

# India: Climate change in the global south drives people to suicide

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**Louis Mendee explains the real human costs of climate change for the global south.**

*'...it is clear that such a change [in climate] would have vastly different impacts in various regions of the world. There would be winners, and there would be losers. A climate change could be the cause of a major redistribution of wealth, and from the point of view of mankind, quite an arbitrary one' - R White.*

Seventeen skulls and seventeen femur bones were taken to the capital. The farmers who brought them there had tried everything: from running naked through the streets to drinking their own urine, but their demands were never met. This time, though, they would force the government to confront the horrors of climate change face-on. They wore them. Necklaces of bone, the remains of men—friends—who had been driven to suicide by one the worst drought in 140 years. These were the eerie protests [1] from the farmers of Tamil Nadu, a region struck by a drought deemed 'mostly man-made' [2]. According to *The Hindu*, the region 'could be water self-sufficient if its resources are managed properly.' But the main culprit behind this disaster was one thing: climate change.

Many farmers in the Tamil Nadu region fell into debt as they could not produce sufficient crop yields to pay back the money they borrowed for basics and seed crops. Their fellow farmers demanded concessions on their behalf: a waving of loans and an adequate drought package. One asked, 'What are we to do? We can't live like this...[the chief minister of Tamil Nadu and others] have not delivered on any of their promises. Maybe our deaths will move these people into action,'. Another simply stated: 'We have no water left in our area. How are we to grow crops, if we don't have water'. And of course, there's no answer to this. No water; no crops; no life. Humans have never, and will never, be able to survive without this necessity - and yet the droughts that plague much of the developing world have not provided an incentive for the West, or India, to radically scale back emissions. The farmers never gained anything from their 100-day protest, but they highlighted a sombre truth: when the climate comes crashing down, the first victims will be poor and brown; and in the past 3 decades, it is estimated that almost 60,000 Indian farmers have killed themselves in climate-change-related circumstances.

It seems a grotesque unfairness that those who had little to do with the impending catastrophe will be the very people who will *initially* pay the largest cost. In fact, a tiny 10% of the world's population are responsible for 50% of emissions, while the poorest 50% are responsible for only 10%. The West in a lot of ways now looks a lot like a victor of climate change - we have gotten off free of charge, right? Complete industrialisation paid for by the suffering and sacrifice of deprived nations to the east - what's new? Well, that might be the case now, but while the West counts its blessings and continues to pump carbon into the atmosphere, countries like India are well into the first-wave of climate change, creating a blueprint of what will, in good time, reach American and European shores.

*'The vital conditions [to modify the climate] are to prevent world conflict and establish a lasting peace, since only through the peaceful coexistence of countries with different social systems are close co-operation and concerted action possible; to stop the arms race and promote disarmament, for only by such action will it be possible to afford the great material resources required by such concerted activities. It is clear that only under such conditions can we hope to solve the global problems of modern civilization' – R. White.*

Few places on earth have paid the price for industrialisation like India. And like other developing countries, the problem of climate change is twofold: an unfortunate geographical positioning makes it susceptible to volatile weather and under-developed infrastructure makes prevention, defence and recovery, very difficult things to facilitate. In addition to this, the income of over 600 million Indians is dependent on farming, and the main form of energy generation – thermal and hydroelectric plants—relies completely on a crucial ingredient: water. And this is a big problem; rainfall has decreased by 20% across India which has hampered energy production to the extent that in 2016, the country lost 14 TWh of electricity generation, enough to power all of Sri Lanka's energy requirements for a year. But as well as suffering water shortages, India's monsoon season provides an opposing extreme, and as of August this year, 32 million people in India have been affected by floods, a staggering statistic which is only set to increase.

And with water scarcity becoming more of an issue across Asia, a worrying tension has started to emerge; the idea of a 'climate war' may seem far-fetched and dystopic, yet the geopolitics that are unravelling across much of southern-central Asia make it inevitable. Besides, scientists have found that, already, 1 in 4 conflict outbreaks in ethnically fractionalised countries coincide with climatic casualties; the battle for resources has already begun.

And when it comes to resources, there are few more valuable than the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna river basin, which covers 174.5 million Hectares and is home to about 10% of the world's population. As the Himalayan glaciers continue to retreat and water scarcity worsens, the longevity of the river systems in the area is now uncertain and so competition between neighbouring countries has become more, well, desperate.

China, for example, is in the process of constructing multiple dams in the region, which could see it controlling water for approximately 40% of the world's population. And the science shows why: by 2050 the rivers sourced from the Himalayas could lose 10-20% of their flow<sup>13</sup>, and nobody wants to be left without. The Indian geopolitical analyst Brahma Challeaney says the following about the situation: 'China-India disputes have shifted from land to water. Water is the new divide and is going centre stage in politics. Only China has the capacity to build these mega-dams and the power to crush resistance. This is effectively war without a shot being fired.' It's worth asking ourselves the question – how long do bullet-less wars remain that way? If war is starting to creep already, during the first phase of adverse climate change, then what hope is there for peace in 2100? In 2050? When resources will be even thinner and the stakes even higher; how confident can we be that diplomats and treaties will ensure harmony in a planet that is imploding? What is certain, is that the culture of the West, specifically, must change drastically if worst-case scenarios are to be avoided. And this starts with an analysis of how industrialisation, in concert with an unnatural economic model, has warped our relationship with the natural world and blinding us from the very real repercussions of unlimited consumption.

**Louis Mendee**

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\* Redpepper. November 17, 2017:

<http://www.redpepper.org.uk/climate-change-in-the-global-south-drives-people-to-suicide/>

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.oneindia.com/videos/tamil-nadu-farmers-protest-with-garlands-of-human-bones-and-skull-watch-video-228740.html>

[2] ESSF (article 42494), [Disasters: 'Drought in Tamil Nadu mostly man-made'](#).