

Heat waves: Soon to become a norm

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While India alone cannot alter the global trajectory of climate change, it can make enormous difference by undertaking measures on the home front

Yet another report has warned that severe climate related extremities are in the offing in the near future — this time a [Nobel Prize](#)-winning panel of scientists has warned that the deadly heat waves that hit India and Pakistan in 2015 could become yearly events if global temperatures rise more than two degree Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a UN body, specifically named Kolkata and Karachi in the new report. The two cities can expect annual conditions equivalent to their 2015 heat waves if temperatures cross the two-degree mark. The special IPCC report is not the first to warn about these upcoming weather anomalies and definitely won't be the last. However, what nations across the world will do to evade these extremities, is of importance.

A current day average temperature rise of 1.5 degrees across the year as compared to pre-industrial times will mean extremely difficult days for the specified cities. Heat waves will become a norm and would bring a host of problems, such as drying up of groundwater, besides having irreversible impact on crop yield and creating severe power deficit. These adverse conditions will eventually have a telling impact on the economy, leading to the commerce and industry suffering which in turn will see per capita income get into a free fall. All these events are connected to the temperature rise, which is expected to occur between 2050. According to the scientists associated with the IPCC and the authors of the special report, the 2015 Paris Agreement was a step in the right direction in its resolve to limit global temperature rise to below two degrees. However, not all nations are realising just how tough it is going to be to actually implement the vision. It is estimated that extraordinary measures are needed and unprecedented all pervasive changes are required to bring about the two-degree temperature limit into reality. The countries also do not have much time,

especially those that are already at the threshold of peaking temperatures and rapidly changing climate conditions. India and Pakistan have already reached there.

In 2015, as the Paris Agreement was being deliberated, India and Pakistan experienced heat wave conditions that ended up killing over 3,600 people in just three months. The depth and gravity of this tragic event, though suffered by the victim nations, could not register on the Western world whose carbon footprint is also way too high at the moment. But these conditions may change very rapidly as research organisations are suggesting that apart from India and Pakistan, potentially deadly heat waves are likely to substantially increase across the world inflicting sudden and unprecedented damage on human lives.

The IPCC report, written by 91 authors from 40 countries, speaks of risks of failing climate conditions leading to increased coastal flooding and the salinisation of riverbeds, apart from increased heat waves. The South Asian region, where millions of vulnerable people live and work outdoors, is especially at risk for all of this. In response, the Indian State Governments have been working on action plans and raising awareness about best practices for heat waves. India's National Disaster Management Authority has set a zero-mortality goal for heat waves, which is seeing a good progress. This is crucial as between 1992 and 2016, heat waves caused nearly 26,000 deaths in India alone, and 2016 and 2017 went on to become the hottest recorded years in the country's history. Earlier this year, temperatures once again soared well above 40°C in States such as Rajasthan in the west and Andhra Pradesh in the south, threatening lives of millions. The Government must take cognizance of this and show its concern in the form of concrete steps in addition to passive measures to rein in runaway temperatures in the Indian region. A recent study by IIT Gandhinagar found that heat waves in India alone will increase 30-fold by 2100. Given this disturbing prediction, it is critical that the Government takes immediate steps to check decreasing green cover, excess concretisation, loss of wetlands and rising air pollution having a cumulative effect in causing the heat island effect across the country.

It may be difficult for India to not change the global trajectory of climate change and not alter the opinions of other nations pertaining to the consequences of rising temperatures and the associated urgency with which solution needs to be found. However, it can make an enormous difference by undertaking path-breaking measures on a large scale on the home front. Afforestation and urban tree plantation drives must be taken up on a target-based scale; States and cities must have quantifiable targets on how much green cover they have been able to increase in a year. This should be linked to the benefits, subsidies and grants that they usually get from the Centre. This target-driven mechanism must also be extended to wetlands and groundwater recharge. To ensure that the end of the year audit is transparent and accurate, independent environmentalists and

foreign subject matter experts must be included in the audit panel that assesses the annual performance of a state. Accountability always delivers performance and to save the environment and arrest rising temperatures, we all must be accountable. This alone can deliver us from the searing heat waves that are threatening to become a norm in future.

(The writer is an environmental journalist)