

March 16, 2021

Coming of Age of India's Youth Climate Movement

By: Nagraj Adve

A nascent but rapidly growing movement in India of young people — school and college students — concerned about climate change is now confronted with having to deal with the chilling effects of police charges on some of their fellow-activists.

The arrest in February of Disha Ravi, a 22-year-old member of the climate change organisation Fridays for Future (FFF) India, on charges including sedition and criminal conspiracy, and warrants issued against two members of Extinction Rebellion (XR) India, Nikita Jacob and Shantanu Muluk, have severely jolted innumerable climate activists, students, and other young people in this country. After spending five days in custody, Ravi was released on bail. As of early March, the three activists were being questioned daily by the police in Delhi.

Why these three — and possibly more — activists are being targeted is to some degree a matter of speculation. It could stem from the central government's intent to undermine the widespread legitimacy of the farmers' protests and to paint Disha, Shantanu, and Nikita as conspirators in [the violence](#) that took place on 26 January in Delhi. It could also be seen against the backdrop of a recent [campaign](#) by organisations including FFF India and XR, against the environmental degradation from the Adani group's present and planned projects.

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The state's [targeting](#) of climate and environmental organisations in recent years is deeply worrying, as is the worldview underlying it: that voicing environmental concerns or critiquing mainstream energy choices and development trajectories is detrimental to the nation. In this warped view, to oppose coal mining, to critique thermal projects, or to question environmental damage is to attack the nation-state. The latest targeting constitutes the gravest attack yet on the youth climate movement in this country. Its effects on the movement, one that is still in formation in India, have been chilling. And since the climate change movement has porous boundaries, it will also affect advocacy on other crucial environmental issues.

To appreciate these effects, we need to first understand the factors underlying the emergence of youth climate change groups.

The sudden rise of youth climate groups

One striking thing about the climate movement in this country is that for the longest time, there wasn't any.

For thirty years now, the terrain has been dominated by NGOs working on policy advocacy or building awareness, but it lacked collective organisational coherence, coordinated demands, or conceptualisation of long-term strategies. As a consequence, there were very few youth organisations engaging with the climate crisis. The [India Youth Climate Network \(IYCN\)](#), established in 2008, sought to build awareness about climate change among young people through 'climate *satsangs*', workshops, and training. An India chapter of 350.org, which focused on youth, was formed about a decade ago. (The organisation is named after its key demand to reduce carbon dioxide in the atmosphere from its present high levels (currently 412 parts per million) to a safer threshold of 350 ppm.)

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The startling emergence of youth climate organisations like FFF and XR in India took place in multiple contexts. One, climatic changes and their social impacts have been intensifying in recent years, as has the information about them. It is difficult to overestimate the spread of smartphones among young people of varying social backgrounds and locations in this dissemination. Smartphones enabled the rapid circulation of images, articles, and videos with information and visuals from India and around the world and transformed the depth of awareness of climate change. With television, climate change is now in one's front room, with regular reports and visuals of ever more frequent extreme events in recent years, such as the Kerala floods of August 2018, Fani and other cyclones, or the Chennai

floods of December 2015.

Alongside, there has been an expansion of climate change and other environmental issues in curricula and related activities in schools with students across social backgrounds. These include debates, plays, presentations, competitions, and nature trips. “The highlighting of issues like water scarcity, air pollution, and global warming in schools becomes a site where much larger issues have to willy-nilly get brought in,” an educationist told me in 2017. “The attitude of teachers and the administration acknowledges that questions like corporate-driven destruction of the environment are important ones.”

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Three, widespread concern about severe air pollution in many parts of India and the deep class divide in its impact catalysed conversations about the causes of pollution and the measures needed to address it. These measures are entwined with other issues that address climate change, such as a greater transition to solar and wind energy, the closure of older coal plants, curbing the use of private cars, and the need for more public transport.

Finally, scientific warnings about accelerating climate change have widely circulated among the youth on social media platforms. “12 Years to Save Earth,” was the key banner at a protest XR and FFF Delhi organised in March 2019 — this slogan was adapted from IPCC’s 2018 special report, *Global Warming of 1.5°C*. Such dire messages both resonate with and generate anxiety among the youth.

Integrating climate change, livelihoods, and the environment

By early 2019, groups of young people, adopting the names XR and FFF, sprang up in a number of towns across India. They were catalysed by XR’s street actions in the United Kingdom through 2018, Greta Thunberg’s school strikes in Sweden in the same year, and her association with the formation of FFF. By late 2020, FFF India had 60 local chapters across the country. Extinction Rebellion currently has 14 groups in India in cities or states. The age of their members varies from 14-15 years to the late 20s and older (which has a bearing on current responses). Partly due to the speed with which these youth groups arose, and perhaps to some degree inclination, they have been largely decentralised in their decision-making and organisational structure.

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For FFF India and XR, the starting point for activism is the climate crisis, through which prism they approach related issues. In contrast, other youth climate organisations formed around this time, such as the Chennai Climate Action Group, foregrounded local and regional environmental concerns and integrated climate change. Youth wings within broad collectives, notably in the South Asian People’s Action on Climate Crisis (SAPACC), fused these two approaches. They deepened the understanding of how issues raised by people’s movements or faced by marginalised communities such as Adivasis overlapped with ecological and climatic concerns, and sought to view these issues from the perspective of those affected.

In the process, these groups were underscoring the significance of climate justice with at least four elements: those most affected by the climate crisis are often the least responsible for causing it; measures to address the crisis should not hurt the marginalised; access to energy should be more equitable; and climate change policy-making needs to be more democratic and inclusive.



Protesters in Goa demand State Bank of India to reject loan for Adani's Carmichael mine in Nov 2020 | Adani Watch

Some common features of these organisations are worth noting. Though they engage with agrarian or varied livelihood issues, they are largely based in urban areas. They began in large metropolises but spread quite quickly to smaller cities and towns. As groups, they are autonomous and not affiliated to any political party. They have largely relied on social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to mobilise membership and support for their work; in contrast to traditional movements of workers, farmers, or women.

Because of the urgency of the climate crisis young people have had to both understand different facets of this massive, complex crisis as well as realise that there is no time to lose in addressing it.

Their work has tended to be of at least three kinds. One, building awareness among young people of the complexity of climate change by sharing articles and short videos in various languages and by organising discussions. Initially face-to-face, the shift to Zoom, Google Meet, and other platforms induced by the lockdown enabled youth from different towns to participate in the discussions together. This discursive part of their work has had to be on fourth gear because of the urgency of the climate crisis. Young people have had to both understand different facets of this massive, complex crisis; as well as realise that there is no time to lose in addressing it.

Two, these groups —FFF India and XR in particular — organised regular public actions. A number of climate ‘strikes’, approximately one every month, were organised in Delhi and other towns through 2019. In this, they followed the model practised by FFF in Europe. Thousands of school and college students were mobilised in different parts of India. Particularly noteworthy is the work in Kerala, where the extreme flooding in August 2018 had intensified concern about climate change among people at large. A thousand meetings and discussions were planned by Students for Climate Resilience and SAPACC in schools and colleges across the state in 2020.

Youth have for long been part of anti-displacement, pro-livelihood struggles [...] With the rise of youth climate groups, climate change was linked more explicitly with these and other campaigns.

Some of these actions —notably in March 2019, and online in September 2020 — were part of ‘global’ climate strikes organised by FFF and XR in several countries, underlining the planetary nature of the climate crisis and the need for an internationalist solution. FFR and XR were not the first to organise such strikes. 350.org, headed by Bill McKibben, had organised such global actions a few years previously. But the millions of young participants worldwide and the presence of Greta Thunberg, who was by now an internationally known figure, meant that they received unprecedented media attention.

Three, they have linked climate change more explicitly with anti-displacement, pro-livelihood struggles such as against Aramco’s oil refinery project in the Konkan or the nuclear plant at Jaitapur. The Chennai Climate Action Group organised a campaign around the [damage to wetlands and the pollution from industrial zones](#). FFF was part of a popular campaign to protect over 2,500 trees in the Aarey forest in Mumbai. Ahead of the Delhi state election last year, an FFF local chapter sought to pressurise political parties to “reduce Delhi’s carbon footprint, which will also reduce social injustice and be a step forward in solving issues like air pollution.” Chapters of FFF India, XR, and others were active in the Greens for Farmers campaign in support of the ongoing farmers’ struggle. This campaign included meetings on agroecology and sustainable farming and reflected concerns about what the farm laws would imply for intensified fossil fuel use in Indian agriculture.

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Youth organisations, including [Yugma](#), [Let India Breathe](#), and FFF India carried out a concerted campaign last year against the dilution of Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) provisions, including providing for exemptions in obtaining environmental clearances to several industries and projects, including offshore and onshore oil, gas, and shale exploration. These amendments potentially damage carbon sinks such as forests, and forest-dependent communities. Several lakh signatures were mobilised and sent to the MoEFCC. The Indian government, worried by this huge mobilisation by youth organisations [blocked the website](#) of Let India Breathe for 26 days and of FFF India for two weeks. [A notice](#) under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA) was sent to their service provider. (The government withdrew the notice after protests, claiming it was a clerical error, and the sites were restored.)

Targeting a movement in formation

The work of some – though not all – of the youth groups has been badly affected by the targeting of activists. For organisations such as FFF India and XR, this has been a serious jolt. The FFF India website says “[we don’t have any events scheduled as of now.](#)” With communication far more difficult and uncertain, the rapid expansion of such groups and the creation of new chapters in different towns will likely slow down and perhaps even cease for a while.

Ravi is quite well-known among youth climate activists and others, and her arrest has jolted many young people. Many have withdrawn from social media platforms and deleted these groups on their smartphones. Communication and discussions about environmental issues in general has broken down. They have become a lot quieter as collectives. Conversations are now in a subterranean and less visible fashion.

Other than concern for the three activists, there is also worry about who else may be on the government’s radar, which is understandable given the state’s age-old practice of unreasonably adding names to existing FIRs. On 3 March, a member of XR Goa, fearing arrest in this case, filed for, and was granted [ten days’ transit anticipatory bail](#).



At a protest by students against climate change on 15 March 2019 in New Delhi | Nagraj Adve

Others have more prosaic concerns but which are no less real: about how it may affect current studies and student fellowships, applications abroad for further studies, and current or future jobs. Pressure is also being applied from two institutions in Indian society: families and schools. Many young people are being told by their parents to not join protests and to withdraw from social media groups.

A visible aspect of some of the climate strikes in 2019 was that, in sharp contrast to such events in Europe, students here often received the permission of their school authorities for joining them. With the Disha Ravi case, support among school authorities for students joining protests and speaking up publicly has shrunk drastically. This pressure from parents and schools will continue for the foreseeable future, shrinking the space for collective engagement, particularly of those in their mid-to-late teens.

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The youth brought in fresh energy and up-to-date technological modes of communication to mobilise and implement strategies. The support among the youth, not just for the farmers' movement, but for a range of other issues and movements has been considerable. Getting over one million people to speak up against the EIA amendments could not have been done without such mobilisation by youth organisations. Additionally, because of their location, they voice a range of urban concerns, including urban tree cover, public transport, and air pollution. Work on these issues will be affected by the crackdown and pressures.

Their likely resurgence

It may take a while, but these youth climate groups will recover ground. With accelerating climatic events and their reporting, millions of young people deeply worry about what a worsening climate crisis means for their future. Owing to [Earth system processes](#) and global political economy compulsions, the impact of the climate crisis will only worsen and the conditions informing the concern will only intensify. Hence the youth will speak up. They will have little choice. The youth now have modes of interaction that even a repressive state cannot entirely suffocate.

|| The much-needed rapid and just energy transition needs a strong youth climate movement.

How quickly the movements bounce back depends on how the present legal cases goes and on the support from other social forces. So far, supportive statements include those by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (representing a number of farmers' organisations), by democratic rights organisations, and by [academics](#) including [Teachers Against the Climate Crisis](#). There have also been a few live protests. But there needs to be far greater outrage in civil society.

Many challenges remain for the climate movement in India, a movement still in formation. Pushing for a rapid shift away from fossil fuels, a key demand of these and other youth climate organisations, necessitates a more granular engagement with the key sectors that consume them – [transport](#), industry, electricity, energy, and buildings – than they have displayed thus far or many even realise. One also needs to foreground the centrality of jobs and livelihoods even while pushing for a faster energy transition.

The much-needed rapid and just energy transition needs a strong youth climate movement. We need to emphasise that these organisations have the political and constitutional right to support people's movements and oppose environmental deterioration. The concerns that they voice affect us all.