

# [***Opinion: The Indian election issue that will impact the world (and no one is talking about)***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BV7-T361-DY7V-G06S-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

New Delhi (CNN) &#8212; It's hard to truly comprehend how difficult and relentless a problem climate change is for a country as large as India. One way would be to rig a drone with a very large battery pack and fly it from one end to the other.

Start in the south in Bangalore, India's Silicon Valley, in the fall of 2022. Fly very, very slowly northwards until you reach the Himalayas just before the national elections that started this week.

You would witness a country in constant convulsion.

Soon after take off, you'd see the swish houses and gleaming towers of Bangalore's new tech and corporate elite submerged amid [*September 2022's monsoon rains*](https://www.newscientist.com/article/2337801-bangalore-floods-highlight-how-cities-must-adapt-to-climate-change/). Just a little further north and a few months on in March 2023, [*record breaking fires*](https://bangaloremirror.indiatimes.com/bangalore/others/karnataka-is-on-fire/articleshow/99000633.cms?) tear through Karnataka state's forests, the smoke obscuring vision for days.

Then, on to the heaving, humid metropolis of Mumbai at summer's onset in April 2023 to find over a dozen people dead, mostly women, due to [*heat exposure at a large public gathering*](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/four-days-after-the-kharghar-sunstroke-tragedy-14-dead-and-five-in-hospital/article66759622.ece). Next, entire stretches of Delhi under water from [*flooding in July*](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/10/india-floods-new-delhi-rain-record-deaths).

That same summer, hospitals in the sunburnt state of Uttar Pradesh, home to over 240 million people, fill with listless, [*heat-stroked workers*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/06/20/asia/india-heatwave-deaths-intl/index.html). Finally, the anticipated visual reprieve of the Himalayan snow caps that never comes - instead replaced by an [*almost snowless winter*](https://www.eco-business.com/news/scientists-say-worse-to-come-as-himalayan-snow-ceases/#:~:text=According%2520to%2520IMD%2520data%252C%2520December,it%2520was%2520%252D75%2520per%2520cent.) that continues into 2024.

The impacts of India's extreme weather are not neatly contained within the country's borders. This is a global worry. When India [*introduces wheat export bans due to a heat wave*](https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/india-prohibits-wheat-exports-with-immediate-effect-2022-05-14/#:~:text=India%2520bans%2520wheat%2520exports%2520as%2520heat%2520wave%2520hurts%2520crop%252C%2520domestic%2520prices%2520soar,-By%2520Rajendra%2520Jadhav&text=MUMBAI%252C%2520May%252014%2520(Reuters),prices%2520hit%2520a%2520record%2520high.) or slows its vaunted IT exports because [*Bangalore is underwater*](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/06/world/asia/india-bangalore-floods.html), the lives of seemingly unconnected millions across the world are affected.

India is the world's [*third-largest emitter of greenhouse gases*](https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-profile-india/), after China and the US. It is also the world's [*fastest-growing major economy.*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/29/economy/india-gdp-growth-economy/index.html#:~:text=India%20GDP%3A%20The%20world's%20fastest,to%20its%20billing%20%7C%20CNN%20Business)

How India handles climate change, then, is everyone's concern. But while climate is mentioned in the election manifestos of the two main parties - the ruling [*Bharatiya Janata Party*](https://www.bjp.org/manifesto2019) (BJP) and [*the Congress*](https://manifesto.inc.in/assets/Congress-Manifesto-English-2024-Dyoxp_4E.pdf) - it will, perhaps surprisingly, not feature as a major issue in [*India's six-week-long national election*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/india/india-general-election-explainer-intl-hnk/index.html) that started this week. That's unlike in [*Australia*](https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/nov/28/climate-concern-the-main-reason-voters-swung-to-independents-at-federal-election-study-finds), the [*UK*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/09/20/uk/uk-sunak-climate-targets-delay-gbr-intl/index.html) and [*US*](https://www.npr.org/2023/11/10/1211186808/climate-issues-tracker-2024-election-candidates), among others, where elections can be significantly influenced by climate policy positions.

This is because climate ***politics*** looks different in the developing world; it will shape Indian elections in definitive but under-the-radar ways. Climate impacts do shape voter demands - though this tends to filter through as anxieties about livelihood and continued welfare support, rather than in a neatly defined area of ***politics*** labeled "climate."

You can see it in farmers asking for loan waivers and irrigation facilities after years of drought, in urban families demanding reduced electricity prices to offset cooling bills and in calls for more penetrating social welfare.

Here in the world's most-populous country, the average Indian does not emit very much at present. India's relatively low per-capita carbon emissions of 1.9 tons per person are [*less than half of the global average of 4.7 tons per person*](https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/co-emissions-per-capita?tab=chart) - and several times lower than developed economies.

This duality - low per-capita emissions and a rapidly growing economy - also shapes India's climate policy. The incumbent government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has both pushed the rapid deployment of renewables and domestic green manufacturing to create jobs, while continuing to rely on fossil fuels to power the economy. That's fairly similar to previous governments.

Leaf through the BJP and Congress' election manifestos and you will find several dozen pledges across sectors that could be filed under climate policy, with a roughly even split between the two parties (though their emphases predictably differ).

But these are listed across several chapters and rarely mention the word "climate" (though each has a separate chapter on sustainable development). Similarly, stump speeches throughout this campaign season have not featured climate change as a central issue.

Parties do however focus on climate-adjacent developmental issues - including expanding entitlements for the poorest (which could also help with weather shocks), creating jobs through green manufacturing and reconfiguring Indian agriculture.

But ***politics*** here seems to reflect the relative insignificance of climate change as a conceptual category in the Indian voter's mind. When [*tens of thousands of farmers marched through Maharashtra*](https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/maharashtra-where-farmers-marched-for-land-rights/article23281120.ece) in 2018 after several years of drought across parts of the state, they protested against rising agricultural debt, declining productivity, pests and inadequate irrigation. This was a climate protest in all but slogan.

Take for example a Muslim woman I spoke with a few years ago from the poorer reaches of North Bengal. Her small house in an informal settlement in Delhi was engulfed in a summer fire, and then a few years later her family home in Bengal was damaged in a monsoon flood.

She supports a large family of children and grandchildren as a house cleaner in Delhi's rich neighbourhoods. Despite the fingerprint of climate impacts on her past, her main demands in previous elections were for regular water (which she gets once in two weeks from a water truck), cheaper electricity (she told me she pays around three times the price her rich employers pay because of an illegal connection), and cheaper health care.

Elections turn, then, on meeting developmental exigency. The headwinds of climate change are absorbed by the electoral machine and emerge as end-of-tailpipe policies rather than grand climate strategy.

This pattern of climate ***politics*** is reinforced by seemingly low recognition in India of climate change as a problem. In a [*2022 survey*](https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications/climate-change-in-the-indian-mind-2022/toc/2/) of over 4,500 individuals across the country, over 50% of respondents said they knew little or nothing about climate change. Interestingly, recognition of climate change increased to over 80% in that survey when respondents were supplied with a short description of the phenomenon.

The hotch-potch of ad hoc policy fixes that emerges around climate issues will only get the country so far. It fails when put to the long-term test. Mobilizing large amounts of public finance to redesign cities to trap less heat and flood less, for example, requires a genuine public debate about a climate-ravaged future. Immediate investments are necessary to dull the blow tomorrow.

The climate crisis also deepens the case for global cooperation. India's climate-outages are going to be hard for trading partners and global markets to ignore as its economy grows. Domestic ***politics*** that focus on immediate developmental goals rather than long-term climate-proofing creates a gaping hole that global adaptation finance must fill.

This has a moral dimension, too. The climate impacts buffeting India today are largely because of the [*historical emissions of developed counterparts*](https://ourworldindata.org/contributed-most-global-co2).

Global resilience must be a priority in an interconnected world. The climate impacts buffeting the most populous nation on earth aren't just a domestic issue - they're an international one.

Tamanna Dalal, of the Sustainable Futures Collaborative, assisted the author with research.

Opinion by Aditya Valiathan Pillai

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