

March 27, 2024

We Need to Talk About Climatism

By: Anshu Ogra

A single-point focus on global temperatures as a proxy of human welfare in the face of climate change has structured the latter's science and politics. This is a problem.

*'Our Earth is on its way to becoming a fireball'
'It is necessary to be scared of killer heatwaves'
'Is our doom destined?'*

These are some recent headlines from Hindi news channels reporting on climate change. The tone of these headlines is visibly fear instilling.

These narratives feed into what Mike Hulme calls “climatism” in his recent book *Climate Change isn't Everything*. Climatism is rooted in climate reductionism, “a hegemony that lends disproportionate power in political and social discourse to model-based descriptions of putative future climates” (Hulme 2011). But it is more pervasive and insidious, and, as Hulme argues, undermines the more complex realities that shape the workings of a society.

|| The overtly optimistic faith in the power of science to inspire political action has, given climate change deniers and sceptics clear target: the science itself.

The focus on a single, globalised, view of the world generated by climate modellers, has led to mono-causal climatic explanations of past and future events, which outweigh many other factors that condition climate's influence on society. Ironically, the overtly optimistic faith in the power of science to inspire political action has, given climate change deniers and sceptics clear target: the science itself. Conspiracy theorists have questioned the reality of climate change on the back of a few errors in the IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report (IPCC 2007), which the organisation [openly admitted and corrected](#).

Hulme might sound like a climate change denier or delayer, but what he argues is for a contextually sensitive approach to incorporating the challenges of climate change in policy and decision-making processes. The single-point focus on global temperatures as a proxy of human welfare in the face of climate change has structured the latter's science and politics. What has been erased in the process are the effects of changing climate on regional and local phenomena, such as the Indian monsoon, which are better captured through everyday life experiences. These experiences are arguably much more important in mobilising societal action than global proxies.

|| What has been erased in the process are the effects of changing climate on regional and local phenomena.

An overt emphasis on the global narrative also marginalises “plural ways of knowing” and “alternative globalities.” Hulme explains this elsewhere with the example of M?ori, Inuit, Nepalese Buddhists, or First Nation cultures where natural and social are not separate categories. For them restoring climate cannot be conceived solely as a physical process ignoring social relations.

While the global vs. local divide in climate change discussions is not new, Hulme takes up the seemingly functional issue of scale discordance: the mismatch occurring when available scientific information does not reflect the unique context of the environmental conditions and/or the geographic scale for decision-making. He sees this as the significant cause which fuels climatism.

An alarmist approach that declares a climate emergency also opens climatism to illiberal and antidemocratic impulses. A case in point is the cases of local struggles for justice in India's solar energy boom. More specifically, two major solar parks faced significant protests from locals as the state governments designed these parks ignoring the [needs of local marginalised communities](#) such as the livestock herders and small farmers.

Climatism in India

India's Hindi television news media, which is known for outlandish and exaggerated headlines to get eyeballs, has largely escaped critical reflection on its coverage of climate change. Studies have focused on the print media – and primarily English-language national dailies. (Jogesh 2019, Mittal 2012).

A glimpse of climatism in the narrative was hinted at by Painter et al. (2020), who looked at the coverage of two extreme weather events in 2015: flooding in Chennai and a heatwave in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana:

some politicians and NGOs seem too hasty to draw connections between specific weather events and climate change prior to the publication of rigorous scientific evidence, and journalists seem too reluctant to question them. Such a practice can be described as 'science by assertion, not evidence.

Climatism might be a bigger problem in the policy landscape, where there is a trend to piggyback on ongoing governmental schemes and label them as adaptation strategies (Ogra 2018, 2020). The Weather Base Crop Insurance Scheme (WBCIS), which predates the climate change discourse is now pitched as an adaptation strategy in State Action Plans on Climate Change (SPACC). WBCIS indexes the weather, correlates the indexed weather with an everyday concern (crop output), and then statistically attributes a monetary value to this correlation (payoff).

|| There is a trend to piggyback on ongoing governmental schemes and label them as adaptation strategies.

However, the scheme is not designed to differentiate between precedented or unprecedented rainfall variation. The need to report climate change action internationally creates pressure on policy planners to forcibly relate any measures structured to address known weather concerns as climate change adaptation.

Arguably, this appropriation can be seen as an opportunistic interpretation of the National Action Plan on Climate Change's (NAPCC) co-benefits approach which promotes developmental objectives while also addressing climate change (Ogra 2020). Yet, the lack of methodological guidance about using this co-benefits approach in practice has led to policy interpretation and trade-offs that are largely driven by reporting urgency. (Dubash et al 2013). In the absence of studies of situated experiences of climate change a co-benefits approach becomes an exercise in responding to a global narrative of climate change and thus risks slipping down the climatism slope.

Rethinking the local

A way out of climatism is to go beyond the impersonal scientific framing of climate change debates. Hulme argues we need to focus on everyday lives that inform the multiplicity of values and goals: the diversity of political views and individual preferences, which in turn are shaped by a myriad of factors some of them being local knowledge, religious beliefs, political views, and individual aspirations.

|| The dominant narrative of climate change requires an observer to be placeless, or attain the positional perspective of God.

In the current framing of the climate change narrative, since the 'local' is not needed to imagine the 'global', the 'global' is rendered irrelevant in everyday life in fixed and defined localities. Conversely, attempts to bring in specific 'local knowledges' to fill in gaps in the broader scientific narrative only gives power to the dominant narrative to cherry-pick snippets which are deemed useful by the latter. Introducing localised narratives is not simply about capturing the 'local knowledge' to fill the gaps of the bigger narrative. The divide exists because the 'global' narrative is a view from nowhere.

A telling instance is the eight-minute-long video played at the opening of the COP 21 conference in Paris in 2015, which had astronauts emphasising the need to take urgent action against climate change. The fact that astronauts were considered the best spokespersons for emphasising the urgency of climate change reiterated that the dominant narrative of climate change requires an observer to be placeless, or attain the positional perspective of God.

Localised narratives help us escape the duality of global vs local. The focus is on the 'natural whole', which is open to imagination emerging from the various interconnections in the lived everyday life. It argues for 'a great chain of causes and effects' and that 'no single fact can be considered in isolation'. Unlike the detached 'global view', the focus is on interconnections.

A good example of this thinking would be Rachel Carson's work where she showcased the impacts of local actions on seemingly distant life forms (Carson 1962). Hulme talks about this approach as an antidote to the current expression of climate logic. He captures this in the following table which is adapted and extended from Aykut and Maertens (2021).

Four characteristics of a 'climate logic' in the making		
Characteristic	Expression	Antidotes
Scientistized	View from nowhere	Plural ways of knowing
Planetary perspective	Global gaze	Alternative globalities
Long-term temporality	Strategic planning	Participatory futuring
Solution-oriented	Carbon reductionism	Social transformations

Hulme repeatedly mentions that his argument against climatism might be misinterpreted. On the contrary, he views the narrative of societal collapse, which feeds climatism, as counterproductive. Climate science is not alarmist, but caution is needed when interpreting scientific knowledge claims for broader public information.

References:

- Aykut, S. C. and Maertens, L. (2022). 'The climatization of global politics: Introduction to the special issue'. In *The Climatization of Global Politics*. Springer International Publishing.
- Carson, R. (2009/1962). *Silent Spring*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Dubash, N. K., Raghunandan, D., Sant, G., & Sreenivas, A. (2013). 'Indian climate change policy: Exploring a co-benefits based approach.' *Economic and Political Weekly* 48, No. 22: pp. 47-61 (June 1).
- Howe, J. P. (2014). *Behind the curve: Science and the politics of global warming*. University of Washington Press.
- Hulme, M. (2011). 'Reducing the future to climate: a story of climate determinism and reductionism.' *Osiris*, 26, no 1: 245-266.
- Hulme, M. (2022). *Climate change: Key ideas in Geography*. Routledge: London and New York.
- Jogesh, A. (2019). 'Looking Out, Looking In: The Shifting Discourse on Climate Change in the Indian Print Media.' In *India in a Warming World*, edited by: Navroz K. Dubash. (Oxford University Press, 2019.)
- Mittal, R. (2012). 'Climate change coverage in Indian print media: A discourse analysis.' *The International Journal of Climate Change: Impacts and Responses*, 3, no 2: 219.
- Ogra, A. (2018). Weather based crop insurance scheme. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53(31), 95.
- Ogra, A. (2020). 'Rethinking Adaptation to Climate Change for the Policy Landscape of India.' In *Climate Change Governance in Asia*, edited by Chou, K-T., Hasegawa, K., Ku, D. & Kao, S-F: 207-231 (Routledge Taylor & Francis).
- Painter, J., Osaka, S., Ettinger, J., & Walton, P. (2020). 'Blaming climate change? How Indian mainstream media covered two extreme weather events in 2015.' *Global Environmental Change*, 63: 102119.