



The reality of climate injustice

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A recent Greenpeace report highlights how the lifestyles of the rich encroach on the climate space of the poor in India.

The next time you reach for your electric mixie to whip something you could easily whip with an old-fashioned handheld twirl, or hop into your car to travel a distance you could easily walk or cycle, remember these two words: climate injustice.

This neat term encompasses a startling, though complex, reality: some people are more responsible than others for the warming of the earth's atmosphere that is triggering catastrophic climate change. The biggest emitters of greenhouse gases are today's industrialised countries, the United States topping the list. Countries like India are rapidly increasing their share; but each Indian citizen, on average, still emits a fraction of what each American and European does. So when the world started discussing what to do in response to climate change, developing countries demanded climate justice. They said they wanted to continue being able to 'develop', without being bound by actions needed to curb greenhouse gases, while industrialised countries were asked to immediately start such action. Thus emerged

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the concept of “common but differentiated responsibility”, acknowledging that all nations had the duty to act, but some could act later, or be assisted through funding and technologies if the world wanted them to act faster.

Sounds logical except for one flaw in the argument that a report by the NGO Greenpeace India, released last week, has starkly exposed. Climate injustice occurs not only between nations, but within them also.

Rich vs. poor

While average emissions per Indian citizen are way below the global average, some Indians — the richest — are already nearing this average. Worse, they are already well above levels considered sustainable. But this is camouflaged by the fact that the vast majority of Indians — the poor — are way below the average. In effect, poor Indians are subsidising the rich, allowing them a much greater share of the atmosphere than should be rightfully theirs.

Before we get further into climate injustice, let’s take a quick look at what climate change has in store for us. With even a 2°C rise in global average temperatures (now considered almost certain), we are in for serious trouble. Sea level rise will inundate vast areas of coast, pushing millions of people inland. Dozens of inhabited islands will disappear. Already many villages in Kachchh and the Sundarbans have been submerged, rendering thousands homeless or destitute. Drought and flood occurrences will increase manifold. Forest fires, like the one that just devastated California, will become more common. Agricultural production will fall in many tropical countries and vector-borne diseases will become epidemics in several areas. Several thousand species of plants and animals will face extinction.

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Worst affected

It is also instructive to note that while the poor are the least to blame for climate change, they will be the worst affected. Their dependence on Nature is much higher than that of the rich, and their ability to cope with disaster much weaker. If Mumbai is inundated, the rich will buy up houses in Pune; where will the poor go?

Greenpeace surveyed 819 households across several income classes, and calculated their carbon emissions based on energy consumption from household appliances and transportation. India's average per capita carbon emission is 1.67 tonnes (compared to the global average of 5.03). But Greenpeace found that the emission of the richest class (those with income above Rs. 30,000 a month) is 4.97, just a fraction below the world average. In contrast, the emission of the poorest class (income below Rs. 3000 a month, almost half of India's population) is only 1.11 tonnes. The richest in India produce 4.5 times more carbon emissions than the poorest.

More to the point, these emissions should be compared to the 2.5 tonnes per capita limit that scientists consider is necessary if we want to restrict the temperature rise to below 2°C. All Indian classes that earn above Rs. 8000 per month are already above this limit!

What explains this gross difference in emissions?

Greenpeace found that the biggest difference was in the extent of household appliances using electricity. While general lighting, fans, and TVs are common to all classes (though much more in use by the rich), several appliances were found only in rich households... air conditioners, electric geysers, washing machines, electric or electronic kitchen appliances, DVD players, computers, and the like. Secondly, much greater use of transportation using fossil fuels, including gas-guzzling

cars and airplanes, characterised the rich.

Greenpeace's fingers point unwaveringly at India's rich for cornering much more of the atmospheric space that all citizens should have equal right to. It warns that the rich are denying development possibilities for the poor. It is among the first studies in the world to look at climate injustice within a country, and therefore a crucial breakthrough in discussions relating to climate change.

Tribal rights

The report's findings put an interesting light on the raging controversy over the Forest Rights Act, which provides tribals and other traditional forest dwellers with the rights to land and forest resources that they have deserved for generations. A handful of conservationists are vigorously opposing the Act, claiming that it will destroy India's forests and lead to much greater carbon emissions. There are elements of truth in both the claim that the Act will cause deforestation, as also that it will lead to greater stake among poor people in protecting forests. However, what is interesting is that those who are opposing it in the name of climate change, mostly belong to the richest classes that the Greenpeace report holds responsible for 4.5 times greater carbon emissions than the poor who will be the prime beneficiaries of the Act! Yet nowhere in the debate is there an acknowledgement of this, let alone voluntary action by such conservationists (or others who are less critical of the Act) to reduce their climate crunching consumption patterns.

Evidence of climate injustice within India also points to the utter bankruptcy of the Indian government's development policies. These have continued to push a carbon-intensive economy, and also promoted the kind of consumerism that has allowed India's rich classes to become global climate destroyers. These policies have to

be challenged, resisted, and replaced by much more sustainable and equitable ones.

Partial answers

Greenpeace provides partial answers to this. It assures the rich that their lifestyles need not be sacrificed. The solution, rather, is in “decarbonising” the economy, moving towards replacing fossil fuels by renewable sources like solar, wind, and biomass, and towards greater efficiency in energy production and use. It advocates greater focus on public transport systems, mandatory fuel efficiency standards in cars, and high-speed trains to check the increasing use of air travel. It also proposes a “carbon tax” on use of fossil fuels, proceeds from which could be used to help the poor get access to cleaner forms of development, and to mechanisms to cope with the impact of climate change.

This is where I found the report to be surprisingly soft on the rich. At one point it admits that even with increased efficiency, the tendency to accumulate more and more electricity-run appliances will keep lifestyles beyond the sustainability limits. But it does not conclude from this that we have to curb such consumerism in the first place, through an appropriate system of incentives and penalties. This becomes imperative not only to reduce carbon emissions, but also because the lifestyles of the rich are ecologically destructive in many more ways... massive uses of minerals, timber, agricultural produce, and other materials well beyond the limits of the earth to sustain. A solar-powered car for every household in India may not cause significant carbon emissions, but imagine the amount of mining needed to produce 200 million of them? Climate injustice needs to be seen in the context of the larger issue of ecological and social injustice, which is pushing the earth and all its inhabitants to the brink of another massive phase of extinction.

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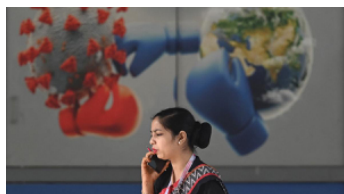
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