

CLIMATE CODE RED: INDIA MUST GO VOCAL & LOCAL

THE latest climate change report defined by the United Nations as 'code red for humanity', lines up every imaginable catastrophe. For Indians, beyond the colour coding, it is not exactly 'breaking news'. Indeed, India has been a witness and victim of the accelerated and aggravating consequences of climate change for decades.

Every threat highlighted is recorded in India's evolving contemporary history. The retreat of glaciers in the Himalayas has been known since 2005. The fall in availability, access, and sinking levels of ground water in hinterland has been recorded for over three decades as chronicled in my book 'The Gated Republic'. The increase in the number of tropical cyclones is a lived experience — across the east coast and, now, the west coast too.

The melding of human and natural causes leading to the submergence of coastal areas is not unknown. As early as in the 1990s, this columnist had reported on the submergence of villages near Mavinkurve in North Karnataka. A July 2018 study by the Ministry of Earth Sciences reveals large-scale erosion across the 7,500 km of India's coastline.



THE THIRD EYE

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Extreme weather events, high rainfall and floods are now expected annual events. The report says it will get worse as the Indian Ocean as also the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal warmed faster than global average. Rising sea levels threaten the existence of cities such as Kochi, Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata which house over 30 million — a spectre highlighted in studies by Susmita Dasgupta at the World Bank over a decade back.

Soon after its release, the Minister for Environment and Climate Change reminded developed nations of their obligations under the Paris Agreement on "delivery of promised climate finance and technologies at low cost keeping in perspective per capita emissions" and level of development for sustainability.

India has argued that its per capita carbon emission is among the lowest while the developed world has harped on rising emissions. The drone of data and distractive discourse will continue. India's response to the global moves depends on the many variables and exigencies which define geopolitics. As developed economies such as the US and EU re-design their economy, global funds are installing a new filter called ESG to dictate the flow of trillions of dollars of investments.

The question is what India can do at home to mitigate the visible and possible consequences of climate change. As India turns 75, it is an opportune moment to reflect and ensure sustenance of life and livelihoods. India must go vocal on local solutions and the template of governance to deal with the challenges across sectors. Here are five ideas to start with.

Identify the vulnerable: It is critical to identify the vulnerable using technology to map geographical and economic terrain — habitations and sectors which will be most affected. India's policy on crisis mitigation and disaster management revolves around evacuation and compensation. It needs to evolve towards a migration plan graded by risk to shift folks out of danger zones and enable re-skilling of livelihoods facing uncertainty — and also think of a Plan B for 3.5 million remitting dollars from petro economies.

Redraw crop map: Water is key for India to feed its billion-plus populace. Right now what is grown where and how is defined by partisan politics and distortionary input and output policies. Farmers in Punjab and Haryana are mining ground water to grow paddy, and sugarcane is grown in rain shadow zones. It is time for the idea of 'per drop more crop' to be translated on the ground. The RBI's priority sector lending policy of 2020 and the facility of e-RUPI can enable promotion of drip irrigation and solar farms. Just as with new farm laws, states must demonstrate success through model farms like C Subramaniam did for the Green Revolution.

Revive the '100 new Smart Cities' idea: India's urbanisation is stranded between aspiration and apathy. The existence of over 3,500 census towns caught between rural and urban definitions affords the opportunity to set up new cities. Using satellite imagery, study of topography, and modern town planning, these towns/cities could be set up as models of self-sustained eco-systems for living and livelihood. All the government needs to do is earmark infra and invite the private sector to build.

Retail Solar Revolution: India's energy narrative is stuck in the rut of megawatt ambitions instead of resting on kwhr aspirations. Weaning the urban populace off the dependence on the grid to power homes for curbing emission requires a simple easy to adopt policy framework backed by income-based incentives. Yes, there is a rooftop solar programme but getting one on apartment blocks or backyards requires the skills of a rocket scientist-turned-lawyer.

Global Grand Challenge: India is emerging as an epicentre for start-ups and unicorns. Why not set up a grand global challenge for climate change mitigation business ideas — be it mobility or reskilling — which can expand on the size of the domestic economy with necessary tax sweeteners.

The upside of greening the political economy is clear — jobs, income and sustainable growth. The 75th year of Independence beckons the political class to live up to the aspirations of the people.