri Lankan people in significant ways. There are direct impacts of climate change on livelihoods that are dependent on climatic conditions. There are also threats to the lives and resources of families living in fragile environments that are vulnerable to frequent extreme weather conditions. These stressors undermine the socio-economic and material determinants of well-being and mental health in multiple ways. The uncertainty of impacts of extreme weather conditions, the anticipated rise of sea level in the future, and changes to the familiar natural environment are also a source of worry and fear for vulnerable populations' existence and identity.

Perhaps the most obvious of the direct impacts of increasingly unpredictable weather conditions is on the livelihoods of farming and fishing communities. Over 28 percent of Sri Lanka's population is estimated to be directly engaged in agriculture and a significant percentage of the population is indirectly dependent on livelihoods related to diverse food supply chains. The impacts of economic stress on affected families and communities manifest in increased suicidal or self-harming behaviour, family conflict, and risky coping responses that undermine well-being. Any negative impacts on the production in the agricultural sector, especially food crops and fisheries, also impact the food security of the wider population of the country. In the context of the current crisis, the impacts of adverse weather associated with climate change add an additional layer of precariousness – where Sri Lanka anticipates a loss of food production due to a poorly-planned policy to shift suddenly to organic farming as

well as reduced financial capacity to import staples such as rice to meet the shortfall. Furthermore, the sudden onset of extreme weather conditions, especially cyclones, floods, and landslides, routinely disrupt human settlements, damage infrastructure, and impede access to essential services. In the more recent past, an increase in sea erosion damaging houses and property of coastal populations has been observed. Living in such conditions causes instability and uncertainty in people's lives, and could increase stresses related to the safety and security of their loved ones. Being exposed frequently to inhospitable climatic conditions can erode families' and communities' resilience to cope with crises. Adverse impacts of climate change stressors also affect interpersonal relationships - for example, exacerbate violence against women and children within families. Existing practices of community-sharing can also be challenged when resources become scarce during times of prolonged or repeated harsh

weather conditions, leading to inter and intra-community conflicts. Changing climatic conditions, particularly unfamiliar and unpredictable weather patterns, challenge communities' use of traditional knowledge, and time-tested skills and technologies in managing their food security. Rural communities adapt to spells of adverse weather by supplementing their staple diet of rice with alternative seasonal foods during lean periods. Prolonged drought or frequent floods undermine people's capacity to use their knowledge and skills to cope with threats to their farming and food security. Similar stresses affect the fishing communities whose fishing seasons are premised on predictable weather patterns and the movement of shoals.

**The case for integration of climate change adaptation and MHPSS**
The loss of the ability to use their knowledge and skills to manage their natural environments to sustain

lives and livelihoods can challenge men's and women's fulfillment of their caregiving and economic roles within their families, and their social roles as productive members of their communities. This may affect their sense of self-efficacy, self-worth, and dignity, and result in a loss of perceived control over their lives and livelihoods. These would directly impact their mental health and psychosocial well-being. Cianconi et al. have highlighted how experiencing loss of control and powerlessness over one's environment and resource bases in the context of climate change causes uncertainty and stress that affect people's mental well-being. The global discourse on climate change and mental health, viewing these through a clinical lens, has offered diagnostic labels such as 'solastalgia' or 'eco-anxiety' to describe conditions related to grief or anxiety over the loss of familiar environments caused by climate change. Regardless of the frameworks we use to

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> *...impacts of climate change weigh heavier on people who already experience structural discriminations and social injustices in their daily living...*

articulate these conditions, it is vital to understand that people's difficulties and distress resulting from climate change are shaped by the particular psychosocial meaning of the impacts on them. In Sri Lanka, the experiences of climate change impacts and consequences on mental health and psychosocial well-being may vary significantly across communities, within them, and even between members of the same family.

When supporting individuals and groups in communities, including families living in extreme poverty, socially marginalised groups, and people with disability, it is vital to recognise their particular intersectional vulnerabilities to climate change. As with other crises, adverse impacts of climate change weigh heavier on people who already experience structural discriminations and social injustices in their daily living, or who have historical experiences of adversity. In Sri Lanka, this means that the impacts

of climate change are compounded by the impacts of war experience, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing economic crisis. More visible crises may also sometimes overshadow the slower and less dramatic dimensions of climate change impacts, making it hard for service providers and policy-makers to recognise the role of the latter.

The MHPSS field in Sri Lanka would better serve many of the vulnerable communities and groups that it seeks to assist if it were more sensitive to climate change as an increasingly important determinant of people's well-being. A climate change perspective will be relevant to every level of MHPSS response – from caring for individuals with acute impacts, targeting support to specific groups, responding to collective experiences of affected communities, to addressing underlying environmental and material factors. MHPSS responses informed by a climate change perspective may need to take on new approaches and

emphases – for example, engaging more deeply with communities' relationships to place and environment, or emphasising more on processes that build collective resilience to hazards and adverse changes, that are shared experiences.

**Kusala Wettasinghe** is an independent Psychosocial Practitioner, and has been working in the sector for over 15 years engaged in psychosocial-based research, teaching, and capacity-building.

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SERVICE DELIVERY

# Weathering the Storm: Disability, Climate Change, Mental Health

Highlighting the Unique Vulnerabilities of Persons with Disabilities and the Layered Impact of Climate Change

BY CANDICE D'SOUZA

**The consequences of climate change**
In November 2021, Israeli minister Karine Elharrar was unable to attend the COP26 summit in Glasgow because, as someone who lives with muscular dystrophy, she couldn't access it with her wheelchair. Her concerns served as a metaphor for the historical exclusion of disabled individuals' access needs in the conversations surrounding climate change and disaster relief.

The increasing frequency of extreme weather events and natural disasters, rising sea levels, floods, heat waves, deforestation, droughts, desertification, and water shortages are some of the adverse impacts of climate change. Climate change affects food production, access to safe drinking water, shelter, livelihood, and the destruction of

health infrastructure, among others. Invariably, the most vulnerable, marginalised sections of society are the first to have their lives and basic rights to food, water, and shelter undone by these changes.

**The unique impact of climate change on PwDs and human rights**
Disabled individuals constitute the world's largest minority - with an astounding 15 percent of the global population, i.e., 30 million people, living with an intellectual or physical disability. Yet, the unique challenges of PwDs (Persons with Disabilities) are as invisible in discourses surrounding climate change as they are in conversations surrounding consequent mental health challenges. In India, the multi-layered impact of climate change on the disabled is also exacerbated by

the attitudinal and other barriers they face, including access to a historically exclusionary public education and health infrastructure, illiteracy, and consequent unemployment.

**The cyclical reasons why PwDs are especially at risk due to major climate change**
India is home to almost 3 crore persons with disabilities, of which close to 1.3 crore people are employable; but only 34 lakh among them are actually engaged in formal or informal employment. This is because disabled people are often stuck in a cycle wherein societal structures and systems render most public life inaccessible to them. Thus, children born with disabilities may or may not have access to the necessary health and educational infrastructure, depending on other

DISABILITY

Social and cultural exclusion and stigma

Reduced participation in decision-making, and denial of civil and political rights

Denial of opportunities for economic, social, and human development

VULNERABILITY TO POVERTY AND ILL-HEALTH

Deficits in economic, social, and cultural rights

POVERTY

Image: Grills et al., 2017.

factors such as socio-economic status, geographical location, etc. Therefore, disabled individuals live with the risk of remaining uneducated, living below the poverty line, and being cut off from access to the health infrastructure and medical care they would need at different points in their lives.

When natural disasters make resources scarce and we work with a 'survival of the fittest' mindset, PwDs will be the first people in need of help and yet the last to receive it, if at all. Moreover, the dearth of accessible housing and sanitation facilities, and a healthcare system that is focussed on pathologising and 'treating' symptoms of a disability rather than helping with adaptation and improving quality of life, along with barriers such as prejudice, social stigma, and exclusionary public policy, only worsen the existing vulnerabilities of disabled and mentally ill persons, especially women. Reports by IDMC, South Asia

on the relief camps in Bangladesh after Cyclone Amphan include narratives of disabled women who were unable to use the makeshift washrooms/bathing areas due to fear of harassment and abuse from men, which respondents attributed to as being fuelled by frustration due to unemployment and substance abuse.

**Climate change and mental health of PwDs**
The issues of climate change, mental health, and disability have been historically viewed as mutually exclusive, unrelated concerns. However, advocacy to consider climate change as fundamentally being a human rights issue is incomplete unless interlinked with disability rights and mental health.

Limited mobility and self-preservation skills during climate change-related emergencies can adversely impact the mental health of those living with psychosocial and physical disabilities. Research demonstrates

*...PwDs will be the first people in need of help and yet the last to receive it, if at all.*

that the rising temperatures, deforestation, increasing number of natural disasters, and the consequent losses incurred — both material and emotional — are resulting in mental health concerns such as depression, PTSD and suicidality, violence, and more. Climate change-related impacts can also lead to job loss, force people to move, or lead to a loss of social support and community resources — all of which have mental health consequences.

In addition, disabled individuals may lack access to the necessary resources not only to survive emergencies but also be cut off from larger systems of social support and rehabilitation resources that may be available to the larger mainstream, able-bodied community. In a study

on Tropical Cyclone Pam, which hit Vanuatu in 2015, 60 percent of people with disabilities reported a lack of safety information on what to do in an emergency before the cyclone, compared to 47 percent of people without. After Cyclone Amphan struck Bangladesh in May 2020, 71 percent of people with auditory or hearing disabilities said that early warning systems were not accessible, while 90 percent of people reported challenges related to walking or climbing stairs, and said evacuation centres and/or their toilet facilities were inaccessible. People with disabilities also face a greater risk of being separated from their usual carers and assistive devices while fleeing, which could exacerbate their vulnerabilities during displacement. Following the 2004 tsunami, conservative estimates by Human Rights Watch show that many people with disabilities in India, including several hundreds of children with intellectual disabilities, were left destitute after being separated from or even abandoned by family members, who had hitherto provided financial support and care.

There is increasing evidence that disabled individuals face a higher risk of experiencing mental health concerns such as depression and PTSD as well as a higher risk of suicidality when left in such a vulnerable position. The perceived burdensomeness and general stigma surrounding disability and disabled individuals mean that a lot of them hesitate to seek help for their concerns, knowing that their caregivers are already grappling with the more pragmatic concerns surrounding their care, particularly in times when resources are scarce and supportive infrastructure is missing.

Mental health professionals need to be sensitised in their gaze towards people with disabilities - to view them as not being mere hapless victims of fate and help in cultivating agency and hope for the individuals, while becoming an active part of relief interventions and advocacy. Mental health and provision of therapy and psychiatric care for persons with disabilities are often not independent of advocacy for their rights.

**The need for inclusive disaster risk management and relief**
The unique challenges of living with a disability - whether physical, intellectual, or psychosocial - are best understood by those with lived experience. Given the unique and often vastly diverse support needs of people with different disabilities, it would only be pertinent to include disabled individuals in the discourse surrounding inclusive disaster risk management policies.

Inclusive climate change policy may be accomplished through a 'twin-track' approach, which promotes both 'specialist disability initiatives' designed to include and empower persons with disabilities and the 'mainstreaming' of disability inclusion into all policies, strategies, and activities. Effective and accessible early warning systems and evacuation procedures are crucial, especially for someone who may have difficulty getting out of harm's way quickly or independently.

Emergency relief workers could benefit from sensitisation and training as well as necessary technical support for inclusive relief planning. For example, wheelchair users may be unable to hide under tables/chairs during an earthquake. Evacuation of these individuals when electric outages might render elevators defunct would need to be conducted using special equipment that allows a wheelchair to be lifted out and lowered from heights. It is also important to create awareness among mental health professionals and other stakeholders in disability affirmative intervention. The scarcity of sign-language interpreters is a consistent challenge across India, as is the lack of signs for disaster-related terms in Indian sign language. Educative resources and creating awareness regarding climate change-related consequences on mental health and safety planning in formats accessible to disabled individuals (including manuals in Braille or training in sign language) are essential to fostering agency and self-efficacy in individuals with disabilities.

Collaboration between multiple stakeholders, including local panchayats, rural authorities, municipal authorities, disability rights organisations, as well as emergency relief professionals and medical staff is imperative to ensure that they meet the short as well as long-term goals towards inclusion and rehabilitation of persons with disabilities in emergencies.

Therefore, we need to cultivate active sensitisation among mental health professionals, emergency relief workers, and all other stakeholders for the mainstreaming and integration of disabled individuals, as these form the first step in any major inclusive climate action or advocacy. However, truly ending this vicious cycle involves educating people and addressing the stigma and prejudice that is at the root of their exclusion, and the conscious mainstreaming of disability in public life.

**Candice D'souza** is a practising psychotherapist and educator who lives with cerebral palsy. She identifies as an intersectional feminist and is an avid reader who is passionate about providing inclusive mental health care and education to individuals from multiple loci of marginalisation, including gender, sexual orientation, caste backgrounds, and disability.

ILLUSTRATION BY: UPASANA AGARWAL

RESEARCH

# Women of the Rivers of South Asia:

## Unpsoken Trauma, Stress, and Moral Policing In The Face of Climate Change

**BY CHHAYA NAMCHU**

Through the course of this writing, I reconnected with women who, like me, have experience working with riverine communities as facilitators, researchers, activists, storytellers, and friends. Going back to our work and shared experiences helped us to reflect on how we have encountered the issue of mental well-being amongst women affected by climate change, which is otherwise sidelined to make room for more 'urgent' physical catastrophes.

Minket Lepcha, from Darjeeling, has been working in the Transboundary Rivers of Mahakali (Ganga) and the Brahmaputra for over 10 years, first as a filmmaker (*Voices of Teesta*) and now as a storyteller. She shared how as an indigenous woman herself, she felt that the medium of storytelling was easier to connect with and understand the soul of the rivers, issues of climate

change, and the lives circling the rivers from the perspectives of the women themselves. This medium of storytelling and coming together has been a source of therapy and solidarity for women who face both physical and mental adversities as a consequence of climatic impacts.

Discourses on climate change can often be restricted to academic, scientific, and political platforms. Vulnerable communities and people who bear the brunt of climate change, displacement, and climate-induced disasters end up as data figures and objects of studies. In this complexity of work on climate change, we fail to humanise the local people and stories, and personal and collective narratives become case studies in reports and publications. Studies are derived through a process of data collection, questionnaires, and carefully-curated

indicators – such as level of rainfall, change in cropping patterns, and so on – all of which are driven by numbers and pre-determined assumptions. Almost always, the dominant issues of concern are measured in terms of physical casualties and tangible damages to property and infrastructure. This, unfortunately, leaves out the voices and perspectives of local communities, especially of women.

**Miss-representation**
The mainstream discourse on climate change which focusses on infrastructural damage, climate hazards, and data-driven findings may not be representative of all of its stakeholders. This is because women are often left out of this whole dynamic. This is especially true of rural areas in South Asia, wherein the burden of society and household chores create obstacles for women

when it comes to participating in decision-making processes. Merely opening up opportunities and extending invitations for women to participate is not adequate – there is a need to create access and spaces for women. As a researcher working on gender and climate change across the South Asian Himalayan rivers, I often encountered this complex issue wherein women would attend meetings only because the project demanded them to. Mere attendance did not ensure the participation of women, especially in the presence of senior members and men. Evidence, experience, and literature have shown time and again that women are more vulnerable than men to the impacts of climate change. This is seen evident in the case of riverine communities across South Asia (Ganga and Teesta Brahmaputra dominantly – which, although divided by borders, are bound together by the shared impacts of climatic and anthropogenic changes in the form of floods, droughts, and displacement). However, while discussing climate change impacts on women, we discuss them in relation to natural

hazards, migration, livelihoods, food and water insecurity, and biodiversity loss. This limits the narrative of women, as there are far more layers to this than just broad areas and themes. Furthermore, issues of women are measured through factors of livelihoods, physical threats, and increased workload, and although this is valid and true, it also diminishes other areas that are equally important such as mental health, emotional well-being, and need for solidarity and support within their households and communities.

**Weather, women, bodies, and beyond**
Women are seen in relation to their physical bodies - as caregivers to families and communities, contributors to livelihood streams like agriculture, fishing, and daily wage, and even as primary victims of climate impacts. The threats attached to women are immediately and solely seen in relation to their bodies and sexuality. This is true, as displacement caused as a consequence of disasters makes women more vulnerable because of their high dependence on natural

resources, low sources of income, and lack of access to public and cultural institutions. This insecurity is known best to women who, as a consequence of flooding, not only face physical harm but also household-level breakdowns as men have to move away looking for better livelihood opportunities.

Zerin Ahmed from Dhaka is a young river activist who has also been working with Oxfam in Bangladesh. Zerin has continued to keep in touch with the women she has met living along the flood-affected villages in downstream Brahmaputra. Out of the innumerable stories, she speaks of women who have lost their childhood homes and villages to the floods. The impact of displacement is both physically and mentally draining on women, she adds. Women and girls who are suddenly pushed out of their safe spaces of homes and community have to deal with the trauma and insecurity of facing the fear of physical, sexual, and mental vulnerability.

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports

have been validating these local experiences through their publications. The 2012 IPCC report warned us about global warming and unpredictable precipitation leading to more destructive and frequent floods. Even as early as 1990, the IPCC had pointed to migration as the greatest consequence of climate change. This is evident across many rural communities but even more so along river communities. Unpredictable rainfall patterns and flood displacements force the men especially to migrate, looking for alternative livelihood opportunities. Kriti Shrestha, from Practical Action in Nepal, has been working on climate change in Nepal. She has worked with women along the Gandak River (Ganga) and reiterated this very point on migration. She added how, following male migration, it is observed that women are suddenly pushed into public spaces. The women who are left behind have an increase in burden and responsibilities - looking after their homes and their communities. Too often, these women who have to move outside the home space for daily activities, face moral policing

and are criticised by the older generation. Women who want to participate in public meetings and community services become the subject of gossip. The mental stress that women and girls face is multi-layered and arises out of all forms of vulnerabilities. While mental health issues in women are mostly studied with reference to disaster relief and post destruction, we must work towards normalising discussion on mental health at all levels of society, and not only as a last relief measure.

**Women will continue to build solutions and connect like the river**
However, despite all adversities, Minket, Zerin, and Kriti agree that women of the rivers continue to form groups and push towards participation and opportunities in councils, even adopting art as a medium of relief to create a space where they can share and express their shared trauma and concerns. In a long list of priorities in the face of climate change, we must understand the need to build spaces for these women to share, and to heal and rebuild the communities that centred on the resilience of the women of the rivers.

**Chhaya Namchu** is currently working as Program Manager with Socratus Foundation. She has previously worked for over eight years on the subject of the Himalayan region, Transboundary Rivers, and mountain livelihoods in the backdrop of climate change.

"A horse might not work as sorely as I do"

ILLUSTRATION BY: SABBA KHAN

ADVOCACY

# Climate Change at the Cost of My Life

## Does ANYONE care?

**BY AHMAD NISAR**

Afghanistan, home to 40 million people, faces enormous challenges of terrorism, political instability, and illiteracy. On top of these, Afghans are set to welcome another challenge - climate change! Over the last 3 decades, temperatures rose significantly (by 1.2 Celsius), droughts doubled, and over 14 percent of the total area of glaciers was lost. In the absence of preventative measures, future projections show that snowfall would diminish in the central highlands, potentially leading to reduced summer flows in the Helmand and Northern River basins, while spring rainfall would decrease across most of the country. Additionally, it's predicted that in small pockets of the south and west, there might be a 5 percent increase in "heavy precipitation events" that can lead to flash floods.

The continuation of excessive garbage, industrial activities, and lack of awareness is confronting residents with previously non-existent diseases. Gaining deeper insight into the roots of climate change makes us comprehend that

its reinforcing notion is poverty merged with a lack of policies and investment. As the government is laser-focussed on solving political dilemmas, they wouldn't bother paying attention to the catastrophes climate change entails.

### Our mental health?
During my research for a documentary film on climatic exacerbations in Afghanistan, a thought-provoking finding was revealed. Anyone who was impacted by climate burdens was mentioning emotional mismanagement, periods of depression, and lethargy to mention a few. The roots that climate change plants to making us mentally unwell form a complex paradigm circulating around multiple factors which, if left unattended, can take us to the brink of our death. In this essence, our lived experiences effortlessly reflect that climatic complexities reinforce our mental stresses, while also allowing us to sense the realities endured by many.

The plight of Ershad Naqshbandi, a climate activist residing in Mazar, corroborates the distasteful

extremity of climate and mental ill-health burden. Ershad's pre-existing anxiety was deepened by the damaging "rural" lifestyle of residents plus the communal inattention towards his aspirations to catalyse change. "I was sick of the government's remiss towards the issue and spent most of my earnings on turning my dreams into reality. We had no sources of funding as entities supported organisations that were closely tied with them. The consequences, however, meagerly met my expectations as no one listened to me. With this failure in mind, I took a suicide pill but regrettably, it didn't amount to anything," explains Ershad. Joined with the complications of climate exigency, his mental ill-health will cause him additional financial loss.

### Don't bother us, draw a line under it!
Unsurprisingly, the real destructors like industries rebuff our request to be held accountable. A reasonable alibi is the autonomy they possess from the government which allows them to pollute the environment beyond measure. Needless to say, the authorities are

> *Decades of war, corruption, and lack of knowledge and capability have prevented the war-torn country from mainstreaming preventative measures for climate change.*

vanquished by the costs of integrating accountable systems and policies, leaving its undesirable rot on the residents. Decades of war, corruption, and lack of knowledge and capability have prevented the war-torn country from mainstreaming preventative measures for climate change. When I asked a climate specialist from the National Environmental Protection Agency (NEPA) about their strategies to mitigate climate-related harms, he responded, "How can we ban the usage of plastics and wood when we have no alternatives like stable electricity to meet their needs?"

**Why me, when I had no role in it?**
Not all residents are impacted proportionately within the cross sections of wealth and gender. Women, especially with a low income, bear the consequences of their farmer husbands' poor mental health via increased domestic violence, housework, and labour on the farms, which in turn raises the anxiety levels they have to deal with.

Shima, a farmer, lives in a rural village with her family and works in the fields as it's the only source

of their income. On top of being a survivor of child marriage due to climatic catastrophes, she now bears the responsibilities of her children's welfare as well. "A horse might not work as sorely as I do. Fetching water, doing housework, and cultivating crops take all my power away. My daughter lives with asthma and can barely breathe during the winter as smoke hovers in every corner, but I'm impoverished by the costs of treatment. I assume either my husband will kill me one day, or I'll die from sorrow," narrates Shima.

Their misery doesn't end here as Shima's fate might accompany her daughter as well. In order to migrate from the disaster-stricken area, she borrowed money from a relative which she either had to pay back in cash or sell her 14-year-old daughter as a bride instead. As per the system of patriarchy in Afghanistan, males in the house exercise full control to make decisions about a female's life; in this case, Shima's husband was the one to give her hand to a wealthy stranger.

With the ever-lasting drought, Shima and her daughter are both

working intensely to earn a living, at the cost of her daughter's education. "Life seems purposeless. Periodically, I wish to end my life, because anyway I'll tie the knot with somebody twice my age.

When every one sleeps, I cry and ask Lord Almighty for happiness like other people," narrates Rahima, Shima's daughter, who lives with a depressive disorder.

Empowered by perennial cultural norms, divisions made upon class and gender heightened with the addition of climatic exasperations to a point that migrant children are branded as "peasants" in the classroom. The cycle extends to workplaces, where they're regarded as "less competent" to hold higher positions. Combined with the lack of services, the implications on their mental health may be beyond despair.

**The need for change**
Anticipating for a second, how can we ignore an inevitable need which affects all aspects of our life? Mental well-being is exclusively emphasised in clinical settings while its impact varies to a myriad

of levels, which often might not lead to seeking professional help. Apart from this, humanitarian aid aimed at combating climate change hardly ever invests in building allyships that could function as a hotbed of mutual learning and prevention of disasters to reap benefits.

Quite often, low and middle income countries lack the financial resources and workforce to incorporate preventative programs for climatic catastrophes and the heavy reliance on external aid hinders them from innovating solutions themselves. On the other hand, their lack of ownership in the design and allocation of these investments obliterates the preserved cultural heredity and indigenous knowledge of communities; the provision of a one-time donation further extends the cycle of food insecurity and stress. If the billion-dollar aid was subsidised for developing preventative measures, it could've created sustainable jobs, and reversed the effects of climate change on mental health in turn. Henceforth, entities must emphasise the effects of climatic and mental distress using an intersectional

lens and respectively invest in people's demands. This compels the integration of mental support for activists and people impacted by climate change through sensitisation of support providers (clinicians, etc.), decision-makers, and their allies. Similarly, a ban on the importation and usage of poor vehicles must be ratified to prevent pollution and bring ease to families who spend thousands to cure their dependents in the winter. An integrative approach will also encompass the sensitisation of school atmospheres, including the staff, to be welcoming of migrant children to prevent further harm. The key is to directly involve those affected mentally and morally by climate change in all stages of the decision-making process so as to give them ownership and to best fulfill their needs.

"Our voices have long been turned a deaf ear to, making us mentally and physically distressed. But the more we tolerate, the more powerful it will get, so let's stand up against the cycle of injustice that's disproportionately plotting against us" - Ahmad Nisar.

**Ahmad Nisar** is the founder of Ahmad Nisar's Literacy Center in Afghanistan. He runs a grassroots youth-led organisation focused on sexual rights and literacy, and its role in alleviating violence. Since 2018, he has actively advocated for changing policies as a volunteer teacher, a global youth reporter for Team Harmony Foundation, a Young Leader for Women Deliver, and a Fellow for Orygen Global.

LIVED EXPERIENCE

# Climate Justice implies Inclusive Justice

## Climate Change needs to include Issues of Disability Justice and Mental Health at the Centre of its Discourse

**BY ABHISHEK ANICCA**

Winters are difficult for me. My legs get numb without warning. The bladder develops its own routine. Walking becomes difficult on days. Pain becomes a regular feature of my scoliotic back. My disabled and chronically ill body wants to quit and go to a distant place where there is no winter, but these plans seldom work out. Lying in bed for days without an end brings me down. There are bad mental health days, too many of them to count. Anxiety and depression become two sides of the same coin and there are many days when mere survival seems difficult. This is only compounded by days of illness and recovery. Monsoon is no better. The roads are waterlogged and I can't even step out. Even a wet floor may result in a sprain, or worse still, in a fracture.

The weather outside has an immediate impact on my physical and mental health. It always did but for the last few years, the weather seems erratic and unpredictable.

Extreme temperatures. Unplanned rains and thunderstorms. My body and mind react adversely to these events. A fear grips my existence. I cancel more plans than I make. The idea of climate change impacting day-to-day lives seemed distant a decade ago but as the years roll by, we realise it's right here, in our room, dictating our moods and the decisions we make.

**The world is changing**
If the subtle changes are not enough, you keep getting new warnings every day. Flooding cities, forest fires, and unbearable temperatures - disasters that one can ignore only if they are not ready to read the signs. As disabled people, we have more immediate, pressing needs, of course. Accessibility, healthcare, security, survival. The world around us is inaccessible. Many of us can't even get to a school or a hospital. The healthcare system is crumbling and has little space to give special attention to persons with disabilities. We focus on survival.

The last two years have been very difficult for us. Living in a pandemic, through lockdowns, doing everything to protect ourselves and yet, depending on others for our basic needs. The wait for vaccines was long, and when they came, we grappled with inaccessible vaccination centres. Our lives had come to a halt. Many of us had comorbidities. We grappled with fear as we heard stories of people not being able to find a hospital bed. There was news of immuno-compromised friends dying every other day. No one prioritised disabled people's well-being. We were out of sight and out of mind. If anything, this pandemic was a warning for all of us, a preview of how life might become in the face of impending disasters and climate change if we don't prepare for it. That we might be forgotten.

Disabled people, like others in the margins, are always disproportionately affected by disasters.

After the Nepal earthquake of 2015, I had this constant paranoia of not being able to get out of the building in case of the next earthquake. I lived on the first floor because I couldn't find an affordable and accessible flat on the ground floor. Such paranoia is not uncommon among disabled friends. There is the constant fear of being left behind.

**An unfair burden**
When it comes to our duties as conscientious beings, we aren't given any concessions. As individuals, we are equally responsible for 'saving the planet'. Cut down on consumption. Use greener alternatives. While big multinational companies and the capitalist systems that power them can get away with man-made disasters which irreversibly damage our ecosystem. Disabled people are very familiar with this model of injustice. Society systematically excludes persons with disabilities, creates barriers for them, makes them powerless, and then puts the onus of survival on disabled individuals.

Disabled people have been asked to make sacrifices 'to save the planet' frequently, sometimes at the cost of their lives. Plastic straws became the prime enemy of everyone doing 'climate activism' and were replaced by the 'eco-friendly' paper straws, without any consideration for many disabled people who could not drink without plastic straws. It was as if their consent was never required. And that is the overall feeling one gets when the planet is being 'saved' by individuals. Disabled people are seldom even included in this decision making and policies around climate change rarely take into consideration the most vulnerable populations, which include persons with disability.

As a disabled and chronically ill person, the idea that you can save the planet or that you are not doing enough only leads to guilt. For example, I have to regularly use diapers whenever I go out, and apart from the social stigma, it bothers me that these diapers might not be biodegradable. I have had dreams of rows of diapers upon diapers, becoming part of mountains of garbage, failing to wither away, turning into shame. To put things into context, there is no way I can go out for work or social engagement without wearing diapers since my bowel and bladder are adversely affected by my disability. A diaper provides me with a sense of security and confidence to step out. In India, adult diapers are very expensive and other biodegradable options are not available. Even when they are available, I wonder if I would be able to afford them. The welfare provided by the state machinery to disabled people is completely insufficient to even cover the cost of food for everyday consumption. How can you afford diapers? And why should I be guilt-ridden about this while the world around me engages in unimpeded consumption?

The idea of moral decision-making is much more complicated for persons with disability, even more so when you live in a country like India where disability and mental health policy is driven by tokenism rather than action. We barely have any welfare support and even the basic protections offered by the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act, 2016, are out of reach of the majority of the disabled population. Lack of awareness and stigma of disability only leads to exclusion. The situation is likely to get worse depending on your class, caste, and gender. While there is shared responsibility on all of us, it is also true that the disabled will face comparatively worse consequences of climate change when compared to able-bodied individuals.

**Survival on the line**
The able-bodied world loves to use war metaphors. A pandemic, a climate crisis, a mental health 'epidemic': everything turns into some kind of war. These wars often erase the experiences of disabled people who are fighting hard for our survival every day, against the state, against inaccessibility, against apathy, and sometimes against our own bodies. This is a lonely battle and there is never enough empathy to go around.

With these larger 'wars' looming over us, there is a persistent fear of fending for ourselves in disaster situations, our quest for survival reduced to a personal battle. When it comes to the system, you are left with more questions than you have the answers for. For example, with rising water levels many cities might be flooded. What will happen to disabled people in such situations? Will their rehabilitation and resettlement be a priority? What about rescue situations in disasters? With physical infrastructure being inaccessible in many countries across the world, will disabled needs be taken into consideration while planning disaster management?

All of these questions are only made complicated by the cost involved in barely surviving. Disabled people have difficulty finding employment. Many disabled people are forced to live in poverty, burdened by the expenses of medical care, and forced to depend on the entitlements given by their respective states, no matter how meagre they are. Their 'productivity' is often questioned and utilitarian arguments strip them of their dignity. As we try to fight climate change and rebuild a better world, what will happen to the economic needs of the disabled? Free healthcare, disability pensions, and accessible workplaces are essential for the quality of lives that the disabled live. With the world falling apart, one fears that their basic needs might not remain the priority for governments across the world.

Climate change is already affecting marginalised populations across the globe. The question of climate justice must consider the present inequities which push disabled people into the margins and the possible ramifications of climate change on their day-to-day lives. That process won't be possible unless they are given a seat at the table. Their voices have to be heard; their opinions have to be taken. The current discourse on climate change and disability is mainly focused on non-profit organisations and one worries that climate justice might end up becoming just a discussion driven by the global funding cycle. Climate justice for the disabled has to do more, not only as we await the crisis to become worse and prepare for disasters that may happen but also plan for a more equitable, accessible world for the disabled where they can live with dignity. There would be no climate justice in a world that is full of injustice and inequity, where disabled people are pushed to the margins every day. We have to start working on that right now, taking collective responsibility, with disabled people at the centre of every decision-making process.

**Abhishek Anicca** is a writer, poet, and performer. He identifies as a person with a locomotor disability and chronic illness, which shapes his creative endeavours. He uses spoken word poetry and theatrical performances for disability activism. Abhishek has a Master's in Development Studies from TISS, Mumbai, and an MPhil in Women's & Gender Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi.

HUMAN RIGHTS

# Changed Destinies in the Eastern Himalayan Region

How Climate Change has Undermined the Development Aspirations of Marginalised Communities

BY RITURAJ PHUKAN

The National Highway connecting my hometown to Guwahati was home to thousands of marooned families for several weeks this year. Men, women, and children were forced to live on the road for weeks, sharing their space with livestock and companion animals, the shacks clearly insufficient to provide any protection from the periodic thunderstorms. One side of the highway was barricaded after a person was run down while he was having dinner. I was dismayed by the helplessness of these women and children; the lack of toilets and privacy exposed them to indignities unimaginable in this modern era.

Last year, a global survey of 10,000 young people across 10 countries revealed "profound psychological distress" attributed to the climate crisis, with anxiety and distress affecting daily life and functioning, worsened by perceived government inaction. Most respondents from the Global South including India and the Philippines were concerned about the "frightening" future.

Previous studies have shown that psychological distress about climate change exists, with affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions, and that such natural disasters have long-lasting effects on mental health and consequences including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and general anxiety.

Floods are expected annual occurrences, but I have seen the frequency and intensity increase since my childhood. This year, the first wave of floods in May was unexpected, with the heavy rains and landslides devastating the hill district of Dima Hasao and other areas with the loss of over a 100 lives. For millions of children, repeated waves of floods, landslides, and erosion will lead to innumerable loss of school days and, sometimes, the total end of schooling and any hopes of a better life.

Studies have found that specific groups like children, the elderly, women, people with pre-existing mental illness, the economically disadvantaged, and the unhoused are at higher risk of distress and other adverse mental health consequences from exposure to climate-related or weather-related disasters. As climate change undermines children's mental health, it disrupts educational and occupational opportunities, with increased stigma, discrimination, and social marginalisation. These evident consequences across the region need to be documented for targeted responses and remedial measures.

The forecasted loss of over a third of glaciers in the Eastern Himalayas by 2100, even if warming is contained to 1.5°C, will be equally disastrous for montane and riparian communities. Residents of highland regions, mostly indigenous people, will be affected by the future decline of glacial runoff in terms of the effects on agriculture. People in the lowland regions

> *...specific groups like children, the elderly, women, people with pre-existing mental illness, the economically disadvantaged, and the unhoused are at higher risk of distress and other adverse mental health consequences from exposure to climate-related or weather-related disasters.*

| GROUPS | EFFECTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE IN THE EASTERN HIMALAYAN REGION |
|---|---|
| Children | Disrupts educational and occupational opportunities, with increased stigma, discrimination, and social marginalisation |
| Elderly | Lack of inclusion in disaster planning, experiences limited mobility and difficulty in understanding and dealing with extreme weather events, which may lead to greater vulnerability to mental health issues |
| Indigenous people | Future decline of glacial runoff in terms of the effects on agriculture; floods and erosions |

affected by floods and erosions also suffer long-term consequences undermining resources and resilience, compromising health choices like poor diet, inadequate physical activity, and reduced or no access to health services, adding to the mental distress. These aspects are further aggravated in the underdeveloped and remote villages of the Eastern Himalayan region.

Last year, Assam was listed among the eight most vulnerable states by the "Climate Vulnerability Assessment for Adaptation Planning in India Using a Common Framework". The national climate vulnerability assessment report from the Department of Science and Technology placed 60 percent of districts in Assam under the highly vulnerable category. Another recent

study revealed that six of India's eight most flood-prone districts during the last decade are in Assam, reinforcing its place as the worst flood-affected state in the region. Besides the mandated committees and action plans, there is no urgency or proactive action to mitigate the long-term and short-term health consequences for affected communities.

Earlier scientific assessments have found that communities that rely on the natural environment for sustenance and livelihood, as well as populations living in areas most susceptible to specific climate change events, face an increased risk of adverse mental health outcomes. These findings are applicable to the indigenous communities of the Eastern Himalayas, who are at a higher risk of hardship from impacts like flooding because of pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerability, history of exploitation and conflicts, and social stigma.

Despite insignificant contributions to the accumulation of greenhouse gases, indigenous people are among the first to face the direct impacts of warming. These communities are proudly connected to the natural world and biological diversity is celebrated in their art and music. Loss of forest cover, decline of native biodiversity and proliferation of invasive vegetation, and the

consequent loss of indigenous food sources have emerged as direct threats to the food security of forest or fringe forest dwellers dependent on natural resources for sustenance.

It must be mentioned that the latest State of Forest Report showed a further decrease in the area under forest cover across the northeast region, despite an overall increase for India, in continuation of a declining trend since 2009. Compounding the problem is rampant encroachment, with 60% of India's encroached forest areas located in the northeast, and Assam again being the worst affected.

Personally, I believe that ensuring indigenous people can access traditional foods in the face of warming impacts is climate justice. Most food, medicines, and ingredients for traditional liquor are derived from the native vegetation, and preserved according to traditions passed down from one generation to

the next. These are important to their cultural identity and societal fabric, but also vital for health and well-being, affecting personal immunity, community resilience, and fulfillment.

Indigenous peoples are vital to creating a dynamic adaptation and mitigation pathway and there are many examples of how different communities interpret and react to the impacts of climate change, drawing on traditional knowledge and other technologies to find creative solutions which may help society at large to cope with impending changes. Traditional ways of preserving food, like smoking or fermentation, practised by indigenous communities are perhaps the best insurance for their food security, and mental and physical health in times of disasters. Planning for the future should include enhancement and support for the adaptive capacity of indigenous peoples integrated with disaster preparation, land-use planning,

environmental conservation, physical and mental health support, and sustainable development strategies.

At the camps for the flood-affected, the elderly people are despondent about a lifetime spent fighting poverty and hunger, but the children must be mentally readied to fight a system that fails to address their basic human development aspirations. Considering the vulnerabilities of the Eastern Himalayas, it is imperative for policy-makers to integrate mental health into the agenda for proactive mitigation responses during climate-induced disasters.

Developed countries like the USA and Japan have incorporated mental health elements like the deployment of psychiatric teams, nutritional advisories, and help centres into the protocol for emergency responses. Countries of the Global South could leverage their experiences in crisis preparedness for an integrated global system in highly vulnerable

areas like the Eastern Himalayas. The government must strive to ensure the opportunity to overcome the protracted effect of climate change on mental health for an equitable and sustainable future.

The empowerment of community leaders is important and hopefully, these marooned children growing up on the roads will someday represent India in global fora to negotiate the allocation of climate funds for the region. Conspicuously absent from global climate negotiations are indigenous people representatives from India, particularly from the Eastern Himalayas, despite being among the worst affected. Finally, the deliverance of climate justice, like all other aspects, is tied to climate finance, and it should be our endeavour to have representation from the affected indigenous communities in these negotiations for the allocation of funds to the region.

**Rituraj Phukan** is an environmental writer, TEDx Speaker, adventurer, and naturalist from Assam. Founder of the Indigenous People's Climate Justice Forum, he also serves as National Coordinator for Biodiversity, the Climate Reality Project India. He has personally experienced the impacts of climate change in the polar frontiers of the Arctic and Antarctic, in the Himalayas, and across India.

# Engage

*What are the required considerations and target outcomes to keep in mind, while designing preventive policy and rehabilitative services and programmes for CLIMATE RELATED DISTRESS? How do we envision mental health care in policy and services for climate induced distress? In both community care and clinical intervention, how can we incorporate a rights-based lens and respond to structural climate trauma?*

Practices
Implementation
Psychosocial

SERVICE DELIVERY

# Mental Health in the Darjeeling Himalaya Socio-ecology

Recognising Voices of Stakeholders in Marginalised Mountainous Regions

BY ROSHAN P. RAI, MICHAEL MATERGIA, AND RINZI LAMA

The IPCC Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) report states that some impacts of climate change are already "irreversible" and it has adversely affected the mental health of people. It is evident that the impacts of this global crisis are disproportionate across regions and communities, with disproportionate mental health impacts which cannot be ignored. There is an immediate need towards integrating mental health into climate justice with an understanding of the socio-ecological context of communities to address mental health consequences related to climate change.

This article aims to locate climate change and mental health in the Darjeeling Himalaya, based on our experience partnering with communities since 1996. In and through this narrative, we argue for an intersectional approach to understanding the socio-ecological context to develop community-based interventions and policies that promote climate resilience inclusive of mental well-being.

**The Darjeeling narrative**
The global narrative of Darjeeling tends to be towards a romanticised, post-colonial, and touristy landscape with great views of the Kanchenjunga, Darjeeling Tea, and forests. Darjeeling Tea, a global brand, is sold with imagery of green plantations and smiling women picking tea. This is supplemented by the narrative of discord and conflict related to the political demands for statehood as well as the discourse around the Eastern Himalaya, a global biodiversity hotspot.

When viewed through the lens of equity, justice, and well-being, these dominant narratives are found to be devoid of the everyday realities of people. Life in Darjeeling is complex and challenging. Access and benefits of nature's bounty are limited for the people despite being resource-rich. Locating mental health in this challenging socio-ecology requires unpacking Darjeeling.

**Unpacking the Darjeeling narrative**
Rural Darjeeling communities spread across 3 distinct landscapes: tea plantations, forests, and small farming hamlets.

Unpacking 'Darjeeling Tea' entails recognising a history steeped in colonialism, being perpetuated even today. A recent report from the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Commerce states: "the plight and deprivation of the tea workers and feudalistic set up that alienate tea workers from their basic land rights despite seven decades of independence starkly undermines 7 successful land reform movements in the country".  This colonial legacy perpetuates insufficient wages which are "minimal to the extent of not meeting the basic needs of workers manifests a severe crisis in the tea sector".

Similar to narratives around tea, there is a simplistic celebration of the forest cover of Darjeeling as a global good with environmental benefits for humanity, leaving out

the forest villagers of Darjeeling. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 which sought to address the 'historical injustice' done to 'traditional forest dwellers' has resulted in limited dispensation and setting up of institutional mechanisms at an extremely slow pace. Dispensation has been mostly for people with tribal certificates, resulting in only a section of the village with formal land ownership, leaving others without. Furthermore, in these remote villages, there has been an increasing amount of human-wildlife conflict that is threatening peoples' lives and livelihoods, but these remain not adequately redressed, acknowledged, or compensated.

Farmers occupy an important part of the Darjeeling socio-ecology but maintain extremely small land holdings and face severe remunerative injustices. Agriculture offers a bleak life opportunity, being far removed from the social infrastructure and market. Additionally, human-wildlife conflict is now overflowing

out of forest boundaries, making agriculture an impossible task.

Across the tea, forest, and farming communities, many families manage their lives through migration to cities and other countries. Thus, in some sense, Darjeeling survives on a repatriation economy. These socio-ecological stressors have contributed to Darjeeling's long-standing demand for autonomy from West Bengal. It has undergone experiments of autonomy without proper devolution of power since 1988, with the formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and the successive three versions of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. Throughout this, the everyday lives of people have had extremely limited recourse to self-governance.

**Climate crisis in Darjeeling**
Climate change heavily impacts the Himalayas and within the intervention time scale of DLR Prerna from 1996 till date, we have witnessed a number of ecological impacts in the region. Some of the most

visible are - Darjeeling Mandarins have made a range-shift in altitude; rhododendrons are blooming early; and changes that have a direct impact on productivity, the mosquito and tea mosquito, are seen in higher altitudes, impacting health. Newer pests and diseases have developed in crops, and in some cases, with increased virulence, reducing production. These changes threaten livelihoods, food and nutrition security. Changes in temperature and precipitation are aggravating water stresses and contributing to reduced and changing spring flows that have huge communal impacts. Extreme weather events result in more frequent landslides and flash floods, leading to loss of life and livelihoods.

**Mental health in the climate crisis**
The climate crisis and its impacts in Darjeeling have added a further layer of stress that individuals, families, and communities have to adapt to, with its fallout on the mental well-being most of all.

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*Lack of agency as a region and community; social and political marginalisation and identity; and issues related to land ownership and opportunities are central to the narrative of the everyday lives of Darjeeling.*

Lack of agency as a region and community; social and political marginalisation and identity; and issues related to land ownership and opportunities are central to the narrative of the everyday lives of Darjeeling. This sense of lack is central to the political autonomy demand. Such a difficult socio-ecological context has meant that the people of Darjeeling have been living in duress that has a direct impact on their mental health. The everyday solutions like migration have affected the migrant as well as the family which stays home.

There is a lack of language and conversation on mental health in Darjeeling which is further aggravated by the lack of basic care and support services in the region. It is only with the COVID-19 pandemic that mental health issues are being acknowledged and discussed.

In this challenging interplay of life in Darjeeling, with its pre-existing vulnerabilities, the climate crisis has added a further layer of stress that individuals and communities have to adapt to for the mental well-being of all.



### Negotiating pathways to redress mental health and the climate crisis

The climate crisis shines a spotlight on the deep intersection and alignment between the socio-ecological context and mental health within Darjeeling. There is a need to acknowledge this and have explicit representation in the National Action Plan and State Action Plans for Climate Change. The national plan has a special mission for the Himalaya but does not acknowledge mental health. There is a need for climate action plans to integrate climate crisis trauma management. Likewise, the progressive Mental Healthcare Act, 2017, while guaranteeing rights to access mental health services to all, does not go on to recognise the intersection of climate change and mental health. While it talks of access at the district levels, what is appropriate to the mountains and socio-ecological context like Darjeeling is not explicit.

Community-based approaches have the potential to involve individuals as active participants in efforts to improve collective mental health. Our experience in Darjeeling demonstrates that the impacts of climate change and mental health are shaped by each community's unique socio-ecology. Thus, successful interventions will need to move away from dominant and incomplete narratives to respond to unique vulnerabilities driving climate trauma and build upon existing local capacity for peer-support, mutual-aid, and resilience. Furthermore, acknowledgement of socio-ecological context may lead to broad-based intersectoral responses that interweave clinical and psychological responses within a broader framework of livelihoods, ecological sustainability, and resilient infrastructure.

**Roshan P. Rai** is a development practitioner with DLR Prerna, a Darjeeling-based NGO. He has over 25 years of experience working on a broad range of issues in the Darjeeling Himalaya, with a focus on environment, participation, institution-building, and governance. Representing DLR Prerna, Roshan engages with regional, national, and international networks including Zero Waste Himalaya and the Integrated Mountain Initiative.

**Michael Matergia** is a family physician and global health practitioner. As the Executive Director of Broadleaf HEA, he collaborates closely with colleagues at DLR Prerna on the design and implementation of community-led innovations in health and education. Additionally, Michael is a Co-Investigator with Tealeaf - an MHI-supported initiative for children's mental health in the Darjeeling Himalaya.

**Rinzi Lama** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology, University of North Bengal. She is from Darjeeling and her research interests are centred around the thematic of medicine, healing practice, and identity politics. Rinzi was previously a Senior Program Officer with Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) and is currently a Co-Investigator with Tealeaf.

CAPACITY BUILDING

# Memories of 'Floods', 'Erosion', and 'Displacement'

## The Missing Link in the Climate Justice Discourse of Majuli

BY OLIMPIKA OJA

This year, Assam experienced grave flooding and landslides with unprecedented damage and deaths that left over 7,00,000 homeless. Majuli's name often recurs in this floods-and-erosion narrative. Located in the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam, Majuli is one of the largest freshwater river islands in the world. It has, however, shrunken from around 1,255 to 422 square kilometers, losing 69 villages to river bank erosion and 96 villages prone to flooding. Satras (monasteries), which house historical collections of writings, antiques, and masks were originally 65 in number but only 23 have survived now.

Even as Majuli was in the global spotlight for its ecology and demands for UNESCO heritage conservation of its historical buranjis (ancient writings), satras, folk theatre, dance forms, and craft work, it was affected by decades of armed conflict and insurgency, leading to the displacement of villages, migration, and resettlement.

This study brings out an undocumented lacuna in the discourse of Majuli that over-arches people's lived experiences of climate-induced disasters. Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) has been historically under-prioritised in climate disaster-related rehabilitative services and policies.

Climate change is increasingly having a stronger and longer-lasting impact on people's mental health. Despite the widespread prevalence of climate change and disaster-induced distress, response approaches have traditionally focussed solely on immediate humanitarian needs, thereby, excluding mental health services from its purview.

This study draws upon oral histories, lived experiences, and collective memories of its five participants and weaves a narrative of how indigenous communities like the Mishings of Majuli have deployed their inherent knowledge, practices, and resources in the adaptive management of crises like floods and erosion.

**Etiau buku bikhae jaae ("I still feel a lump in my throat")**

Dipa Payun, secretary of Rengam[1] from the Mishing community, highlights how the loss of built environment and personal built spaces can lead to grief, loss of autonomy, and a sense of helplessness: "Bohut dukh lagisiile (we felt very dejected). We have shifted five times during past erosions." Because of their low-resource settings, Majuli's Mishing community is disproportionately affected by climate-related hazards and shares a significant mental health burden.

Dipa narrates the risk factors that predispose the Mishing community to these experiences: "We do not have any land of our own. We curse our ancestors for choosing to live in riparian regions, while the upper castes chose to stay in elevated areas." The Mishings are, therefore, located at a crucial juncture where contextual factors like their economic, geographical, and ethnic marginalisations interact with each other and multiply

ILLUSTRATION BY: ABHISHEK CHOUDHURY

their different vulnerabilities. Das argues that flood control in Assam has often been aimed at protecting urban economic hubs at the expense of rural villages. In Majuli, dykes and embankments protected only the revenue-generating villages, excluding the Mishing settlements that were historically semi-nomadic in nature. Their rehabilitation, too, was in question as they came under non-cadastral villages.

Along with the above-mentioned factors, the loss of livelihood during climate-induced disasters remains a crucial exposure pathway to psychosocial distress. Rituraj Phukan, a climate activist from Assam, highlights how "floods and erosion often drive people to work as daily wagers or to migrate to cities to work in hotels and restaurants, and often it is mostly men. For women, the choices are far fewer and limited." Bedabrata Dutta, a local Majuli resident who runs a community-based organisation named Amar Majuli that works with Mishing women weavers from Rengam, substantiates Phukan's viewpoint: "People from the younger generation have given up farming. They often move to Hyderabad or Bangalore to work as security guards." Such instances highlight how different structural systems permeate and bind together the otherwise siloed discourses of mental health and disasters.

**Politics of flood-control: excluding indigenous knowledge systems**
Dipa and the other interviewees underscore the systemic marginalisation of indigenous knowledge systems by centralised, techno-managerial flood control measures like embankment construction. Payun says, "We have years of experience of living by the rivers yet the engineers do not involve us in flood mitigation programmes." Phukan highlights certain alternatives to such heavy and expensive structural measures: "Along with the embankment intervention, it is important to explore nature-based solutions such as the example set by Jadav Payeng[2]." Dhriti[3], who works with one of the District Disaster Management Authorities (DDMA) in Assam, provides a localised solution to this structural issue: "Programmes need to be district-specific with a bottom-up approach where districts are consulted prior to policy-making."

Climate-related hazards can cause intense emotional suffering and this gets underlined by Dhriti's narrative: "This year, I worked for 10-12 hours at a stretch, resulting in a severe burnout." Dipa, too, highlights the lack of an intersectional discourse within climate-induced distress conversations: "When we lost our homes, we went through severe trauma and had no mental health support." Phukan sheds some light on why an MHPSS approach does not get included in disaster management programmes: Because, after all, "in Assam, mental health still remains unknown beyond urban spaces."

**Aami aakhabaadi ("We are hopeful")**
This section highlights some good practices that have been taken up in Majuli, Assam, and in the North-East of India vis-à-vis climate justice and mental health.

It also underlines how fostering a community's ability to manage distress using its own resources is a sustainable and holistic approach.

Detailed examination of community responses to recurring floods offers examples of best practices forming a time-tested body of alternative knowledge. For instance, the flood-resilient Chang-Ghar[4] system of the Mishings is a unique indigenous response to environmental hazards. Similarly, their climate-sensitive expertise in growing suitable crop varieties, or their traditional cost-effective approaches, such as planting trees like Indian cottonwood, bamboo, coconut, and betel-nut, are some effective nature-based solutions for soil conservation. Especially when embankments, dykes, or sandbags have remained vulnerable to breaches. Phukan further adds, "Their ways of preserving food through smoking, sun drying, pickling, or by fermenting can be useful methods during climate-induced crises."

However, disconnection from social support systems is one of the major stressors of climate change. Dipa explains the significance of traditional community care networks in building resilience: "After our homes got swept away and when the entire community used to eat a meal together, we used to feel xukhi (happy)." Deb[5], a disaster management professional in Majuli, talks about the district's Aapda Mitra scheme, which trains community volunteers as first responders to disasters; and the Community Quick Response Team, consisting of local men, women, and resource-deprived groups like transgender persons. These are exemplary community-based, low-resource methods to reduce vulnerabilities and mitigate the mental health and psychosocial impacts of climate change.

Further, losing one's home environment can create a sense of a loss of belonging, and of personal identity, especially exacerbating the experiences of children. Child-Friendly Spaces (CFS) help in addressing this marginalised group and ensure a safe environment through integrated programmes like play, education, health, and psychosocial support. "Along with CFS, every flood camp in Assam has a special corner for pregnant and lactating women," Dhriti mentions.

Climate-induced disasters can also make mobility a challenge for older people and people with disabilities, thus impacting their sense of autonomy and control. "With the help of ASHA[6] workers, we take special care of these vulnerable groups," adds Dhriti. Similarly, MANOJNA — a tele-counselling helpline service — provides psychosocial support for disaster-affected people of Assam. It facilitates appropriate referrals while also offering follow-up services. The Assam Climate Change Cell (2018) envisages cross-sectoral convergence across departments in the planning, delivery, and monitoring of climate action, while at a macro level, the Pakke Declaration (2021) of Arunachal Pradesh is a model multi-sectoral approach towards low emission and climate-resilient development.

So, what are some of the paradigmatic shifts that can strengthen disaster management policies, while also building allyship with mental health? Climate-related disaster responses should operate with a psychosocial lens and go beyond the diagnosis-treatment model. Climate-affirmative mental health practices should integrate the psychosocial impacts of climate change and address systemic inequities at a multi-sectoral level. This can be witnessed as Dutta and Dipa, while highlighting the community needs of Majuli, underline the need for a bridge and emergency healthcare support, along with employment avenues following disasters.

Community-based mental health programmes should be deployed to bridge the gap between Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR)[7] and climate-induced stressors. Different marginalities operate within individuals and these intersectional locations need to be taken into consideration while addressing community distress.

**Conclusion**
Lived experiences of the indigenous Mishing community in Majuli can help us mitigate climate change sustainably and the lessons learnt can be deployed amidst communities who live in disaster-prone areas. Further imposing top-down measures increases alienation and fails to help with climate distress. In fact, doing so may even be one of the reasons for producing psychosocial stressors in the first place. Development projects need to value indigenous knowledge systems and their voices of resilience that remain at the margins and privilege these over expert-led institutional knowledge.

If we look for solutions to any climate-induced problems, whether it is flood or erosion, it must be tailored to the needs of a particular community of a specific region. Anything that is successful in Kerala cannot be replicated in Assam or anything that works in Assam with the Mishing community may not work with the Bodo community in the plains or the Karbi community in the hills. Any intervention must be community-led to make them full stakeholders in the discourse. Rituraj Phukan aptly sums it up: "When indigenous communities have the right to enjoy their existing cultures, eat the food they grow, and seek basic human development, that is climate justice."

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ADVOCACY

# Environmental Health and Care Require Environ*mental* Justice

Marginalised Communities are the Primary Victims of Climate Events, yet their Mental Healthcare is oft-overlooked

**BY DULARI PARMAR, MANASI PINTO, ROSHNI NUGGEHALLI**

Sarita Devi, a migrant worker, says, "We came here so that we could have our own house, but what good is it if every monsoon we are forced out of our houses to spend days sleeping on the road?"

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states, "These impacts (of climate change) disproportionately affect marginalised groups, amplifying inequalities and undermining sustainable development across all regions."

Word on the ground and on paper echo a similar reality. As the material effects of climate change rise, we can no longer detract from the fact that the experience of this impact is gravely unjust and unequal. The imbalance manifests when the major contributors to global greenhouse gas emissions are corporations based in the Global North, while the victims are indigenous and rural populations.

Indigenous populations comprise less than 5 percent of the world's population and protect 80 percent of the world's biodiversity. Yet, across the globe, they are forced aside by extractivist economic practices which trigger ecological degradation — violating their rights and threatening their access to land, their traditional livelihoods, and their cultural identities. Despite being close observers and preservers of the environment, indigenous leaders rarely get a seat at the table to discuss climate change adaptation or mitigation.

Climate governance, both global and national, often perceives the threats to be limited to the natural environment. The multidimensional effects of climate change, one critical aspect being forced migration, are often ignored.

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), global estimates of the number of climate change migrants will range between 25 million and 1 billion by 2050. In urban areas, migrant workers carry the trauma of their forced displacement, which is accentuated by the insecurity of life and livelihood. Migrants to the city are left with no option but to settle in ecologically-sensitive regions, thus placing them at greater risk at the time of climate hazards.

This writing seeks to understand the varying effects of climate change, specifically on mental health, through the lived experiences of two vulnerable communities residing in Mumbai. The first, an indigenous community, faces the gradual, everyday emergencies catalysed by anthropogenic climate change, and the latter, a hill-dwelling migrant community, has suffered the wrath of an extreme rainfall event that
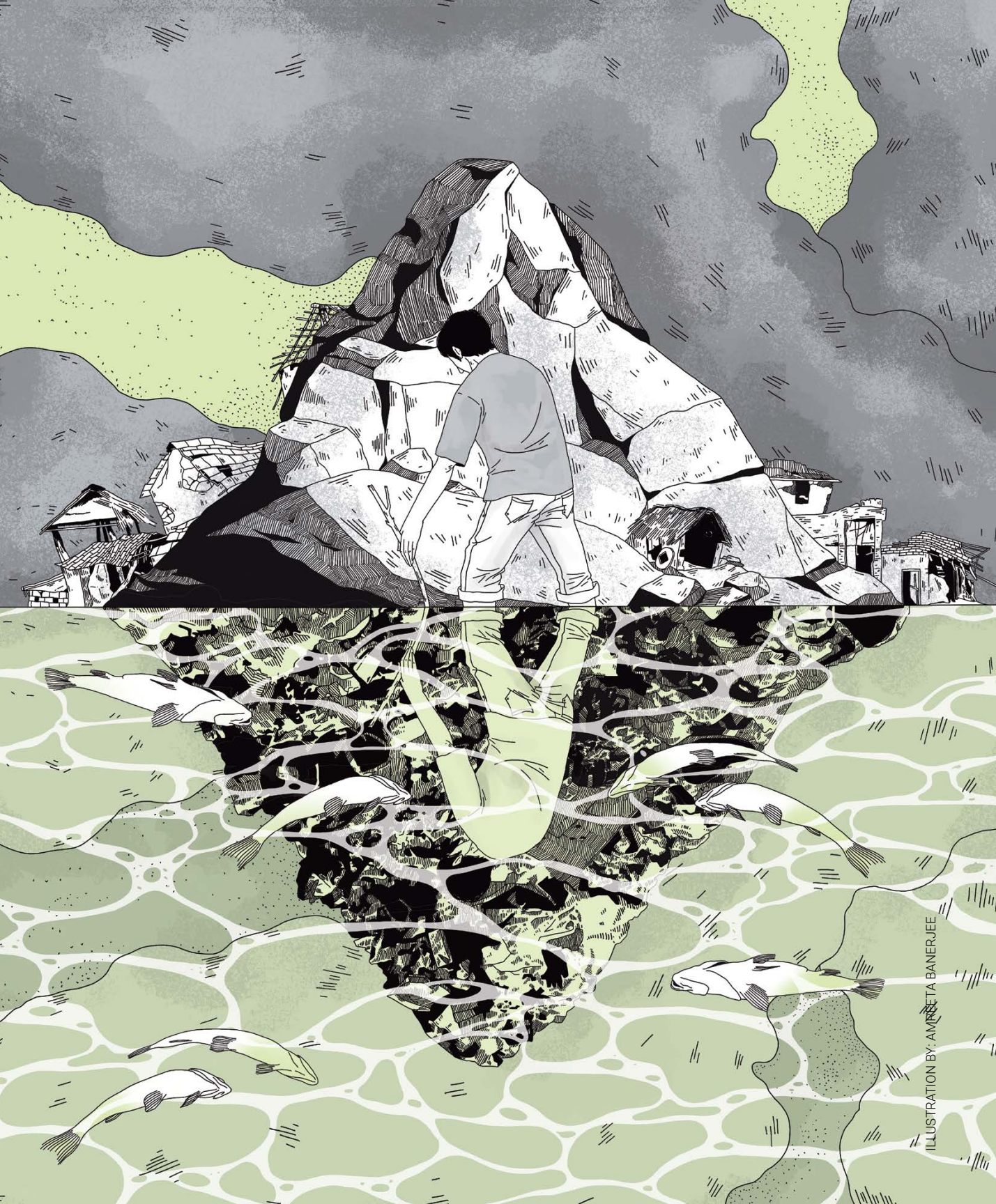
ILLUSTRATION BY: AMRREETA BANERJEE

triggered a landslide hazard. Their experiences inform us of several structures of oppression at play in urban society that work against vulnerable groups; their social security is further compromised during a climate hazard, leaving an indelible impact on their mental health and collective well-being. These stories have been documented by the Climate Justice team at YUVA (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action); they are attempting to understand the effects of climate change on the urban poor of Mumbai and shift the narrative to include their lived realities and demands.

**Transitions and tensions in the Koli community**
In the coastal city of Mumbai, one indigenous group, the Koli community, is primarily engaged in the fishing trade. Their identity is closely linked to their place and occupation, hence any alteration to this affects the individual and collective sense of well-being. In a short interaction with representatives of the community, it becomes clear how erratic weather conditions have triggered a drastic depletion in the number and varieties of fish in the sea. Yet, weather change has not been the only contributing factor. The community members were

quick to point out that the allocation of a dumping ground on the Uttan Hills in 2008 had hampered the existing ecology of the region. The burning of waste here has led to air pollution coupled with water pollution as the leachate from the garbage entered the groundwater and eventually the sea. One elderly fisherman reported remorsefully, "Back in the day, we used to obtain prized collections of bombil (Bombay duck) and bangda (mackerel). Today, the catch is much less, and the taste of bombil is nothing like it once was." With many of their children choosing other occupations, they stand witness as their traditional occupation gets mired in stigma and is systematically phased out by commercial fishing enterprises.

In koliwadas (colonies of Kolis) across Mumbai, urban development projects like the Uttan dumping ground and the coastal road intersect with climate change events to affect the traditional ways of life. A sense of despair permeates the indigenous community; people experience deep anxiety as they are disconnected from their lands and waters, threatening not just their livelihood but also their identity. As is evident from the experiences of the Kolis, the mental health implications

of climate change are not always solely incumbent on sudden climate disasters but are supplemented and worsened by urban development and policy decisions.

**Disastrous night and fearful futures**
Research shows that migrants to a city often live in ecologically-sensitive habitats. A "Climate Hazards Map of Mumbai", created by YUVA, confirms that most informal settlements in the city are located in areas that are exposed to multiple disasters. A case in point is of New Bharat Nagar, which lies along the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre hills in eastern Mumbai. The settlement, inhabited largely by migrant workers, is sensitive to landslides during heavy rains; in response, the government has built a retaining wall above the basti.

The night of 18th June, 2021 stands as proof of the fact that retaining walls are not a solution, and in fact, can further contribute to a problem - a 'maladaptation'. That night, as the community settled into their beds, rain battered against their tin roofs, lulling them to sleep. A little past midnight, a few of them awoke to the sound of a distant crash followed by muffled cries. The retaining wall had collapsed, taking

19 lives with it. As grief consumed the community, the members were left to pick up the pieces of their lives with no one there to listen to their stories of loss and frustration, of their fears and collective suffering. A few reported that the trauma of the incident wouldn't allow them to sleep on rainy nights; they would stay awake so as to be able to escape if another disaster came. The response of the local government, especially in clearing up the debris, was inefficient and had, in fact, contributed to their anxieties. Now, over a year later, collapsed houses remain exposed to the skies, and debris is still littered all around. These are gaping wounds that impede the healing of the community.

Across the city, informal settlements inhabited largely by daily-wage migrants have crumbled and have had to be rebuilt due to landslides, floods, earthquakes, and other disasters. Poor communities are forced to rebuild their surroundings in an institutional vacuum, and the process of physical rebuilding takes a toll not only on their material wealth but also on their psychosocial well-being.

**Whose responsibility is it, anyway?**
Climate change and mental health are viewed as individual issues with disconnected solutions. Also, since the mental health practice lies within the framework of the modern medical industrial complex, it adopts a symptomatic approach of 'cure' as opposed to 'care'. Thus, both these looming crises are diagnosed with simplistic treatments, and both champion individual resilience, coping, and adaptation. Several questions arise here: Do the people who face the brunt of the climate crisis have the financial, social, and emotional assets and capacities to cope, heal, and move on? Are mental health institutions and practitioners accessible to people from urban bastis and gaothans (village land portions used for settlements)? Is the mental health practice able to factor in the systems that, along with climate change, affect the individual? The answer, often, is no.

In reality, climate change and mental health are deeply intertwined, not just with each other but with other social systems as well. In urban areas like Mumbai, truly transformative responses necessitate a more holistic approach which is able to tackle various systemic causes, including but not limited to caste, gender,

religion, and occupation. While individual-centric mental healthcare is still necessary, it needs to be embedded within an institutional framework of climate justice where the systems that perpetuate injustices are reformed and power is redistributed. Collective social well-being is, therefore, possible only through climate policies that ensure that voices of the marginalised find an equitable space in development and ecosystem management decision-making processes.

**Dulari Parmar**, **Manasi Pinto**, and **Roshni Nuggehalli** work at Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) in Mumbai. Drawing from their unique academic and experiential backgrounds, they seek to collectively develop a Climate Justice Framework to scaffold the rights-based work that YUVA does with socially and economically vulnerable communities across different cities in India.

HUMAN RIGHTS

# From Collective Trauma to Collective Action

## A Youth-led Struggle for Survival in the West Himalayan District of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh

**BY MANSHI ASHER**

Standing at the precarious rubbly edge of the National Highway 5 in Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, Bansilal Negi stared down the steep slope leading to the Sutlej River. He seemed to be conjuring up images from a year ago, recreating the fateful scenes of human bodies being removed from the mountain mass that descended (loomed) from above. He was one of the many locals who had worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) team as part of the week-long rescue operation that had followed a massive landslide at a place called Nigulsari on 11th August 2021. The disaster had killed 28 people, most of them residents of the valley.

### The Nigulsari tragedy
Bansilal, now in his late 30s, is a regular part of rescue efforts in this precipitous Himalayan landscape, now known for frequent landslides and flash floods. He says bitterly, "Paharon mein dhank aati hai to niche se upar dekhna hota hai, upar se niche nahi. Par hum local logon ki kaun sunta hai?" ("The mountains have a steep overhang, so we are supposed to have a perspective of looking up, not down. But who listens to us local folks?") He also has strong comments about the failures of the bureaucracy and the political representatives from the region, and all that they could have done to save more lives after the landslide. The tragedy had been triggered when a bus, parked on the side of a sloped road, had given way and rolled into the valley. In the initial hours after the accident, the rescue work had focused on removing trapped vehicles by clearing the debris off the road and chucking it down the mountainside. This had buried the bus deeper into the muck. Bansilal can still recollect clearly the pain of the family members identifying the mutilated bodies of their loved ones.

A series of colorful prayer flags now flutter at the disaster spot in Nigulsari, silently humming chants of peace and freedom in memory of the departed souls. Two-year-old Vanshika is one of them. Till the morning of the day of the accident, she had been with her mother, 24-year-old Sangeeta, who had temporarily moved back into her maternal home in Chaura village due to problems with her in-laws. On the morning of 11th August, Sangeeta's mother-in-law and sister-in-law had visited her home and decided to take the child with them, despite her reluctance. The Sumo they had boarded was one of the vehicles hit by the landslide. All three lost their lives. Sangeeta does not recall much of the following two days, except about dealing with her distraught husband and seeing Vanshika's body, which was found at noon a day after the tragedy. "There was no scar or injury on her," she says as she pulls out her phone to show a picture of the happy toddler. Sangeeta now grieves not just her little daughter's loss but also the estrangement from her husband and the breakdown of their love marriage. "He blames me and I hold him responsible; we

may not be able to live together ever again," she says softly.

## The damming of a valley

A common belief is that time heals. But in Kinnaur, deadly disasters have become permanent parts of the local collective memory and the wounds. "A rockfall here or a landslide there used to occur earlier, but not as frequently as it does now, and with this kind of human impact," says Mohan Negi from Nichar village. The term 'natural disaster' has become a trigger for the people here - they bear the brunt of the massive land use and the underground excavation for large-scale hydropower dam construction in this topographically complex and sensitive region. Currently, Kinnaur is home to over 30 large and small projects, producing close to 4,000 MW of power in the state, driven by the demand for 'clean energy'. Residents attribute the Nigulsari landslide to the 1,500 MW Nathpa Jhakri hydroelectric dam project. "A 27-kilometre-long tunnel runs underneath the mountain from here, carrying the waters of the Sutlej. Chambers the size of four football fields are right below us," says Mohan.

Sunil, 35, is a resident of Nichar and the chairperson of the block panchayat. "The project was finished in record time by employing heavy-duty dynamiting, violating all scientific principles and safety measures. We may have been about 15-years-old then and till date have vivid memories of the doors vibrating and window glass breaking during the blasting. Roads caved in and houses developed cracks; we had to repair them year after year," he says.

Two high-frequency transmission lines run across villages in this belt - one is for the 300 MW Baspa dam that cuts through orchards and residential areas of several villages, and the other is for the 1,000 MW Karchham Wangtoo project that cuts through the forest at the ridge. Together, they have swallowed over 4,500 trees. Walking about the stumps of an axed-down cedar forest, Sunil recalls, "I left my job in the Merchant Navy in 2012 due to a serious illness. The day I returned home, I found out that the deodar trees were being felled. I could not eat or sleep for the next two or three days. We used to play here as kids."

## Coping in a shifting landscape

For the youth here, the trauma of alienation and betrayal runs deep. They live through rapidly-shifting times, of which the unfolding impact of this 'development' is one albeit critical element. Earlier, the 'common' (polyandrous) family system used to keep family sizes smaller and the land undivided. While a few household members tended to the land, others went sheep and cattle-grazing. These traditional socio-economic systems are now shifting and the youth without jobs are frustrated, sometimes turning to substance use to cope. "Our elders agreed to this 'development' because they had dreams of us, mostly first-generation learners, going to Solan, Shimla, Chandigarh after completing class 12," says Sunil.

Unlike other mountainous regions, horticulture and commercial vegetable cultivation-based cash economy had gained prominence here in the past 20 years and had ensured that young men returned to the land. But with the average land-holding size at just about 5-10 *bighas* now, they can no longer sustain their whole families with that work, making the availability of other local employment avenues essential. Young people here lament that the '70 percent jobs for locals' was an empty promise of 'development'; fewer than 5 percent of them today have jobs or petty contracts because of the projects.

Instead, what the people have now is disruption of existing farm and forest-based livelihoods due to the dam-related activities and disasters. "When the roads were blocked last year, the harvested peas that had to reach the market started rotting. People had to pay Rs. 500 as carriage charge for every sack of peas taken by foot through an alternate route. The NH5 is our lifeline, the only road connecting the borderlands of Spiti and Kinnaur with the rest of the world," says Vijay Negi, the young Pradhan of Chaura Panchayat.

## Emerging youth resistance: 'No Means No'

Over the last two decades, as dam-building progressed in this tribal valley, so did resistance – both in the streets and in the courts. But the two tragedies during the 2021 monsoon provoked the vibrant youth from Upper Kinnaur to up the ante. Among the resisters is 20-something Sunder, who left a bank job in Zirakpur back in 2018. "The mundane desk work was burning me out and I knew that I belonged back here. I faced flak from family and relatives for quitting initially." In the following two years, Sunder set out to build relationships with the community, getting involved in village matters, and pushing for basic welfare schemes like that for a link road which had been stuck in files. Through the lockdown in 2020, he participated in reviving collective farm labour practices in his village of 18 families, an experience that helped him build deeper connections with his people. Sunder teamed up with other energetic, like-minded youth from neighbouring villages to push their leadership in the local panchayat. "Political parties approached us but we were here for the community work and to foster the spirit of co-operation, not their narrow agendas." He was elected president of the youth club in his village, Khadra in 2020.

Around this time, news had spread of an upcoming dam that Sunder's Panchayat, along with five others in the Moorang tehsil, were to be impacted by. For Buddha Sain, who hails from the other affected Panchayat of Jangi, the proposed project raised existential questions. "Tribal laws grant power to the *gram sabhas* to make such decisions," he observes sharply. In April 2021, the proposed 804 MW Jangi Thopan Project, to be constructed by the Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam (SJVNL) which had also built the Nathpa Dam, was opposed openly at a public meeting in Jangi. Under the leadership of the youth clubs and guided by the gram sabhas, mahila mandals, and village elders, the project survey was blocked. Since then, a by-election boycott has been organised as well as several village assemblies where the youth in their thundering speeches have challenged the government's blatant disregard for public opinion.

It is this grassroots movement, preceded by a decade-and-a-half-long struggle of the Kinnaura people, that lies at the foundation of the clarion call of "No Means No" spreading through the district, including in lower Kinnaur. "Upper Kinnaur is way more geologically sensitive and not suited to this kind of construction. We are all part of the movement," says Sunil from Nichar. Young, local social media influencers from Kinnaur threw their creative weight behind the resistance but the campaign was never restricted to just digital activism. Slogans to halt further construction of dams reverberated from a rally at the district headquarters of Reckong Peo on 26th August 2021. In Kinnaur, cars with stickers, walls with posters, and young people wearing tee-shirts with the message 'NO MEANS NO' written in the bold font can now be spotted.

**Manshi Asher** is a researcher-activist and co-founder of the Himachal-based Himdhara Collective. She has been working and writing on social and environmental justice issues for more than two decades. She has been documenting the impact of hydropower projects and community responses in Himachal since 2009. Her home is in Kandwari village in the Dhauladhar valley of Kangra. She enjoys engaging with feminist political ecologies of life in the mountains.

RESEARCH

# Troubled Waters

## Tales of Woe from the Kerala Coast

BY DR. MANOJ KUMAR
AND DR. MEENA NAIR

The implications of climate change have not been lost on mental health professions. In May 2021, the Royal College of Psychiatrists in the UK called for international cooperation and urgent action by declaring a climate and ecological emergency. A survey conducted by the college found that as many of the UK public (84 percent) believe that climate and ecological emergencies will affect mental health in the next decade as they believe that unemployment (83 percent) and COVID-19 (84 percent) will. More interestingly, 60 percent of the respondents said that the climate and ecological emergencies are affecting their mental health now and will continue to do so in the future. Dr. Adrian James, President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said, "The climate and ecological emergency is a mental health emergency. Our mental health is entwined with the health of our natural world."

Nowhere is this more starkly borne out than in Kerala. The past few years have seen Kerala being battered by torrential rains resulting in large-scale flooding. Cloudbursts causing landslides in the mountains of the Western Ghats have become more common. Farming, which has always depended on predictable weather patterns, has suffered as the previous patterns have become undependable. Needless to say, environmental degradation and climate change have come to the fore as yet another social determinant of mental ill-health. In the UK, flooding, which is the most common disaster, has been shown to be associated with anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in survivors and a similar picture has been reported in India as well.

The big question is, like with all other social determinants of mental health, can we act to mitigate the effects of climate change?

This piece focusses on the work that MHAT (Mental Health Action Trust) has undertaken amongst a vulnerable group affected by climate change in Kerala. MHAT has been active in the field of community mental health for almost a decade-and-a-half, providing free, comprehensive community-based mental health services to people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As we became aware of the disproportionate effects of climate change on certain communities, we decided to shift our focus to where we felt it is needed the most. We began to work amongst the fishing communities of coastal and inland Kerala. We were particularly interested in the problems faced by the women from these communities.

### Coastal communities
Globally, it is estimated that about 10-40 percent of the population lives along the coast, depending on the definitions. According to the National Centre for Coastal Research (NCCR), about a third of India's coastline has deteriorated in the last 26 years. At 590 kilometres, Kerala's coastline is India's sixth longest. For centuries, coastal communities have worked the seas, fishing and engaging in related maritime activities. This way of life is now threatened by climate change. Large-scale mechanised deep-sea trawling has resulted in severe depletion of fishing stock, affecting small-time fisher folk disproportionately. Depleting fish catches have pushed fishing communities into debt and poverty. The alarming ecological devastation of the oceans has caused governments to step in and restrict fishing activities. The unpredictability of weather has limited the days that people can venture out to sea. On shore, fishing-related activities that the rest of the community, particularly the women, depended on for a livelihood have come to a standstill. Rising sea levels and land erosion have led to the loss of homes. Subsequent displacement and unsatisfactory relocation have become major problems. Add to this the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the cup of misery is full and overflowing.

The full impact of the economic and social aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic on coastal communities is not yet known. Social distancing policies, lockdowns often enforced using drone surveillance, the fear of becoming sick, compulsory isolation and quarantine, and the resulting loss of livelihood and income have all added to the community's woes. The longer-term impacts of these are unknown still. Do the above-mentioned developments hold well for the local communities? We dug deeper to find out.

### Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews
We held a series of recorded focus group discussions and interviews with women to understand the mental health issues faced by the coastal population. We were unprepared for the stories that emerged and found several themes repeating in the various groups.

(Translated from the original Malayalam):

### On coping with poverty
"We have been really affected by natural calamities in recent years and then in the last one-and-a-half years by the COVID pandemic. We are totally shattered now economically. Currently, we have no work. No income. We have tried several ways to earn a living through fisheries. But we have had to stop due to a series of issues related to that sector."

"We lost our (sewing) machines in the last sea erosion and floods. We live only 50-150 metres away from the sea. Now we go to the harbour for work, but we get only a day or two of work in a week. At times, we collect fish from there, dry them, and sell them. But that only gets us very nominal amounts of money."

"It's entirely my headache, in addition to all the other issues. I am really fed up. We have no money to support even our children's education. Some have switched over to catering activity."

### On displacement
"The sea wall is damaged and useless, hence there is no consolation; the sea will reach our kitchen any time, that is the situation. Since 2018, the situation has been very grave, but the issues started from (Cyclone) Ockhi and even after the tsunami."

"Houses are getting destroyed due to the regular sea floods. We have no money to do proper maintenance, too. And we are facing the threat of evacuation also. The thought of displacement itself is driving us mad. We are in real tension."

### On loss
"We are ready to work and earn income for our family. We really loved the work we were doing. But our lives are shattered due to the climate issues and the Corona pandemic."

"We lost all our documents. I was crying incessantly. Even before we could react, the sea would come inside our house. I was exhausted crying, thinking we will lose everything. What to do, isn't saving our lives the most important thing?"

### On the fishermen
"Our men are under stress and are totally hopeless. They have practically zero earnings. We are all under great stress."

"Our husbands have no work now. They have got one or two days of work at the most all these months. They are also very disheartened and dull."

"My husband is so dull these days. He will go to the sea and just come back without any catch some days. He comes home, just lies down on the floor, eats nothing, and won't speak either. I am afraid he will attempt suicide. I try to console him but I am also disheartened. My father-in-law is having a loss of memory and he just goes out and gets lost at times. At times, he becomes violent, too. We don't know what to do. There are other cases as well in this locality."

### On stress
"Regular flooding due to sea level rise, strong sea waves, and regular cyclonic attacks have made our minds so unstable. When the skies darken, so do our minds. The sea has become totally unpredictable."

"We are suffering from constant headaches. Numbness in the head, burning, sometimes behind the head, sometimes on the top, icy sensation, backache, bleeding. Bleeding is very irregular these days.

We are suffering from tension."

"If it rains, I can't sleep; thinking of the loans, I can't sleep."

"Our children are also disheartened and we are facing issues related to them also. We need outside support to deal with our children."

The FGDs gave the women a chance for mental and emotional venting. The fisherwomen, generally assumed to be resilient physically and mentally, presented a different picture when they were given an opportunity to share. In the majority of cases, the women, the beneficiaries of a specific benefit program from a government department, were the only source of income for their families.

The FGDs revealed that the women are under extreme stress, which is manifesting as physical pain and symptoms — headache, back pain, excessive bleeding, loss of sleep, anxiety, dullness, loss of interest in continuing work even when no other choice exists, loss of hope, expressions of sorrow and anger, and ultimately, suicidal thoughts. At the end of the FGDs, many of them openly opined that they really

needed mental health support. Many requested immediate help, too. At three places where the FGDs were held, the women pointed out the increasing rate of suicides in the area. In their words, the coastal societies are "on the verge of an explosion". At one location, the women said that one in three households had had an incidence of suicide in the past two years. The women requested counselling and de-addiction treatment for their men and children, too, especially the adolescents. They want to move forward with their activities but at the same time, they seemed hopeless as well. The endless struggle has made them tired, both physically and mentally, they said. A few requested access to counselling services and a few broke down crying during the sessions.

### Discussion
The FGDs confirmed that the fishing communities in Kerala are in urgent need of mental health support.

Following the FGDs, we were able to set up 12 centres aimed at these communities with the support of Mariwala Health Initiative. The MHAT model is based on identifying local partners and working together with

them in identifying beneficiaries and providing mental health care. Once identified, the local volunteers ensure continuity of care and act as care workers linking with the MHAT team. Weekly clinics are held in each area by a multi-disciplinary team from MHAT and domiciliary care is provided as well. The entire service, including medications, counselling, and other psychosocial interventions, is provided free of cost. Telemedicine (telepsychiatry) plays an important role here as does a task-sharing model.

### Implications
The MHAT model has evolved into a social developmental one, wherein the starting point is the whole community rather than the sick individual. Unless social development happens in tandem, isolated mental health initiatives will remain incomplete. Working together with partner agencies involved in social development work is important. Livelihood activities, supplementing education in schools, working with youth and women's groups, looking after the physical health needs of the population, and dealing with substance use - all come under the social development ambit.

### Conclusions
Climate change is here to stay. The resulting mental health impact is only going to get worse. Both mental and substance use disorders are significantly prevalent in coastal communities and demand immediate attention. Social developmental problems and mental ill-health are inextricably intertwined and need to be addressed together.

**Dr. Manoj Kumar** is the Founder and Clinical Director of Mental Health Action Trust (MHAT), a not-for-profit NGO based in Kerala. MHAT works amongst disadvantaged communities, with a particular focus on tribal and coastal areas, and provides comprehensive, good quality, community-based, and free mental health services.

**Dr. Meena Nair** is a Social Scientist and currently works at MHAT as Program Manager - Social Development & Research. Conducting studies and bringing forth solid evidence on the existing sociological, gender, and developmental issues, and participating in creative interventions and policy advocacy constitute her sphere of work.

RESEARCH

# Is it a Good Time to Bring a Child into this World?

## Motherhood and Climate Change through a Therapeutic Lens

BY JAHNABI MITRA

On some days, I close my eyes and imagine a couple seated in my chamber for therapy, talking about how worried they are about their 4-year-old's access to the city and why she thinks aborting her next child is best for both. The husband looks grimly at the marine reef centre table between us and says, "I feel so guilty for the carbon footprint I have left behind. Had I taken more accountability in my youth, I feel we could've kept this child."

This fragment of my imagination is part close to reality and part impending future. While technologies of freezing fertility and the extreme emphasis placed on romance among couples have impacted childbearing and family systems across the globe, climate change anxiety has also started to penetrate couples' psyches in recent times.

### Motherhood as a climate-induced choice
In an article titled "The default question should be: Why do you want to have kids?", Gayatri Rangachari Shah writes about her change in attitude towards motherhood - from

a default and innate position to something based on conscious choice. She talks about a Noida-based couple in the article who has decided against having a child based on the status of the global climate. As per studies conducted in cities

like Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Ahmedabad, and Hyderabad, they are already experiencing the phenomenon of Urban Heat Island - urbanization-induced higher temperatures in comparison to its surrounding non-urban areas.

**According to a study by Lancet, between 2000-2016:**

**34,197 women** lost a pregnancy

**77% of these** were Indian

which could have been prevented if our recommended air quality level was as per WHO standards.
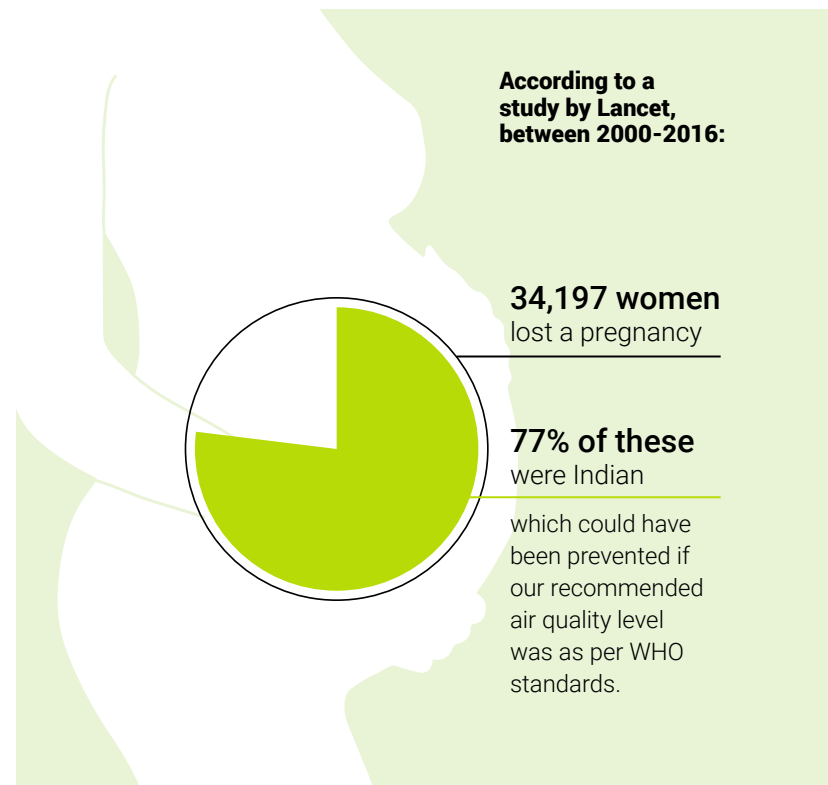
Lancet has published a study on pregnancy loss and stillbirths in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh between the years 2000 and 2016. According to this study, 34,197 women had lost a pregnancy, including 27,480 miscarriages and 6,717 stillbirths, in the period. Out of these, 77 percent of pregnancy loss cases were from India, which could have been prevented if our recommended air quality level was as per WHO standards. Pregnant women in the capital city of Delhi are urged not to go out of their homes. Underweight childbirths (2.2 pounds) in Delhi began to be reported in 2019 due to rising air pollution.

The city of Mumbai is already facing the financial impacts of its sea-level rise. As reported by a documentary on climate change produced by *The Quint*, the city is highly likely to be submerged in water before the turn of the century, i.e., by 2050. Alauddin, a fisherman featured in the documentary, rhetorically states, "Every man wants their child to succeed and fight against all odds in the journey. But whom do I fight against? Do I fight against climate

Climate-aware therapist is a professionally-trained psychotherapist who recognises that the climate crisis is both a global threat to all life on Earth and a deeply personal threat to the mental and physical well-being of each individual, family, and community on the planet.

change?" Although this man is talking about sustenance at one level, this is the narrative of several other underprivileged and middle class communities that are already bearing the brunt of climate change, with no capability of voicing their grievances.

### Who can afford a child in future?
In 2011, Dr. Dorothy and Susan Clayton introduced the novel concept of 'climate anxiety'. A decade later, 'eco-anxiety' and 'climate aware therapist' are terms that are floating in our collective consciousness. Mothers are recognising with much regret that they would have to bring their child into a world where breathing clean air is a luxury. Pregnant women are one of the 'at-risk' groups during climate change conversations. Bearing a child in the future would not just include abiding by climate-conscious laws set for citizens but also being able to grapple with the possibility of stillbirth and miscarriage. While there are several mental health impacts of stillbirth and pregnancy loss, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, and agoraphobia,

Eco-anxiety is not a binary of emotion felt equally among people in the Global South and the Global North, and neither does it impact the mental health of White people the same way it impacts people who have experienced climate disaster.

the Indian cultural context adds to it the feelings of shame, guilt, and dishonour due to taboos associated with a woman being considered sterile. Pregnant mothers and nursing mothers are now not only exposed to climate change factors but also to the negative feelings associated with eco-guilt, eco-anxiety, climate change panic attacks, and extreme sense of sadness and loss.

### From the analysts' couch
Psychotherapists in many first world countries are already using CBT and Existential Therapy to help people cope with these feelings of hopelessness and pessimism towards the future. On the other hand, psychoanalysts are helping us describe what defences arise within us during climate change conversations. Jungian analyst, Jeffrey Keihl in his book — *Facing Climate Change: An Integrated Path to Future* uses the term 'anticipatory loss' to explain what makes it so difficult and almost incapacitating to take steps towards the future. He explains that emotions experienced in anticipated loss, i.e., a loss that is about to take place, can be as

intense as an experienced loss. While the feelings of inactivity aroused by it may imprison us, we may still be able to do something, as it is about a thing in the future.

Why it seems most plausible that India's urban elite are the first ones to approach a therapist with "eco-reproductive concerns" can be explained by psychoanalyst Rosemary Randall's concept of 'ecological indebtedness'. She says that if one leads a lifestyle that pushes the ecosystem beyond its ability to renew itself, one runs up an ecological debt. She also states that people who relate material consumption with their sense of identity are more likely to develop ecological indebtedness and are most likely to never get past the disbelief and shock if faced with it.

**What are we heading towards?**
Perhaps the most jarring cost is faced by marginalised people in society. While on paper these concerns seem to be best verbalised by the elite and privileged, who have both the education as well as the vocabulary to express their

experiences, there are people for whom these are realities without a vocabulary. Mothers and children at the intersections of statelessness and refugee identity who are faced with climate change issues represent the complexity of climate change when viewed from the lens of systemic oppression. For instance, the December 2020 shift of Rohingya refugees from Bangladesh's Cox's Bazar refugee camp to Bhasan Char was criticised by UNHCR due to the island's vulnerability to natural disasters. Add to this reality the disproportionate cost of one childbirth in the US creating 168 times more carbon footprint than a child born in Bangladesh.

Pregnant women in the coal mining communities of Jharia, Mettur are either asked to stay away from the coal mines or travel back to their maternal homes in the third trimester. And risks to maternity are not even caused by climate change in particular, but by environmental factors at large in these communities. While coal mining is the biggest factor responsible for environmental degradation, contradictorily, India's

coal production witnessed a record growth of 36.23 percent in May 2022 as per reports by the Ministry of Coal.

Systemic oppression and intersectionality in the realm of climate change and motherhood are not yet addressed well. But both privileged and underprivileged positions, whether verbalised or not, are moving towards a future where we will have to discuss the *grief of the unborn child*. It is a kind of loss that humans are unprepared to deal with - when the environment would be too hazardous to bring a baby into the world and the choice of maternity would be seized away.

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**Jahnabi Mitra** currently works as a Research Associate and is pursuing her PhD in Psychosocial Clinical Studies from Ambedkar University, Delhi. Previously, she has worked as a faculty of the Department of Psychology, The Assam Royal Global University.

# Working for Disabled People's Organisation of Bhutan

## Impact of Climate Change on PwDs    BY NGAWANG CHODEN

Perhaps my favourite part of working with the Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan is the fact that the work we perform is born out of co-operation and discussion. The management and organisation are fully run by a group of persons with disabilities (PwDs), with the support of a few people without disabilities.

The sad part of my working experience with the Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan has been some of my friends and family members telling me often that I may also become disabled while working with PwDs. It clearly shows that they have negative notions about disabilities, which is a concerning issue in our country. Despite having a National Policy for Persons with Disabilities and numerous schemes, there are still hidden facts and ideas about disabilities. Some persons with disabilities continue to remain indoors and some live without support from their parents and families.

The Population and National Housing Census 2017 reported that close to 2.1 percent of the country's population is living with disabilities.

However, there is no accurate data about the type of disabilities and the unique stressors that disabled people face. That is why there is still a large section of society that has been left unreached and unheard. The Disabled People's Organization is trying its best to reach out to those marginalised groups but it is very challenging as there is still discrimination and social stigmatisation in practice.

Many people with disabilities live in greater poverty, with more significant challenges than everyone else. Imagine a hurricane - people with disabilities would need early access to shelter, social support, and medical assistance. As potential climate refugees, along with everyone else affected, some people with disabilities will require a different level of support in terms of access to food, shelter, and transportation. I feel that PWDs are being systemically ignored by governments around the world when it comes to the climate crisis, even though they are particularly at risk from the impacts of extreme weather.

Few countries make provisions for the needs of people with disabilities when they make plans for adapting to the effects of climate breakdown. Yet people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts, partly because of the nature of their disabilities and also because of the social disadvantage. They are some of the most marginalised people in our society and they tend to be poorer and have fewer resources. People with disabilities are likely to face dangerous situations as a result of the climate crisis. For instance, many people who use wheelchairs risk getting stranded as there are usually no plans for their evacuation. They will be unable to use unadapted vehicles.

There are no examined and detailed climate pledges and policies in place in our country as of now. It is important for the country to have policy agreements that contain a requirement for people with disabilities to be considered. They should also be part of countries' domestic plans for adapting to the impacts of the climate crisis. Most of the countries that did include specific references to people with

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*Few countries make provisions for the needs of people with disabilities when they make plans for adapting to the effects of climate breakdown. Yet people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable to climate impacts, partly because of the nature of their disabilities and also because of the social disadvantage.*

disabilities did so without including meaningful mechanisms to consult people with disabilities or ensure that their rights are respected. The impacts of extreme weather often stipulate that people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups such as children, women, and older people, are given special consideration. But when it comes to domestic policies, that focus is often lost.

People who use wheelchairs are among the most vulnerable to the climate crisis, but some of the risk factors for people with disabilities are less obvious – for e.g., there are people whose medication makes them more sensitive to changes in temperature. Such persons could benefit from better awareness of the problem, and of measures to cool their homes, but that is only likely to happen if countries adopt a more cohesive approach.

I feel that our government should redraft its policies to take into

account the needs of people with disabilities. For instance, the early warning systems for storms and extreme weather should be tested to ensure that people with hearing or communication difficulties become aware of the warnings as well. Such measures are simple to implement, but some would require additional funding. The connections between disability and the climate crisis are not well understood, even among academics. We believe that everyone deserves access to information that's grounded in science and truth, and analysis that's rooted in authority and integrity. That's why we made a different choice - to keep our reporting open for all readers, regardless of where they live or what they can afford to pay.

I consider Bhutan a small and happy country. But I fear sometimes that I may not believe this any longer. Because happiness should not be measured by how much we get, but by how much we enjoy it. We should

really ask ourselves whether all the people are enjoying it or not. Nothing is impossible if everyone embraces empathy and works with a pure heart. We experience and educate ourselves for a better change and I am sure my experiences would contribute to positive changes in society.

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**Ngawang Choden** is the Program Officer at Disabled People's Organization of Bhutan, which is a non-profit NGO established in 2010. She is a traditional physician by profession and a social worker by passion. Disabled People's Organization focusses on creating an inclusive society by recognising, respecting, and promoting the rights and needs of persons with disabilities in Bhutan. The organization also seeks to promote the physical, psychological, and socio-economic well-being of persons with disabilities through a rights-based approach.

# MHI's Work

Innovation
Insights
Philanthropy
Challenges
Lived Realities

*We work with multiple stakeholders, including non-profit organisations, governments, mental health professionals, and activists in the pursuit of an INCLUSIVE mental health ecosystem. Our core strategies include ADVOCACY, CAPACITY BUILDING, GRANTMAKING, KNOWLEDGE CREATION, and TRAINING.*

# MHI's Work

Besides fulfilling its primary role as a grantmaking agency, MHI has included various endeavours within its work that utilise its strengths in knowledge creation, communication, and dissemination. We aim to engage with dominant knowledge critically while centring knowledge from the margins in all our initiatives.

## Re-Vision

**Workplace Mental Health:**
MHI launched a toolkit for corporate workplaces called *Mental Wellbeing at the Workplace*. The toolkit addresses mental health in the workplace by providing a framework that challenges the narrative that it is an individual issue. Instead, it introduces the concept of ecosystem stressors and how an organisation's culture and ways of working can lead to mental health issues among employees.

**Suicide Prevention Initiatives:**
A groundbreaking report titled *Suicide Prevention: Changing the Narrative* was also released, which centred around building a comprehensive approach to tackling suicide in India. The report covers critical methods and evidence-based strategies for suicide prevention. It also offers tangible steps that various stakeholders can take to prevent suicides.

**The Alliance for Suicide Prevention (ASP):**
Seeded by MHI, the ASP brings together stakeholders, including organisations, activists, funders, researchers, and policymakers, to work collaboratively on preventing suicide at the individual and community levels.

**Gender and Sexuality-Based Initiatives:**
We published *The Queer Affirmative Counselling Practice (QACP): A Resource Book for Mental Health Practitioners in India*, the first of a series of anti-oppressive practice resource manuals for practitioners, educators and students, and those working on gender and sexuality.

MHI also launched *Building Allyship: The Mental Health Community and LGBTQI+ Rights* - a report that showcases the queer affirmative mental health work undertaken during a High Court Judgement. The resource book is a guiding tool for mental health practitioners who want to build allyship and promote LGBTQI+ rights.

**International Peer Support Practice:**
Our first international peer workshop had activists from 10 South and South-East Asian countries. In collaboration with Asia Pacific Transgender Network, the workshop focussed on sharing systems and tools for participants to provide mental health support to their queer-trans community.

**Youth Mental Health:**
MHI collaborated with the Asia and South Pacific Association for Basic and Adult Education (ASPBAE), a regional network of more than 200 civil society organisations and individuals in 30 countries in the Asia-Pacific region to provide training to build capacities of researchers on youth mental health. The training was translated into four languages and ASL for this cohort of 45 young people from 12 nations.

## Context

On the second anniversary of the lockdown, MHI launched *Mental Health Diaries: COVID Stories*, a series highlighting how the COVID-19 pandemic and its accompanying lockdowns exacerbated psychological stressors. In addition, they highlighted how COVID impacted marginalised communities - caregivers, healthcare workers, and young persons, among others.

We also collaborated with BBC StoryWorks to produce two films:

1. The first showcased MHI's approach to funding community-based mental health — Atmiyata, a community-based mental health intervention in Mehsana District, Gujarat; and
2. The second highlighted helplines as service providers, showcasing iCALL, a project primarily funded by MHI since 2015. It provides mental health support through professional, accessible, and confidential counselling through the telephone, email, and chat to anyone in distress.

## Engage

MHI collaborated with the ASCENT Foundation to launch an *Entrepreneur Mental Health Toolkit* and Microsite focussing on entrepreneur mental health and wellbeing. The toolkit and microsite focus on unique stressors experienced by the organisational leaders, which can also be felt throughout the business, including the employees.

MHI, in collaboration with Sangath, launched *DIYouth Advocacy*— a complete guide to mental health advocacy for young people. The advocacy guide is developed by a group of young people, mental health experts, advocates, and technologists, including those with lived experiences of mental health needs.

MHI partnered with 48 organisations/collectives across 22 states to provide relief support through food rations, medicines, hygiene kits, vaccine awareness, rents, and bank transfers.

**Leadership:**
Manjula Pradeep, the founder of MHI partner WAYVE Foundation, was featured in BBC's 100 Women of 2021. Two MHI partners—Iswar Sankalpa and the Centre for Mental Health Law and Policy, Pune, were also featured among the 25 good practices for community outreach mental health services worldwide by WHO guidance and technical packages on community mental health services in the same year.

MHI's CEO, Priti Sridhar, was elected as a South East representative on the advisory board for Global Mental Health Action Network (GMHAN), a community of mental health professionals from across the world to improve support for mental health globally. In addition, Raj, MHI's Director, was invited to participate in a panel discussion on community-led approaches to adapting and integrating Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, organised by UNICEF East Asia and Pacific.

# COVID-19
# Crisis Reponse 2022

**COVID relief**

The COVID-19 pandemic, further compounded by lockdowns, implicated that people had to undergo structural exclusion along with psychosocial distress. For MHI, this meant that its COVID relief efforts go beyond mental health support to include relief support within its ambit. Partnering with 48 organisations across 22 states, MHI funded food rations, medicines, hygiene kits, vaccine awareness, rents, and bank transfers. Smaller NGOs and collectives took centrestage in the outreach process as these organisations are often denied funding for relief work.

**We provided relief support to 28 NGOs, CBOs, Collectives, and individuals**

- Advocate Rajesh Kumar
- Advocate Gordhan Ram Jayapal
- Adivasi Mahila Aapsi Madad Pahal
- Agadhbodh Foundation
- Ambedkarite Women's Era
- Anubhuti Trust
- Bharathamatha Family Welfare Foundation
- Burans
- CHARM
- Devadasi Vimochana Vedike
- Disha
- DLR Prerna
- Education Society Chamba
- Ekjut
- Future Vision

- Gram Parivartan Prabodhini
- Indigenous People's Collective
- Jan Jagran Shakti Sangathan
- Jeeva
- Karnataka Vikalachetanara Samasthe
- KOSISH Charitable Trust
- Lok Kalyan Pratishtan
- Manav Vikas Sanshodhan Kendra
- Moitrisanjog
- M/s Vasantham Maatru Thiranaligal Group
- Muzaffarpur Vikas Mandal
- Nirangal
- Nirdhar Samajik Sevabhavi Sanstha
- Ohana
- People's Voice Korav
- Purva Bharati Educational Trust
- Raahi
- Reconstruction and Development Society
- Roshan India Foundation
- SAATHII
- Sadbhavana Trust
- Sahara Sakshrta Educational & Social Welfare Society
- SamajikShodhEvamVikas Kendra (SSEVK)
- Sangvari Gond Youth Network
- Save the Destitute Foundation
- South India AIDS Action Programme (SIAAP)
- SSK, UP
- Voice for Peace
- Volunteers in Saharsa
- Wavye Foundation
- Women Centre
- Ya_All: Youth Network
- Yusuf Meherally Centre

**Vulnerable marginalised communities:**

- Persons with Disability
- Adivasi/NT/DNT communities
- Persons living with long term illness - Physical/Mental
- Ante-natal persons/post-natal persons
- Children living in tea gardens
- Persons living on streets
- Dalit/SC/Bahujan
- Marginalised religious communities
- Transpersons/LGBTQIA+ community
- Daily wage earners
- Domestic workers
- Persons from the Devdasi community
- Persons living with HIV/AIDS
- Persons living in urban bastis
- Sex workers

# COVID
# Impact
# Map

## COVID RELIEF

**People supported:** 28560
**CBOs, NGOs and Collectives:** 48
**States:** 22

Andhra Pradesh
Arunachal Pradesh
Assam
Bihar
Chhattisgarh
Gujarat
Himachal Pradesh
Jammu & Kashmir
Jharkhand
Karnataka
Kerala

Madhya Pradesh
Maharashtra
Manipur
Odisha
Punjab
Rajasthan
Tamil Nadu
Telangana
Uttar Pradesh
Uttarakhand
West Bengal



# Primary
# Impact
# Map

Andhra Pradesh
Bihar
Chhattisgarh
Delhi
Gujarat
Haryana
Himachal Pradesh
Karnataka
Kashmir
Kerala

Madhya Pradesh
Maharashtra
Manipur
Nagaland
Odisha
Rajasthan
Tamil Nadu
Uttar Pradesh
Uttarakhand
West Bengal

# Demographic Snapshot

MHI goals include reaching out to and making mental health accessible to marginalised populations and communities. To bridge the mental health care gap for persons facing structural oppression—it is even more important to provide psychosocial interventions and support.

**TOTAL REACH OF OUR PARTNERS**

**1,454**
DISABILITY

**58,792**
women

**2,974**
lgbtqia+

GENDER

**8,123**
RELIGIOUS MINORITY

**32,394**
youth

AGE

**15,387**
sc/st/obc / indigenous & tribal

CASTE

**20,468**
ECONOMICALLY MARGINALISED

**158**
ANY OTHER

**138,076** PERSONS

# The 5 Pillars

MHI uses a 360 degree approach comprising of 5 pillars to support quantum change and encourage innovation, scalability, and capacity building.

**70,094** PERSONS

**228,692**
sum of persons impacted

**awareness**
Lack of information combined with stigma around mental health inhibits persons with mental health needs from approaching friends, family, and mental health professionals for support and care.

**effective service delivery**
Overall, there is minimal access to mental health services, which are marked by both poor availability as well as poor quality. Accessible, holistic, rights-based services in multiple delivery formats need to be made available to all.

**9** PRESENTATIONS + PUBLICATIONS

**4,332** PERSONS

**capacity-building**
Building the capacity of individuals, organisations, communities, and institutions, through training and knowledge sharing, is of critical importance.

**references & linkages**
Strong linkages need to be forged between mental health service providers and allied services concerned with livelihood, health, gender, sexuality, education, legal support, as well as government welfare schemes.

**research**
A thriving and responsive mental health ecosystem must rest on a support base of research that documents and records context and community-specific experiences in the field, along with evaluating the efficacy and impact of a variety of interventions.

**16,181** PERSONS

# Partners

As of June 30th 2022, MHI works with 33 partners across 38 projects in 20 states, in 15 languages with communities, institutions, and governments for service delivery, advocacy, deinstitutionalisation, capacity building, community mental health, law and policy, LGBTQIA+, and youth mental health.

**partners are**

Activists

Service Providers

Researchers

**that affect state & civil society at these levels**

Government

Institutions

Communities

**partners prior to 2020**

ANJALI • ANUBHUTI • BAPU TRUST • BASIC NEEDS INDIA • BEBAAK COLLECTIVE • BURANS • CENTRE FOR MENTAL HEALTH LAW AND POLICY, PUNE • DARJEELING LADENLA ROAD PRERNA (DLR PRERNA) • DISHA • ICALL PSYCHOSOCIAL HELPLINE • ISWAR SANKALPA • KASHMIR LIFELINE • MANN• MOITRISANJOG • NIRANGAL • RAAHI • RESOURCE CENTRE FOR JUVENILE JUSTICE • SCHIZOPHRENIA AWARENESS ASSOCIATION • SHIVAR FOUNDATION • SOCIETY FOR NUTRITION, EDUCATION, HEALTH ACTION (SNEHA) • SUKOON • WAYVE FOUNDATION • YA-ALL

| partners since April 2021 | Jeeva Trust | Samvada | Project OHANA | Mental Health Action Trust | Project Manmarziyan |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PROJECT / INITIATIVE** | **Addressing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support for Sexual and Gender Minorities in Karnataka** | **Building Capacities for Community Mental Health through Courses for Gender Development Practitioners, Youth Entering Professions** | **Recreation and Safe Spaces for Dalit and Adivasi Leaders** | **Ongoing Support and Scaling-up of Community Mental Health Programmes in Kerala** | **An Initiative on Mental Health with the Urban Gond Youth Community of Bhopal** |
| **NATURE OF PARTNER** | ✊ ✚ | ✚ | ✊ | ✚ | ✊ |
| **STATE & CIVIL SOCIETY** | 👪 🏛 | 👪 🏛 | 👪 | 👪 🏛 | 👪 |
| **LOCATION** | Karnataka | Karnataka | | Kerala | Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh |
| **DETAIL** | As a community-led organisation, Jeeva focusses upon issues around mental health, providing crisis intervention, livelihood support, and community media for working class sexual minorities in Karnataka. In their project with MHI, Jeeva aims for capacity building of community leaders from rural/semi-rural districts in Karnataka who, in turn, can provide mental health support, facilitate links and referrals, and develop awareness on mental health through community existing networks and CBOs working on HIV/AIDS in Karnataka. | MHI partners with Samvada with their Baduku Centre for Livelihood Learning's "Gender Development Practitioners Course with Counselling Skills and Mental Health Perspectives," providing mental health care on campus and self-care modules to all Baduku students. The course aims to equip students from marginalised backgrounds with the critical perspectives of feminist therapy, inculcating reflexivity and developing key skills of non-judgemental and empathetic listening, mediation, networking and referral, women's mobilisation, sensitisation and advocacy for gender justice, while working with marginalised communities. | Project Ohana is designed by marginalised women leaders that aims to holistically address the unique stressors faced by Dalit, Adivasi, and women leaders from marginalised groups and to create a space for addressing their mental well-being through a three-month residential programme. The initiative will provide healthcare services (physical and mental), capacity-building (that is, writing workshops), and peer support opportunities for those in residence with the larger aim of these leaders sustaining their social justice work. | Mental Health Action Trust (MHAT) provides community-based and community-led mental health care models free of cost for economically marginalised individuals with severe mental health issues. Through their partnership with MHI, MHAT provides services to their 46 community partnerships across eight districts in Kerala, and for scaling up of 15 community-based programmes with the Adivasi communities and coastal fisherfolk in a few districts of Kerala. MHAT's partnerships include government community health centres, various government departments as well as local NGOs working across sectors such as health and palliative care among other practices in their work. | Project Man Marziyaan works with youth from Gond and other Adivasi communities residing in urban spaces such as Bhopal, on their mental health, their understanding of the self and society, and in building peer support networks in bastis of Bhopal. The project aims to engage with Adivasi youth of all genders aged 15 and above through a 12-month youth programme. While facilitating direct counselling support to youth in these bastis and making referrals, the project also provides counselling skills for a few identified youths, who later on can go on to become peer counsellors. |

| **partners since April 2020** | Parcham | The Listening Station | BDS Samabhabona | The Centre For Mental Health Law And Policy (CMHLP-CASP) | M.S. Chellamuthu Trust And Research Foundation (MSCTRF) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **PROJECT / INITIATIVE** | **Career Counselling and Life Skills for Adolescents and Young Adults from Vulnerable Communities** | **Helpline and Mental Health Awareness Project in Nagaland** | **Trans Community Drop-in Centre and Ongoing Community Support** | **Contact and Safety Planning Project (CASP): Suicide Prevention** | **Project SPEAK: A Suicide Postvention Initiative** |
| **NATURE OF PARTNER** | ✊ | ✚ | ✊ ✚ | 🔍 | ✚ |
| **STATE & CIVIL SOCIETY** | 👪 | 👪 | 👪 | 🏛 🏛 | 👪 |
| **LOCATION** | Mumbai, Maharashtra | Nagaland | Kolkata, West Bengal | Chhattisgarh | Tamil Nadu |
| **DETAIL** | Parcham is a community-based organisation working with Muslim adolescent girls in Mumbra and Mumbai. Their flagship program is using sports for the empowerment of girls and to foster fraternity and solidarity amongst young women across different religions. They also work on rights education and agency building of marginalised young women to access public spaces, recreation and equal representation. MHI is partnering with Parcham to offer Career Counselling Life skills for young Muslim women. | The Listening Station project operates a helpline staffed by academically trained counsellors, where service users can avail mental health support free of cost. The helpline has a call-back facility for service users to follow up. In order to facilitate greater access to mental health services for communities in Nagaland, the Listening Station team aims to begin community outreach work with key stakeholders and influencers, such as colleges, community spaces, and churches so that they can provide awareness and education, as well as facilitate discussions on mental health in local and vernacular languages. | A Kolkata-based trans-activists-led organisation- BDS Samabhabona was launched by trans and queer activists, comprised of Dalit, working class persons, sex workers, and migrant workers. Samabhabona is partnering with MHI to support a drop-in centre/ community space in Kolkata, which will facilitate mental health support and crisis intervention for around 150 trans persons. In tandem with Samabhabona's feminist, intersectoral, and rights-based approach, this project will support elderly and homeless trans persons, while also facilitating community advocacy activities such as sensitisation workshops, consultations, and meetings that advocate for legal rights, wellbeing of trans sex workers, trans labour unions, leadership training, livelihoods, and peer support as well as art activism. | Partnering with MHI, CMHLP's Contact and Safety Planning (CASP) project will be implemented in Balod and Rajnandgaon districts of Chhattisgarh. With an aim to reduce repeat suicide attempts among individuals, the project seeks to get the CASP intervention delivered through capacity-building of emergency ward nurses and community health officers (CHOs). Post discharge from district and sub-district hospitals, trained CHOs follow-up with participants and their families at regular intervals. The study will aim to identify the feasibility of implementing CASP in the public health systems across all districts in the state. | Spearheaded by women survivors of suicide loss themselves, Project SPEAK is a suicide post-vention pilot initiative by MSCTRF in Madurai district of Tamil Nadu—that focusses on providing support to women survivors of suicide loss through support groups, local outreach to suicide survivors, peer-led support groups for survivors (online and in-person), immediate response by trained volunteers in the event of a suicide death in the communities and sensitisation and training programmes on suicide and suicide loss for various stakeholders such as mental health professionals, police, media, and teachers among others. |

**partners since
April 2020**

# Project
# Sahyog

| | |
|---|---|
| **PROJECT / INITIATIVE** | **Studying Mental Health Capabilities in Kashmir** |
| **NATURE OF PARTNER** | 🔍 |
| **STATE & CIVIL SOCIETY** | 👥 🏛 |
| **LOCATION** | Kashmir |
| **DETAIL** | Project Sahyog is an independent research study led by a group of Kashmiri researchers, mental health sector professionals, and lawyers on mapping the availability and accessibility of rights-based mental health services in the Valley. Keeping the backdrop of marginalisation and conflict in Kashmir, the project will be a 1-year collaborative study across mental health stakeholders in Kashmir such as practitioners, service providers, policy-makers, and community members to document the state of public and private mental healthcare systems in Kashmir through a mapping of service providers, and develop a framework on rights-based mental health work in Kashmir, including context-specific indicators for rights-based care. |

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1) "Rengam"- which means "a united group" in the Mishing language - is an indigenous weavers' cooperative that was established and led by the local Mishing women and currently has more than 160 members who come from more than 15 flood and erosion affected villages in Majuli.
2) "Jadav Payeng is an indigenous Mishing community leader and a famous environmentalist known as the Forest Man of India. Jadav Payeng has created what is arguably the largest man-made forest by one man on this planet."
3) Name changed.
4) Chang Ghars are built on a raised platform supported by bamboo stilts, which can keep floodwaters, insects, and wild animals at bay.
5) Name changed.
6) Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers are trained female community health activists, who work from and within the community itself as an interface between the community and the public health system.
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**ReFrame**, a journal by the Mariwala Health Initiative is a platform to challenge existing norms and explore diverse voices within the mental health space — expanding horizons for who gets to participate in such conversations in an effort to firmly ground mental health in a contextual, intersectional, rights-based, intersectoral framework. It is envisioned as a tool for mental health practitioners, advocates, activists, scholars, students, experts, funders, government officials, and non-profit organisations — and those from closely allied sectors.

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