

WeatherReport

THE CRISIS OF
CLIMATE CHANGE

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The clouds, the only birds that never sleep

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EDITED BY

RAVI AGARWAL
OMITA GOYAL



India International Centre

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EDITORIAL

Climate change is a natural phenomenon and would probably have progressed at a gentle, safe pace had it not been for the intervention of humankind. Humans accelerated the pace of climate change over the past few centuries as a result of industrialisation, new forms of agriculture, the pursuit of wealth and leisure—‘development’, in other words.

The phenomenon of climate change has been studied for a long time. In fact the term ‘greenhouse effect’ was coined in the early 1800s. From the mid-1950s when detrimental effects of human activity on climate and the increased pace of climate change became obvious, there have been countless global conventions, protocols, and environment conferences to discuss and arrive at policies to check climate change and mitigate the damage already done. Scientific and social research provide clear proof of the deleterious effects of accelerating climate change on life as we know it today. Increasing temperatures, environmental pollution, vast swathes of agricultural land turning into desert, rapidly disappearing glaciers and Arctic ice, declining populations of wildlife from large animals to insects to name a few. Some argue that a new geological epoch—the Anthropocene—has already commenced.

Yet we continue to debate and argue and allow political and policy considerations to win the discussion and ensure there is no decisive progress on halting, or at least mitigating, human-driven climate change. The most recent talks on climate change (COP-25) in Madrid in December 2019 ended after two weeks of deliberations with no outcome. COP-26, when the COVID-19 pandemic permits it to be held, is not likely to be much different.

The past few weeks have turned the world on its head. As I write this editorial about five weeks into the ‘lockdown’ in India—an attempt to manage the COVID-19 pandemic—the world has changed dramatically. The tremendous economic fallout of the world’s efforts to contain the pandemic and reduce its toll on human life and health may well cause a global recession and have long lasting effects on

jobs and livelihood. Industries, agriculture, trade, social interaction, travel and tourism to name a few are in free-fall.

It is, however, ironic that these restrictions on human activity have drastically reduced carbon emissions, industrial pollutants, waste, vehicular traffic and so much more we have believed integral to our lives and lifestyles. As a result, the skies are blue, lakes, rivers and other water bodies are clear, one can hear the sound of birds even in urban areas, roadside trees are green and not covered in a layer of grime. It cannot continue for long because the economy has to be revived, joblessness needs urgent attention, salaries for those fortunate to be employed must be assured, peoples' savings protected, production restarted and so much more. We have had a brief glimpse of what we have done to our environment and climate. Can we learn long-term lessons and work towards a more sustainable, equitable and responsible lifestyle? Is there a possibility that there will be some positive outcomes? Will we pause and consider the state of the world we inhabit and take steps to secure it for further generations?

This special issue draws attention to and discusses many of the debates on environmental and climate change—several that have been brought into focus by recent events. Large scale, input heavy, single-species agriculture versus smaller, species-diverse agriculture that is less dependent on fertilisers and pesticides; environmental regulations for industry; the state of our rivers; plant and animal habitats; encroachment of coastlines; energy efficiency. These and many more debates are covered in this issue. I hope you enjoy reading it and if it sparks some debate, that much better.



OMITA GOYAL

FOREWORD

I had the privilege of attending the first United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm in 1972, which is from where the world started focusing on the crucial relationship between humanity and the planet that we inhabit. I was a member of the Indian delegation led by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, while the Swedish delegation was led by its Prime Minister, Olaf Palme. Tragically enough, both were assassinated some years later. The Stockholm Conference was in fact the first organised attempt by the UN to promote the study of the human environment. Indira Gandhi made a significant speech which was widely appreciated. In fact, behind the scenes I was urging that the proposed United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) should be located in India in view of our unique human environment, stretching thousands of kilometres from the great Himalayas in the north right down to Kanyakumari where three great oceans meet and mingle. As it turned out, the move was not successful and UNEP was located in Nairobi. Kenya is indeed a beautiful country that I have visited more than once, but I do not think it had the necessary infrastructure to really do justice to this new initiative.

At the Stockholm meeting only two heads of government were present, but over the decades in subsequent meetings such as the one in Rio 20 years later, over a hundred heads of states and government attended. This shows the manner in which environmental factors have moved from the periphery to the centre of the world's attention. This also highlights the horrific devastation that our race has inflicted upon the planet. After numerous conferences and consultations, the Paris Agreement was finally signed in 2016. It is indeed a tragedy that the world's most populous and most polluting nation decided to pull out of this Agreement.

Over the last century millions of insect, plant and animal species have become extinct, huge areas have been deforested, thus losing the true cover so essential for the health of the planet. We

have even succeeded in polluting the oceans that are steadily rising as a result of enhanced glacial melting due to global warming which will wipe out several coastal habitations quite soon. The air that we breathe has been polluted by our unsustainable lifestyle. In Delhi, for example, it was difficult to breathe at the height of the pollution earlier this year. It is indeed ironic that it has required a global pandemic for us to see blue skies again in our great capital, and even some stars at night, and lots of lovely butterflies.

Every religious and cultural tradition in the world contains significant environmental values. In Hinduism, for example, we have the magnificent *Bhumi Suktam* 'Hymn to the Earth', whose 63 verses contain the most holistic statement of environmental values to be found anywhere in the world. This is based on the realisation that human beings themselves are a product of the earth and it is their duty to protect and cherish it. We have done precisely the reverse, as a result of which environmental disasters, including climate change, are upon us and will soon engulf several island nations. It is now quite clear that unless we substantially modify our lifestyles, our production mechanisms and our consumption patterns, we are hurtling towards a major disaster in the next few decades. This process has to involve not only state governments but the intellectual and academic communities around the world, particularly the young who have the greatest stake in the future.

Climate change is adversely affecting all aspects of our life including our health, our livelihoods and our very existence. The terrible global pandemic which has encircled the world in a way flows from the consistent aberration in our unsustainably high protein diet, which leads to the consumption of lethal animals and reptiles, and cannot be de-linked from our general distortion of environmental values. This is a grim warning, and if we do not take heed there may be even worse to come.

This special and very timely issue of the *IIC Quarterly* deals with the crisis of climate change from several different perspectives. A spectrum of distinguished intellectuals and experts have presented various aspects of climate change and have explored what can be done to halt or even reverse the process. This issue will thus be of considerable value not only to members of the IIC but to the broader interested public in India and around the world.

KARAN SINGH

