



drishti

Climate Change and Development in India

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This editorial is based on the article 'Parley: Is India doing enough to combat climate change?' which appeared in "The Hindu" on May 3rd, 2019. The article talks about how India should tackle the climate change problem at the larger level of discourse.

Climate change is certainly without argument the most serious global environmental crisis that we face. *It is not the only environmental problem*, but it is unique in its multi-scalar characteristic, from the global to the local. And, in many ways, it is arguably the most immediate of our problems.

At one level, for many people climate change has become an existential problem, a problem that risks undermining the conditions for productive life and therefore a problem that does not override but certainly permeates all kinds of other issues. **For many others, climate change is a distant problem that is overwhelmed by more immediate issues.**

What made the news?

The Paris Agreement on climate change is set to become operational in 2020, and discussions on what developmental pathways can India pursue to align its social objectives and energy needs with its commitments made under the UN pact have begun. This is one such important discussion.

The Short Gist

One cannot ignore the linkage between current issues and climate change.

In India, for instance, if we think about farmer distress it is likely to be made much worse by climate change, and if we think about challenges of water, it is being made much worse by the climate changing.

The global carbon system is interlocked

- We are recognising that the global carbon system is an interlocked system.
- So, **we have to think about the global transition to low carbon systems and the resultant spillover effects**, from changes in one economy to changes in another economy, changes in politics in one place to changes in politics in another place, etc.
- **This makes important how we bring about the transition to a low carbon economy in India** (because India is a large economy, market, second largest population and it can play an important role in being part of these positive spillover effects).

If India has to decarbonise while meeting its development goals, what is important is that the new investments go in the direction of decarbonising, but only after taking into account possible synergies and trade-offs with other development objectives.

Opinions from the editorial

Though India is not responsible for the stock of CO₂ in the atmosphere, we must do far more than we are doing today to call the developed countries to account.

India contributes to only 6 or 7% of global emissions but we are one of the most vulnerable countries.

Adaptation & Mitigation

- **We need to start taking climate change more seriously, particularly on the adaptation side, because we really have a lot to be concerned about.**

And on the mitigation side, we have to be careful as we may not be fully exploring the scope of intersections between '*a low carbon agenda*' and '*a development agenda*'.
- **India still has huge development deficits and unfortunately, the intersection between erasing development deficits and genuine climate change adaptation has been very poorly explored and the entry point for this conversation should be development deficits.**
 - **This is because 'development is the first line of defence against adaptation'.**
 - And we have to understand what is development versus adaptation? How much mitigation do we need to do? How much is the overall burden of mitigation?
 - In adaptation, our focus should therefore be on understanding what our development deficits are.
 - **For example, to say that we need to improve, find a way for cleaner transportation, shouldn't actually lead to a conclusion that it should lead to more electric vehicles** – the first priority has to be improved and more accessible public transport.

- **We need to understand these development deficits from a multi objective point of view**, in terms of economics and access, in terms of local pollutants like air pollutants, climate change and mitigation, and liveability of cities, we need this more multi-faceted and analytical framework.

India can bring development gains and that also lead to mitigation benefits.

For example, the way we design our cities: we want more sustainable cities, we want cities with less congestion, with more public transport because we want cities that are more liveable. Those kinds of cities will also automatically be low carbon cities.

Our foremost requirement is to hedge the future

The problem for India is hedging its future, not simply what we consume now or what we expect to gain in immediate terms. [**Hedging**: Any technique designed to reduce or eliminate financial risk; for example, taking two positions that will offset each other if prices change]

- **What is it that we want as our long-term future and how much of it in terms of carbon space we need to hedge?** Because this is an ongoing game, it is not a static number - *it changes over time* - we need to continually monitor and study it.
- **Even though India's performance in NDC is good, we cannot respond with more commitments in our NDC until we see serious commitments at the international level.**

To Conclude

We don't have the option in India of thinking about anything that is innocent of climate change anymore.

We must recognise climate change as a global collective action problem.

If one country is honourable in the extreme, and cuts its emissions to the bone, that is going to be of little use if the others do not follow suit. They will suffer the consequences of climate change despite the extent of their sacrifice or effort.

We need to move climate change, global warming to the top of our foreign policy agenda.

- This is a critical move we need to make and the sooner we do it, the greater is the benefit that we will draw from our own climate actions.
- **And India will probably exceed the NDC pledges**, because for reasons like urban congestion and air pollution, we will want to move in the direction of low carbon anyway, quite apart from climate change.

Would a carbon tax on conspicuous consumption bring about equity in access to energy?

- Before we think of carbon purely in terms of consumption, we should also think of it in terms of production.

For example, imagine privileging Kerala for not having so much emissions at all, and penalising Jharkhand, Dhanbad for too much emissions. That is not exactly fair.

- Inequality in terms of consumption is therefore not really fair. *Is it consumption for production or is it consumption for personal use? The two are not the same thing.*
- The bulk of the problem is really 'consumption for other production', rather than 'consumption for personal use'.

We cannot take our current level of energy consumption in any way as a benchmark of what India needs for the future.

- This is because our per capita energy consumption levels are extremely low and not something compatible with the development and lifestyle that we wish for in India.
- The real dilemma is if we want to increase energy use at a time when globally we are trying shift to a low carbon system.
- At the same time, there is another big challenge - *providing jobs when automation and artificial intelligence are growing in power and capacity.*

Therefore, India should not be thinking about climate change adaptation as a single technology transition. Instead, we should think about jobs, energy and pollution questions together. This is the best way forward.

What makes this topic important for UPSC?

In 2017, GS III, UPSC asked the following question: "Climate Change is a global problem. How India will be affected by climate change? How Himalayan and coastal states of India will be affected by climate change?"

Drishti Input:

"Though India contributes only 6 or 7% of global emissions yet it is one of the most vulnerable countries from climate change." Discuss.