

A climate change narrative that India can steer

The Glasgow COP26 meet offers New Delhi a chance to update its Nationally Determined Contributions to meet targets



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In a keynote speech on September 8 in a seminar organised by a think tank, R.K. Singh, Union Minister for Power, New and Renewable Energy stated, “Environment is something we are trustees of and have to leave behind a better environment for our children and great grand children.” However, a recent report, “Assessment of Climate Change over the Indian Region” by the Ministry of Earth Sciences (MoES) reveals that India has warmed up 0.7° C during 1901-2018. The 2010-2019 decade was the hottest with a mean temperature of 0.36° C higher than average. Heatwaves continued to increase with no signs of diminishing greenhouse gas emissions despite lower activity since the novel coronavirus pandemic. Prolonged exposure to heat is becoming detrimental to public health, especially the poor unable to afford support for coping with the heat. Assessment by the MoES shows that India may experience a 4.4° C rise by the end of this century.

India has also suffered two of the 10 most expensive climate disasters in the last two years. Super-

cyclone “Cyclone Amphan” that hit India in 2020, cost more than USD13 billion even as the country was just recovering from “June-October Monsoon Flooding” that cost USD10 billion and around 1,600 lives. It was India’s heaviest monsoon rain in the last 25 years and the world’s seventh costliest. In early 2021, India suffered two more cyclones: Cyclone Tauktae hitting the west coast and Cyclone Yaas from the east.

India’s rising IDPs

According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, India’s Internally Displaced Populations (IDPs) are rising due to damaging climate events. Uttarakhand residents began deserting their homes after the Kedarnath floods in 2013 due to heavy precipitation that increases every year. Within 2050, rainfall is expected to rise by 6% and temperature by 1.6° C.

To make things worse, India lost about 235 square kilometres to coastal erosion due to climate change induced sea-level rise, land erosion and natural disasters such as tropical cyclones between 1990-2016. About 3.6 million out of 170 million living in coastal areas were displaced between 2008-2018. Recent figures are more alarming with 3.9 million displaced in 2020 alone, mostly due to Cyclone Amphan.

India’s Deccan plateau has seen eight out of 17 severe droughts since 1876 in the 21st century



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(2000-2003; 2015-2018). In Maharashtra and Karnataka (the heart of the Deccan Plateau), families deserted homes in 2019 due to an acute water crisis. Hatkarwadi, a village in Beed district of Maharashtra State, had as few as 10-15 families remaining out of the previous population count of 2,000 people.

Good policies, weak practices

India held the top 10 position for the second year in a row in 2020’s Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI). The country received credit under all of the CCPI’s performance fields except renewable energy where India performed medium.

India vowed to work with COP21 by signing the Paris Agreement to limit global warming and submitted the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) with a goal of reducing emissions intensity of GDP by 33%-35% and increasing green energy resources (non-fossil-oil based) to 40% of installed

electric power capacity by 2030.

India cofounded with France at COP21, in 2015, the International Solar Alliance (ISA) – a coalition of about 120 countries with solar rich resources– which aims at mobilising USD1 trillion in investments for the deployment of solar energy at affordable prices by 2030. Despite leading ISA, India performed the least in renewable energy according to the CCPI’s performance of India. The question is, are these global alliances and world-leading policies being practised or are merely big promises with little implementation?

Experts agree that India can achieve the 2° C target of COP15 Copenhagen in 2009. But it also observes that the country is not fully compliant with the Paris Agreement’s long-term temperature goal of the NDCs and there are still risks of falling short of the 2° C goal. According to India’s carbon emission trajectory, the country is en route to achieve barely half of the pledged carbon sink by 2030. To achieve the Paris Agreement’s NDC target, India needs to produce 25 million-30 million hectares of forest cover by 2030 – a third of current Indian forestation and trees. Going by the facts, it seems India has overpromised on policies and goals as it becomes difficult to deliver on the same.

Why COP26 matters

The Glasgow COP26 offers India a great opportunity to reflect on the

years since the Paris Agreement and update NDCs to successfully meet the set targets. India is expected to be the most populated country by 2027, overtaking China, contributing significantly to the global climate through its consumption pattern. India is in a rather unique position to have a significant influence on global climate impact in the new decade.

Alok Sharma, President of the COP26 met Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change Bhupender Yadav in August to persuade India to deliver a more ambitious NDCs for 2030 to which the Minister responded by stating, “India believes that climate actions must be nationally determined... UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement for developing countries should be at the core of decision-making...”

Being one of the observer states of the Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) as well as an influential member of COP26, India has the ability to improve its global positioning by leading a favourable climate goal aspiration for the world to follow. The country has the opportunity to not only save itself from further climate disasters but also be a leader in the path to climate change prevention.

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