

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-17191-5 – Climate Justice in India
Volume 1
Edited by Prakash Kashwan
Excerpt
[More Information](#)



Empowerment by Nidhin Donald

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Climate Justice in India

Prakash Kashwan

Arundhati Roy famously described the COVID-19 pandemic as a

portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it. (Roy 2020)

As inspiring and insightful as these words are, such juxtaposition of utopia and dystopia barely scratches the surface of what and who we *are* as a nation. The soul-crushing images of burning pyres in parking lots turned into makeshift graveyards, which international and national media have immortalized, offer a clue, as does the sombre poetry of Parul Khakhar (Tripathi 2021). India is a land pockmarked with a million fires.

The COVID-19 crisis has come as a shock to many middle-class Indians. Yet, to India's Dalits, Adivasis, women, and other marginalized groups, haunted by centuries of oppression, this crisis is yet another in a long list of historical and ongoing crises. For example, the coalfields of Jharia in Jharkhand have been burning for over a century now. As a result, at least 130,000 families have, quite literally, lived through a century-long trial by fire (Rahi 2019). Since 1995, the state-owned Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL) has claimed to have a 'master plan', which is possibly gathering dust in some almirah of the coal ministry (S. Kumar 2021). One would imagine that a pandemic like COVID-19 might scare the minister whose job includes ensuring

the welfare of the 3.6 million people who work in mines with a less than adequate supply of fresh air. Yet, in 2020, India's coal minister valorized coal workers as 'our coal warriors who are toiling day and night to keep the lights on even during the corona pandemic' (Press Information Bureau 2020). They toiled very hard indeed.

A year later, as India struggled to confront the monstrous second wave of the pandemic, Central Coalfields Limited (CCL), a subsidiary of Coal India Limited (CIL), recorded the highest-ever single-day coal dispatch of 80 railway rakes (PNS 2021). Unfortunately, such exceptional productivity in the middle of a pandemic came at a steep cost, as at least 400 CIL employees died from COVID-19. CIL appealed publicly to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, requesting about 1 million doses of vaccines for its employees (Singh 2021). However, it is unclear if CIL's request was fulfilled. Nevertheless, India's coal workers and the residents of Jharkhand, the latter hardened by century-long neglect and violence of extractivism, continue to be caught in the crossfire between advocates of national development and stakeholders in the ongoing contestations over the impending renewable energy transition. The involvement of these varied parties and interests has not translated into negotiating power for mine workers, as seen among their counterparts in the West, who have managed to mobilize under the banner of a just transition.

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of India 'unleashed coal', that is, they opened up coal mining to the private sector. In doing so, Prime Minister Modi declared that he was 'unshackling [coal mining] from decades of lockdown', as he wanted 'India ... to be a net exporter of coal' (Varadhan 2020). This celebration of coal is linked to long-standing traditions of coal nationalism (Lahiri-Dutt 2016). For the Indian prime minister, the advocacy and support for expanding coal mining does not appear to conflict with the country's ambition of playing a prominent role in global climate negotiations. At the Leaders Summit on Climate convened by United States President Joe Biden, Modi announced the US–India Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership, which is to 'proceed along two main tracks: the Strategic Clean Energy Partnership and the Climate Action and Finance Mobilization Dialogue' (CNBC TV18 2021). How might these partnerships and India's continued expansion of coal mining shape India's climate action, and the welfare of the multitude of coal miners, most of whom work under extremely exploitative conditions? What will happen to the young boys descending steep chutes – little more than 'rat holes' – to dig coal from hard rock, with just a pickaxe and a torch, in the Jaintia Hills in eastern India (Chandran 2016)?

These snapshots from the year of the pandemic help to outline how Indian leaders respond to crisis situations. They also offer a glimpse of what a major and widespread crisis portends for the majority of India's people, whose lives are locked in multiple

intersecting circles of crises and immiseration. A consideration of how myriad social, economic, and ecological crises reinforce the vulnerabilities experienced by the most marginalized, and their efforts to overcome those vulnerabilities, should be at the heart of the pursuits of climate justice.

Climate change in a grossly unequal society

The climate crisis is occurring in a world of extreme inequalities. The history of disproportionate contributions to the accumulation of greenhouse gases (GHGs) responsible for the current crisis is truly staggering. As of 2019, a handful of countries, including the United States, United Kingdom, countries of the former Soviet Union, Germany, France, Poland, Canada, and Japan, contributed about 75 per cent of the world's historically accumulated emissions. China alone was responsible for about 18 per cent. The majority of the world's countries collectively contributed only 7 per cent to the total GHG emissions present in the atmosphere today. These inequalities would be even more significant if one were to account for the transfer of consumption emissions via international trade or travel. India has contributed less than 3 per cent to the accumulated emissions (Ritchie 2019). Despite contributing a negligible share to the accumulated stock of GHGs, various global indices rank India among the countries most vulnerable to the effects of the ongoing climate crisis (Reuters 2018). As such, India is a victim of international injustices associated with the climate crisis.

India is also home to the largest population of poor people anywhere in the world and is one of the most unequal countries globally today. Ranked according to the Gini coefficient, a national-level measure of inequality in income distribution, India was second only to Russia as of 2018 (Chaudhuri and Ghosh 2021). Concepts such as income inequality and poverty do not quite capture the deep-seated nature and wide-ranging effects of caste-based oppressions. Dalit men are lynched for falling in love with non-Dalit women, and Dalit women are routinely raped with impunity. India's National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reported that 10 Dalit women were raped daily in 2019 (Kumar 2020). Even more worryingly, Dalit women are often 'raped to keep them "in their place"' (Nagaraj 2020). The disadvantages that Dalit women face are a product of the oppressive caste system and patriarchal norms at home and in the society at large. The oppression of Dalit men and women is instrumental to the power, authority, and privileges upper-caste men enjoy in India. Caste hierarchy is therefore an embodiment of violent social norms with widespread social acceptance in today's India (Coffey et al. 2018).

Considering these challenges, the editor and contributors to this volume have grappled with how best to refer to a normatively repelling social reality in which

many Indians consider references to ‘lower’ caste and ‘upper’ caste as objective descriptions. Caste is socially constructed and therefore always political, even when discussed in other contexts. In this text, we will use the vocabulary of ‘upper caste’ and ‘lower caste’ to designate groups of people, their experiences, and how they are represented in public discourse. The quotation marks here indicate our personal disavowal of this system of caste hierarchy and its continued normalization in public discourses and writings.¹ But for the sake of brevity, we use these phrases without scare quotes in the remainder of this volume.

The nexus of the climate crisis and socioeconomic and political inequalities is at the root of various types of climate injustices. For decades, hundreds of thousands of poor Indians have died prematurely because of unacceptably high levels of air and water pollution. A recent study estimates that about 2.5 million people in India die every year because of toxic air (30.7 per cent of all deaths in the country) (Vohra et al. 2021). Similarly, the tens of millions of people displaced by annual floods, the hundreds of deaths because of heatwaves, and enormous disruptions to poor people’s lives due to climate disasters find scant mention in the national press. These statistics are rarely a subject of public debate in India, except when a health minister, who also happened to be a doctor, denied the existence of data that link air pollution to premature deaths in India (Kaur 2019). Clearly, the worst impacts of air pollution and the climate crisis are being denied, ignored, and normalized, because these burdens fall on the urban poor, women, Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and other marginalized people with little political voice. Accordingly, India is an archetypal site for the manifestation of the myriad injustices associated with the climate crisis.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated India’s inequality problem. The catastrophic failure to plan for the widely anticipated second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the dark underbelly of India’s public institutions, and the lack of freedoms afforded to the press and civil society (Ghoshal and Das 2021). In 2020 alone, an additional 75 million people in India were pushed into poverty, accounting for nearly 60 per cent of the global increase in poverty that year (Lee 2021). In the same period, India counted 55 new billionaires, or about one billionaire every week, despite a major economic slowdown in the wake of the hastily declared and rashly managed nationwide lockdown (Bhargava 2021).

Unequal societies are badly governed – they do not have what it takes to rein in the exploitative and polluting models of extractive development that corporations and political-economic elite find beneficial and perpetuate. A careful reading of the

¹ I am grateful to Srilata Sircar for this formulation.

available scientific evidence would suggest that inequality, not poverty, is the biggest polluter (Oxfam International 2020).

Failure to remedy environmental degradation and stabilize the global climate system aggravates these injustices; yet not all environmental and climate action addresses injustices. Paradoxically, many types of interventions meant to mitigate the impacts of climate change are likely to further reinforce these pre-existing inequalities. As this volume goes to press, 1,500 families in central Assam's Nagaon district are fighting to regain control of 276 *bighas* (a varying measure of land area used in India and other parts of south Asia) of farmland forcibly acquired for a 15-MW (megawatt) solar plant being developed by Azure Power Forty Private Limited. According to a group of over 150 academics, activists, lawyers, students, filmmakers, and other concerned citizens, the land acquisition process in this case violates Assam's land laws as well as the residents' human rights (*The Hindu* 2021). Similar injustices are likely to repeat all over the country, as India plans to rely on the expansion of solar and wind power to achieve its intended nationally determined contributions (INDCs) to the Paris Climate Agreement. However, if not handled with the utmost care, this keenly anticipated renewable energy revolution could add significantly to India's long-standing and worsening land wars (Levien 2013).

To those focusing on radical climate action, the injustices resulting from such action may seem mere aberrations. Indeed, in the Global North, where debates surrounding climate justice have been around for longer, some scholars and activists equate radical climate action to climate justice (cf. Kashwan 2021). However, the climate crisis, climate denialism, and the dismal outcomes of international climate negotiations share the same roots: the influence of exploitative and extractive systems of global capitalism, which are propelled by a nexus of multilateral financial institutions and national political and economic elites. The power of this loosely organized, yet extremely nimble, web of transnational elite networks is rooted in histories of colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism (Bachrach and Baratz 1962). Activists and scholars focusing on global capitalism have paid inadequate attention to how such networks thrive on intersectional inequalities borne of the confluence of gender, caste, class, and religious identities within countries. To this day, these inequalities help forge social relations, institutional arrangements, and political structures that shape socioeconomic, environmental, and policy outcomes. Furthermore, the climate crisis greatly exacerbates these inequalities and injustices.

Climate Justice in India is the first comprehensive book-length effort to examine how the climate crisis and some of the proposed solutions are inextricably linked to social and economic justice in Indian society. In this volume, we push back against climate policy discussions that deprioritize questions of inequalities and injustice, as

if they can be addressed post facto. Some policymakers and policy experts assume that the agenda of climate justice has potentially negative consequences for India's international negotiating positions (Swarnakar 2019). However, such nationalism rings hollow. It is evident that no nation can thrive, internationally or locally, without ensuring the well-being of all of its people, environment, and ecology.

Analysing the policies and politics of climate action is the necessary first step to preventing vested interests from derailing meaningful progress in climate action and climate justice. Yet better data or improved analyses of how to 'balance' the considerations of climate action with those of climate justice are unlikely to be sufficient to bring about such a change. Decades of social science evidence suggests that meaningful institutional, political, and economic reforms that serve the interests of marginalized groups like Adivasis, Dalits, and women cannot be accomplished without formidable social and political mobilization (Kashwan 2017). With this in mind, we articulate a politically conscious approach to climate justice that draws on social scientific theories suited to an analysis of the socioeconomic and political realities of India. We take the histories of colonialism and the realities of neo-imperial capitalist capture seriously; we also avoid post-modernist abstractions that fail to address the role of specific actors and agencies in producing climate vulnerabilities at the global, national, and sub-national levels. Moreover, since the beneficiaries of the status quo pursue their agendas by taking over political and policy processes, we need a forceful engagement with these processes to reclaim power from extant regimes.

Through the chapters in this volume, we make five key contributions to the ongoing debates and nascent scholarship on climate justice in India. One, we advance debates on climate justice beyond the long-standing stalemate between questions of international climate justice and the grave domestic inequalities that climate change is likely to greatly exacerbate. For instance, we examine the contents of national- and state-level climate action plans, analyse the evolution of urban climate governance and investigate the relationship between economic inequality and state-level carbon emissions. Two, we bridge the ever-present gap between critical social science scholarship and largely technocratic, apolitical policy-oriented writings. We employ historically informed, empirically grounded, and conceptually rich social science analyses to inform policy and programmatic debates about climate justice in India. For example, in two chapters, we apply the concept of intersectionality to investigate how gender- and caste-based inequalities together influence access to drinking water and the outcomes of agroecological farming.

Three, we seek a carefully curated balance between conceptual richness and the sectoral and contextual specificity of the varied manifestations of climate injustice

in both rural and urban India. This includes discussions on inequalities in carbon emissions, energy justice, natural resource extraction, gender- and caste-based determinants of access to clean drinking water and agroecological farming, urban climate justice, climate movements, and analyses of national and state climate action plans using a climate justice lens. Four, our contributions are grounded in a deep understanding of the Indian context, but each chapter also speaks more broadly to themes prominent in debates on climate justice in other countries of the Global South. Five, the contributions to *Climate Justice in India* reflect a philosophy of theoretical, methodological, and epistemological pluralism.

In the next section, I offer information essential to understanding the historical and more recent causes of the climate crisis. The third section contains a broad framework for climate justice, which formed the basis of my editorial engagement with the volume's contributors. In this framework, I complement the key constituent elements of justice, as argued by justice theorists, with a focus on political and policy processes needed to bring about transformative change. Analyses of policies and policy processes include thinking through the workings of intersectional inequalities given India's social, economic, and political contexts. In the final section, I offer a broad overview of the major ongoing debates on climate justice and, accordingly, situate individual contributions to this volume.

Background: Colonial and post-colonial sources of climate vulnerability

The most common conceptualizations of climate justice speak of an uneven distribution of the costs and burdens of the ongoing climate crisis along axes of nationality, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, caste, and class, among others. These are the distributional aspects of climate justice. Other important dimensions of justice include procedural, recognitional, and reparational work. A systematic analysis of the historical, political, and economic contexts of the genesis and development of the ongoing climate crisis is indispensable to a nuanced understanding of the contemporary manifestations of injustice and the pursuit of climate justice.

Colonization, imperialism, and capitalism

Colonialism is the domination and subjugation of a people by another, most commonly the settler and non-settler European colonization of the Americas, Australia, and parts of Africa and Asia (Kohn and Reddy 2017). Colonial rule led to massive extractions of natural resources and the rampant exploitation of people

in the colonies to serve imperial expansion. The mobilization of the unpaid labour of colonized and enslaved people for the production of ‘cheap nature’ were central to ‘the endless accumulation of capital’ (Moore 2016, 79). Economist Utsa Patnaik estimates that between 1765 and 1938, the East India Company and the British Raj siphoned off at least £9.2 trillion (\$44.6 trillion) worth of unaccounted wealth (Sreevatsan 2018). Patnaik also shows that the combined drain from Asia and the West Indies constituted about 6 per cent of Britain’s gross domestic product (GDP) from 1780 to 1820, a crucial period in its industrial transition.

The processes of colonialism and capitalism shaped the political-economic system that emerged in the postcolonial era. This included the Bretton Woods Institutions, that is, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund founded in 1944. Gross inequalities in international economic, trade, and financial systems enable the continued exploitation of resources and people on the periphery and fuel patterns of wasteful and profligate consumption in the Global North. These patterns of resource use drive the exploitation of the global atmospheric commons, which act as sinks for GHGs from industrially advanced countries (Bassey 2012). However, the legacies of colonization extend far beyond material exploitation. Colonialism deepened the feudal tendencies inherent in Indian society and weaved caste hierarchies into political and institutional structures. Such institutionalization of social and political hierarchies initiated processes of internal colonialism, in which large sections of populations within formerly colonized states were colonized by their own ruling elite, often acting in the name of ‘development’ (Calvert 2001, 51). More broadly, the present-day social, cultural, psychological, political, economic, and institutional effects of colonialism are equally important (O’Dowd and Heckenberg 2020).

Let me cite three examples to illustrate the contemporary effects of colonialism and the postcolonial politics of resource control. One, policies related to the management of natural resources that rely on forest–farm distinctions draw on caste–tribe differentiations that were present in precolonial India but solidified significantly under colonial rule. These distinctions supported resource extraction regimes that were crucial to the colonial project and continue to shape contemporary models of forest governance, regimes of forest rights, and the extraction of valuable minerals, which fuels domestic and global capitalism (Kashwan 2017). Two, the development of the ecologically fragile northeast India as the country’s hydropower hub is a direct result of New Delhi’s political dominance, long-standing patterns of uneven regional development, and a reliance on top-down models of development and governance in ‘a racialized frontier region’ (Gergan 2020, 1–2). Three, most Indian cities were designed with the dual goals of facilitating assorted trade and commerce and protecting the health and wealth of a small population of colonial elite, while

pushing the majority of urban populations to the margins. For example, colonial town planners, financiers, and property developers collectively secured Bombay as a space for commerce by categorizing different types of neighbourhoods as legitimate or illegitimate (Chhabria 2019). This helped ‘delimit the city as a distinct object and progressively exclude laborers and migrants, who were forced into the so-called “slums”’ (Chhabria 2019). The colonial-era patterns of class-driven differentiation are also evident in present-day Mumbai (Farooqui 1996; Bhide 2015).

These examples are meant to illustrate specific outcomes that are rooted in and reinforce well-entrenched social, economic, and political inequalities. The patterns of pervasive disparities common to settler colonial societies of the Americas are also present in India, such as in the discriminatory and subjugated incorporation of the states and peoples of northeastern India (Noni and Sanatomba 2015). Additionally, internal colonization also manifests via caste- and tribe-based inequalities in every sphere of the economy, society, and politics (Desai and Dubey 2011). Routine and generalized policies and programmes cannot address such deep-seated inequalities, which requires deeper engagement.

Caste-, tribe-, and ethnicity-based discrimination

Adivasi communities are distributed across regions rich in forests and other natural resources; this has made them targets of land grabs, resource grabs, and green grabs, that is, taking control of a territory in the name of environmental conservation (Kashwan, Kukreti, and Ranjan 2021). Similarly, Dalits and Muslims have been subjected to political and economic control by beneficiaries of the status quo, primarily people from the higher castes (Dey 2019). The pervasive nature of such inequalities is evident in the fact that Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims are under-represented at the highest levels in nearly every sector of society, including the press, cinema, science, higher education, and political leadership. Some scholars argue that the emphasis in social science research on ‘the binary of colonialism versus nationalism’ is why Dalits and their questions have been missing from academic knowledge production in India (Rawat and Satyanarayana 2016, 9). The existence of internal colonialism and these deeply entrenched inequalities has grave implications for environmental and climate vulnerabilities.

Take, for example, the widely discussed topic of air pollution. It is well known that exposure to air pollution depends on class position – the poor are exposed to the worst forms of pollution for the longest duration in a 24-hour cycle (Wu et al. 2020). Yet ‘class’ is only one of the many dimensions of inequality and discrimination that is relevant to the production of vulnerabilities. Gender is another important