

# Climate Change – Why India needs to take leadership

**Malini Mehra**

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## About this Pamphlet

This pamphlet forms part of the **Climate Challenge India** initiative. Published on 15 August 2007 - the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of India’s Independence - the pamphlet is intended to provoke dialogue and a more forward-looking debate on the issues it raises in India.

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It is an exciting time to be an Indian. Sixty years since independence, the country has shot to global prominence and is making its economic presence felt. It is now the fourth largest in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP) and projected to be one of the three largest – along with China and the US – by 2032. Last year, India Inc. was the toast of Davos and its 'Global India' campaign took the Alpine resort by storm raising the rafters to Bollywood hits.

The country's rising economic confidence is beginning to rub off on its engagement on the global stage. Once regarded in diplomatic circles as the chief ideologue of the G-77 group of developing countries, India is taking a more self-regarding line and asserting its interests on a range of issues. A nuclear power, it has rebuffed attempts to sign the non-proliferation treaty, entering instead into an as yet unclear and controversial civil nuclear deal with the United States.

On trade issues, it has broken with the orthodox G-77 position on services, choosing instead to bat for its rapidly expanding services sector by supporting further liberalisation alongside the US and EU. On international economic governance, it is a leading voice for reform of the International Monetary Fund's voting system, since becoming a net and growing contributor to the Fund's coffers. On global affairs, it is angling for a seat on an expanded UN Security Council and enjoys favour with the majority of the P5 (permanent five) members.

Today India is shaking off its long-held image of maharajas, snake-charmers and holy men, in favour of a more modern, hi-tech and sophisticated look. But this is not the entire story, for modern India exists in both the space, as well as

the stone ages. For the 300 million-strong middle class that wants white goods and wireless, there is the 300 million-strong underclass that exists on less than a \$1 a day. The re-branding of India is incomplete. Beneath the puffed-up 'India boosterism' talk is the reality that confronts any visitor to the country – ramshackle infrastructure, hunger, illiteracy, poverty and despair.

But the one exists with the other, and this is the rub. India's journey to freedom and opportunity is incomplete. It is this schizophrenia which informs a key area of our international policy which critics charge remains in the dark ages – climate change.

### **Climate change: a generational challenge**

Despite an Indian, Dr Rajendra Pachauri, chairing the lead global body – the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC); in India, climate change is virtually a leadership-free zone. As we celebrate 60 years since our Independence, it is time for Indians to wake up to the issues and demand more of our political class - and more of ourselves.

For my generation, climate change will present the most compelling leadership challenge. It is a threat of an order we have never had to face before where basic environmental conditions that make our planet habitable - and which we take for granted - will hang in the balance. In place of climate stability, we are entering an era of instability when natural phenomena, such as monsoons and mountain-fed streams that make our country liveable and our economy productive, may no longer be relied upon.

The impacts of climate change will be felt not just in years, but over generations. Tackling it will require far-sighted leadership. Its greatest victims will be the poor, the marginalised and the disenfranchised.

Analysts tell us that future wars will be fought around resources such as water. In a country that has not only seen a tripling of its population since Independence, but also a shrinking of its natural resource base and a sharpening of its income divide, these are not idle concerns.

This paper argues for enlightened leadership from India's political class on climate change. If we are to avoid conflict and demagoguery in the future, we need to invest in a proactive, opportunity-led strategy to deal with climate change now.

### **Why should we be worried?**

The Earth is warmer now than it has been for the past 650,000 years. Scientists have correlated this warming to an increase in carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), and other greenhouse gases (GHG), released by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas since the beginning of the industrial age 150 years ago.

To put this in perspective, the pre-industrial concentration of CO<sub>2</sub> was 280 parts per million (ppm). In 2005, in Mauna Loa, Hawaii, one of the most pristine parts of the world, this had reached 381 parts per million. In 2006, measurements in Svalbard, in the high Arctic region, had recorded 390 ppm – a full 10 ppm above the global average. This last figure most likely reflects our own emerging carbon footprint, as emissions from Indian and Chinese power plants and cars head northwards.

Top scientists from the world's leading scientific academies are now united on the threat posed by climate change. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its February 2007 assessment report ratcheted up the alarm level: the climate is changing, human beings are responsible, and it is worse than we thought before.

In 2006, a seminal conference on climate science hosted by the UK in Exeter, concluded that we have a decade to start pulling back before 'tipping points' are reached. The concern is that if greenhouse gas emissions are not drastically reduced, we will breach critical ecosystem thresholds and face 'runaway climate change' as the entire global carbon system becomes unstable.

Key among these thresholds are the collapsing of Antarctica's great ice sheets and the melting of Siberia's vast permafrost releasing cataclysmic quantities of methane – a greenhouse gas 72 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub> over a shorter time period. Once this happens we will lose all control, with global temperatures potentially rising to 7°C and making large parts of the world utterly uninhabitable and unfit for human civilisation. This is the real risk of inaction.

No less a figure than NASA's top climate scientist James Hansen – the man who first made headlines with global warming in 1978 - has recently said: "We are on the precipice of climate system tipping points beyond which there is no redemption."

The inconvenient truth of climate change is that even if everyone were to stop emitting greenhouse gases tomorrow, we would still be 'locked into' at least 30 to 50 years of warming. This is why scientists and enlightened politicians are



urging global CO2 stabilisation targets not exceeding 450 ppm by mid-century.

The emissions we release today will still be in the atmosphere a hundred years from now. This is why the infrastructure we build now matters so much. By 2030 all major countries – including India - will need to reduce emissions to make a stable climate possible. This is not a developed country plot to thwart the ambitions of emerging economies such as India. It is the blunt reality of climate physics.

In this world of risk and uncertainty, the best approach is a precautionary one. The UK's Stern Review on the economics on climate change emphasized that action now is far better – and more cost effective - than action in the future. The report's author, Sir Nicholas Stern, calculates that the cost of climate change could be somewhere in the region of 5% to 20% of global GDP, if current trends continue, compared to the 1% of global GDP cost that is needed to tackle the problem.

### **Climate change impacts on India**

India has strong reason to be concerned. Climate change is projected to impact tropical countries more negatively than temperate ones. As a tropical country, our geography is our destiny. India's 7500 km coastline will be particularly hard-hit by storm surges and sea-level rise displacing millions, flooding low-lying areas, and damaging economic assets and infrastructure.

The encroaching salt water will poison fields and make coastal agriculture unviable, deepening the crisis that is already full-blown in India's farm sector. Just these impacts alone could severely test India's governance systems and its institutional

and social resilience. Unless dealt with effectively they could also quickly turn into political challenges.

For the 700 million people in rural India who are dependent on the most climate-sensitive sectors for their livelihoods - agriculture, forests and fisheries - the future brings declining crop yields, degraded lands, water shortages and ill health.

It also brings confusion and helplessness as people lose their traditional capacity to 'read' the weather and adjust accordingly. When the rains do not come and when the natural world does not behave as it should, societies which have survived by observing the world and adapting to it lose essential coping skills.

Climate change, at a most profound level, disempowers by rendering traditional knowledge useless. How this will affect identity and culture amongst India's tribal and indigenous communities is something we are yet to properly understand.

As for the more tangible impacts of climate change: floods, droughts, heat waves, cyclones, storm surges, displacement, disease and pestilence... these are not just projections for a distant future. The future is now.

Phenomena consistent with climate change projections for India can already be seen across the country. 2007 has brought 'wild weather' to South Asia with the worst floods in living memory and 20 million people displaced. Islands and villages in the Bay of Bengal have been lost to sea-level rise causing a drift of ecological refugees to cities such as Kolkata.

The Super Cyclone of 1999 – our equivalent of Central America's Hurricane Mitch – wreaked havoc on Orissa, knocking decades off its development and killing more than 30,000. Heat waves across the country have caused untold deaths and human distress. Diseases such as malaria and dengue have increased their geographical range to metropolises such as Mumbai. Rising temperatures and a retreating snow-line in Himachal have fatally affected its once-legendary apple industry and crippled local economies.

The rapid melting of the Himalayan glaciers - the source of our major river systems - is a cause for particular alarm. Latest IPCC estimates suggest that they may shrink to one-fifth of their volume within a few decades. Initially this may cause floods as the waters melt - and then a water crisis of unprecedented proportions as the rivers dry.

Seven of the world's major river basins originate in the Himalayan and Tibetan plateaus. They are the source of water for 40% of humanity. China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Burma all share these borders. If the rivers do run dry, a more serious cause of regional destabilization can scarcely be imagined. When it happens, it will make India's current water conflicts such as between Karnataka and Tamil Nadu over the Cauvery look like a walk in the park in comparison.

But this is not only a story of human impact. It is estimated that up to 50% of the country's flora and fauna could be threatened, with at least a quarter of our biodiversity lost. For a country with such a long and mythic self-identification with our plant and wildlife, the loss of our natural heritage will carry both socio-cultural as well as significant livelihood implications.

## What must a responsible nation do?

In the face of this, what has the response been of responsible nations? At Heiligendamm this year, the G-8 group of industrialised nations agreed to take “strong and early action to tackle climate change in order to stabilize greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”, with a majority agreeing to “at least a halving of global emissions by 2050.”

China, present at Heiligendamm with India as a member of the +5 Group of Countries - and soon to overtake the US as the largest global emitter of greenhouse gases - issued a constructive paper.

What about India? Well, it was business-as-usual it seemed. Although not challenging the IPCC’s scientific conclusions, the Indian government seems in no rush to change. Prodipto Ghosh, former Secretary, Ministry of Environment & Forests, and architect of the government’s climate strategy has said: “India is certainly not responsible for the mess. We are, in fact, victims of it. So why expect us to tighten our belts?”

This sums up the Indian government’s position on climate change for much of the past decade. As a poor developing nation, with per capita carbon emissions one twentieth that of the US and one tenth that of Europe, the immediate imperative is economic growth. India’s ‘Right to Development’ cannot be compromised; any emissions reductions must be compensated; and richer nations with greater historical responsibility for the problem must bear the brunt of the costs.

The latest twist added is the Government's emphasis on differentiating India's growth from China's allegedly far dirtier growth. Lest people mistake the two, Surya Sethi, India's Principal Energy Adviser, says: "China has grown faster than India but has also consumed over 11 times the fossil fuels ... since 2002". India on the other hand "has been delivering an 8% GDP growth with only 3.7% growth in its energy consumption." A clean bill of health then?

From a climate equity perspective, there is merit to India's position. We are all familiar with the argument. Why should a poor country be expected to bear the brunt of the pain when rich countries such as the US drag their heels?

But from a climate impact perspective, the government's position is short-sighted and dangerously complacent. The global climate does not distinguish between borders. The greenhouse gas emissions being pumped into the atmosphere do not come with country flags attached. What matters is the total volume of emissions entering our fragile atmosphere. At present, India is the 5<sup>th</sup> largest – and growing - emitter of GHGs - at a time when the window for remedial action is reducing.

Despite having had an Indian head of the IPCC, the debate in India has been inaudible. Confined to an inner-circle of officials, NGOs and academics, the focus has been on international climate change negotiations, not on the impacts and responsibilities of us as a nation.

Time has been lost in not internalizing the implications of climate change by national development planners. The approach document to India's 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan (2007- 2012) only mentions the words climate change twice in its 109 pages;

and the capital city's newly-adopted Delhi Master plan avoids the issue altogether.

But with every passing freak weather event, the arcane has now become the obvious. In a landmark issue this April, India's leading weekly, *India Today*, argued for collective responsibility and rebuked the government for "preferring to point fingers at countries like the US rather than focusing on what it should be doing."

India's climate position is a consequence of the schizophrenia of being both poor and rich at the same time. It speaks as the weak and insecure India, not the India of hope and confidence that seeks to stride the world stage. The emotional message it sends out is of victimization and fear. The lens through which it views other countries is of entitlement, not leadership.

India cannot have it both ways – we cannot be weak in some fora and strong in others. Which India gets to set our approach to the climate challenge – and the mindset, spirit and attitude it brings – matters.

It matters because sixty years after our Independence, we face a challenge as a global community unlike any other that has come before. It can only be met through collective responsibility and enlightened leadership.

Is there a need for change then?

I - along with a growing number of my fellow citizens - believe that there is and that it should be informed by two words – responsibility and opportunity.

## Why we need a new approach

India may not be the biggest global emitter, but it is time we were pro-active in addressing its impacts on our people; and responsible for the impacts of our emissions on other regions and future generations.

An enlightened approach would take ownership of the problem, recognizing that while we are not historical emitters, our emissions now – at a time when the implications of our actions are crystal clear – are not without consequence. They risk turning us from climate victim into climate perpetrator. It will be harder to take the moral high ground if our actions accelerate the evacuation of people from poorer, low-lying states or small island nations.

This is not to suggest that India is as much to blame as the US, the world's biggest historical emitter, or earlier industrialising nations. This is not about the politics of blame; it is about recognizing a shared dilemma and grasping the necessity for collective leadership.

At its core, climate change is about morality and inter-generational justice. India has a young population - 70% of our people are under 36. We cannot hold their future hostage to positions that look backwards, not forwards.

In a world where 1 out of every six people is Indian, India will be the global future. We must conserve, not damage that future. Adjusting with hope to the reality of a climate-constrained future, could be the best legacy we leave our children.

## **Reframing the issue – opportunity not fear**

To succeed, climate change must be re-framed not as an agenda of fear and entitlement, but of growth and opportunity. Addressing it is the best means for a country like India to secure peace, development and quality of life.

We need to grow to provide prosperity and dignity for our people. But in a carbon-constrained world that growth needs to be clean and green. Suggesting, as Government advisers currently do, that there is a choice between investing in social development or in environmental protection is a false choice. We need to do both.

But instead of following the example of earlier industrializing countries, we need to go for smart, low-carbon growth. We need to make sustainability the organizing principle of our economy and of our modernization agenda.

This need not be as hard as it seems. The money and the brains are there. Capital markets are awash with money for low-carbon technologies. India has more billionaires than Japan now, and an army of domestic venture capitalists eager to sniff out green markets. Green is the new gold and the \$30 billion carbon trading market is growing in India. The country is now one of the biggest sellers of Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) carbon credits worldwide. The Diaspora of 20 million overseas Indians is another under-tapped source of capital, innovation and political leverage.

Corporate India has heard the penny dropping: ITC's new building in Gurgaon is Platinum-rated by the US Green Building Council's LEED (Leadership in Environment and Energy Design). Bangalore's hybrid REVA car is enjoying export success around



the world. India's wind power giant, Suzlon, is now the 5<sup>th</sup> largest globally and poised to expand domestically. Infosys is involved in an effort to build a foundation for Indian companies to benefit from carbon emission management.

This is not only a story of big business responding. At the small and medium end of the market, India's entrepreneurs have long been active developers and enthusiasts for renewable energy and energy efficiency. The Ashden awards for sustainable energy – the only one of their type – have had more award-winners from India than any other country. Indeed, this year's 'Outstanding Achievement' winner was SELCO, the Bangalore-based private company that provides solar services to low-income households and institutions.

Gearing the economy around sustainability may also help India address two of its most pressing problems – high unemployment and jobless growth. The potential for win-win-win benefits all round in the green economy has long been recognized but remains unrealized. The climate challenge might just give it the impetus it needs.

Europe provides an example of the gains to be made in the building sector alone. The European Union's building stock currently accounts for 40% of its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. At present only 10% of the potential for emissions reductions from buildings is being realized through the EU's Energy Performance of Buildings Directive (EPBD). If properly implemented, however, it has been estimated that instruments such as the EPBD could realize significant CO<sub>2</sub> reductions and energy and cost savings. For the enlarged EU of 25 countries, experts suggest this could also result in 530,000 new jobs being created every year. There are lessons here for India.

All of the above, however, are piecemeal examples of leadership – they do not add up to a coherent national framework. Without a pro-active, opportunity-led national strategy on climate change they will remain isolated examples. The technology is there, the economics are persuasive, but can we get the politics right?

If we are indeed the last generation to enjoy a stable climate, as many scientists fear, we must get it right. Failure is not an option. The missing link is political leadership.

## A time for leadership

There are signs a change may be coming. On June 5<sup>th</sup>, World Environment Day, the Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, admitted “our future will be at peril” unless people change their lifestyles. He has recently spoken of the need for a national action plan and established agenda-setting committees.

Helping him deliver this is a task for us all - at all levels. But first we need to democratize the debate and move it from the arcane to the public.

CSM's national public engagement initiative, **Climate Challenge India**, launched earlier this year, is an attempt to help do this. The first effort of its type, it seeks to provide a national platform for discussion and agenda setting on climate change issues.

Given the vastness and diversity of the country, such efforts need to be multiplied many times over, link up with others, and take place in the country's vernacular languages and

reach into its remotest areas. In particular, women – who are often the ‘first movers’ on environmental issues – must be engaged and mobilized.

The message from our events across the country so far is that a national dialogue is long overdue. Participants from all walks of life have spoken of the need to ‘shout it (climate change) from the rooftops’ and prioritize public awareness-raising. They have called for role models and more visible leadership. Even small gestures and symbols can carry weight. Imagine what a signal it would send if the Prime Minister swapped his car for a low-emissions Reva?

Addressing climate change could unleash the greatest outpouring of ingenuity we have seen yet. It could create new skill-sets and new markets for India as a leader in climate adaptation and mitigation technologies.

The Dutch have done this before us. They transformed their national disadvantage – a country lying below sea-level and prone to disastrous flooding - into an asset, and now lead the world in flood defense technologies. There is no reason why a confident, pro-active India cannot be similarly versatile. We have the talent; we just need the ambition and the leadership.

The year 2007 marks a number of historic anniversaries for India: 60 years since our Independence, 150 years since the Indian Mutiny, and 250 years since the Battle of Plassey.

It also marks 10 years since the agreement of the United Nations’ Kyoto Protocol in 1997 –the first international agreement to set curbs on greenhouse gases. At the time of

Kyoto in 1997 we were largely a bystander. This time we are a player; a protagonist with a clear stake in the outcome of future climate talks.

It is worth repeating: the world cannot solve climate change without India. If we aspire to global leadership, there are few other issues to match. The world needs a fair and effective system of international governance to manage this problem. It is in our interest to engage fully and constructively in the process of establishing such a system.

At present, the politics are stuck. But change can come through leadership. We do not have to wait for others. A more far-sighted stance by India could well trigger a new more positive climate of political will globally. This is crucially needed if efforts to construct a “Global Deal” on climate change, beginning in Bali this December, are to succeed. India could hold the key to this. Generations to come may well see this as our defining moment of global emergence.

Sixty years ago, on the eve of India’s Independence, the country’s first Prime Minister, Jawahar Lal Nehru, gave the country words that crystallized a sense of national purpose. He added: ‘Those dreams are for India, but they are also for the world, for all the nations and peoples are too closely knit together today for anyone of them to imagine that it can live apart.’ That spirit of internationalism and inter-dependence needs to imbue the present time.

India, ‘the ancient, the eternal and the ever-new’ in Nehru’s words, has a long and proud heritage. Five thousand years of civilization must surely count for something at the moment of

our greatest challenge. If we wish to take our place at the table as a Great Power, we now need to act as one.

### **What would leadership look like?**

To paraphrase the business bestseller, 'Green to Gold,' smart companies use climate change to "innovate, create value, and build competitive advantage." Smart nations can afford to do no less.

While no-one expects India to produce a comprehensive national climate change strategy overnight, the process of leadership could begin with a few steps:

Firstly, the Prime Minister could use the preparatory process for the next Conference of Parties to the UN's Climate Change Convention (COP 13), to be held in December 2007 in Bali, to signal a new more positive approach to climate change. This would explicitly recognize the benefits of early and responsible action for front-line nations such as India.

This international confidence building measure could be accompanied by serious domestic efforts – coordinated by the Prime Minister's Office for needed authority - to construct a joined-up and forward-looking national policy platform on climate change that could help the country deliver on its sustainable development and poverty eradication objectives.

For coherence, any policy platform must involve the four key energy ministries: Ministry of Power, Ministry of Coal, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Ministry of Non-Conventional Energy Sources; as well as the departments responsible for India's three-stage nuclear programme. At present this is not the case and paints a poor picture of the seriousness of intent.

A new approach would recognize the need to positively address India's energy security dilemma and the co-benefits of so doing not only for climate security, but also for the national purse and the provision of basic energy services to the poor.

India currently imports about 78% of its annual crude oil requirements- a huge drain on national resources and a dependency projected to increase by 2012. An imaginative climate change strategy would address this dependence head on and chart a path towards a low-carbon economic future that had more of a chance of meeting the energy needs both of industry, as well as of India's masses.

For a country with an advanced nuclear programme and space exploration ambitions, leapfrogging from a high-carbon to a low-carbon energy economy is both timely and possible. It is not rocket science. But it does need to be prioritized.

There are many things we can do. For example, India needs to make major investments in infrastructure and transportation systems. We need to ensure that these are climate resilient, and cost and energy efficient over the long-term. Government leadership could facilitate this by creating national frameworks, setting guidelines, and incentivizing public and private investments.

Prioritising low-carbon technologies today will yield benefits tomorrow in the form of an industrial economy much more ready to compete in a carbon-constrained future. It will add rather than depreciate value for the country.

Studies have shown the diversity of measures that can be taken today. For example, "all new housing stock could be built to the highest possible standards of energy efficiency

and integrate micro-generation technologies such as solar and wind. Combining this with technologies such as solar hot water systems and energy efficient electrical goods may have the potential to greatly reduce future energy demands and associated carbon emissions.”

We have seen that this is already an area where Indian enterprise is alive and well. Government leadership to incentivize these sectors could reap dividends in climate security as well as employment generation and economic development terms.

But leadership need not only come from central Government. In India, state-level responsibilities are considerable and it may just be a question of time before – as in the US – we see a clamour for change at the sub-national level, and Mayors and municipal leaders begin to rise to the challenge themselves.

In conclusion, climate change is a generational challenge. Dealing with it could help provide a new sense of national purpose. But it demands that each one of us ask more of ourselves. The gains are there to be realized. What are we waiting for?

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## About the author

Malini Mehra is the founder and chief executive of CSM. In 2007, she was named as an 'Asia 21 Young Leader' by the Asia Society. She has been featured on CNN's Principal Voices, BBC World, TIME and FORTUNE magazines. Trained as a political scientist and gender specialist, Malini is a campaigner by instinct. She was an active participant at the landmark Kyoto Climate Conference in 1997 where she led the input of the global federation, Friends of the Earth International.

Malini has worked on sustainability and human rights issues in the voluntary sector, business, government and international organisations for more than 20 years. This includes serving as a member of former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan's High-Level Panel on UN-Civil Society Relations, and contributing to the UN's Human Development Reports on democracy and human rights.

From 2005-6, Malini worked in the UK government where she led on sustainable development partnerships and established a pioneering high-level initiative, the Sustainable Development Dialogues, with China, India, Brazil, South Africa and Mexico. Malini presently serves as an advisor to several private and public organisations including companies such as Unilever, BHP Billiton and Fortis.

She is a Fellow of the Royal Society for Arts, Commerce and Manufactures (RSA), the British-American Project, the Asia Society, and the Remarque Foundation. An Indian citizen, Malini is fluent in six global languages and divides her time between India and the UK.

Sixty years on from India's Independence, the country is a rising global star with ambitions to match. But global climate change could wreck that rosy future. As a tropical country with a long coastline and a large population, India could be amongst the worst affected. The time to act is now. This paper makes a powerful case for enlightened leadership from India's political class on climate change. Calling it the challenge of a generation, it argues that climate change must be re-framed not as an agenda of fear and entitlement, but of growth and opportunity. Addressing it now could be the best means for a country like India to secure peace, development and quality of life for its billion-plus people. If India truly aspires to greatness, there could be no other issue more timely or compelling.

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