

## APOCALYPSE NOW

Forget global warming and focus on local warnings

**K**ANPUR, FARIDABAD, VARANASI, GAYA, PATNA, Delhi, Lucknow, Agra, Muzaffarpur. Nine of the world's ten most polluted cities listed by the World Health Organization are in India. The Bharatiya Janata Party controls eight of them. Our politicians ought to rise above the next election and make sure we do not live in an oxygen-*mukt* Bharat.

On World Environment Day, Prime Minister Narendra Modi quoted Mahatma Gandhi as saying "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed." He cited the distribution of 40 million cooking-gas connections to rural women over the past two years, freeing them from the misery of poisonous smoke, and said India was on track to meeting its carbon-emission targets. He noted that India is a founding member of the International Solar Alliance.

"Our experience shows that development can be environment friendly. It need not come at the cost of our green assets," Modi said, adding later: "Environmental degradation hurts the poor and vulnerable the most."

What is the reality? Despite the inspirational talk, India is teetering on the edge. I read a couple of reports last month that were klaxon calls to action.

It is worth quoting the first few sentences of a NITI Aayog report on a Composite Water Management Index (CWMI): "India is suffering from the worst water crisis in its history and millions of lives and livelihoods are under threat. Currently, 600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress and about two lakh people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water. The crisis is only going to get worse. By 2030, the country's water demand is projected to be twice the available supply, implying severe water scarcity for hundreds of millions of people and an eventual ~6 per cent loss in the country's GDP."

NITI Aayog says the CWMI is designed to improve data-based decision-making on water, and encourage inter-state cooperation and collaboration. Currently 11 states are locked in seven major river-water disputes. The report

says it hopes the index, which will be on its portal, will encourage competitive federalism and "enable innovation in the water ecosystem."

It's good that we recognise the crisis. Consider for instance the rising numbers of people who are killed in fights over scarce water supply in our crowded cities. Or consider Shimla, which had to turn away tourists this summer when it ran out of water. Or the 21 cities including Delhi and Bengaluru that are projected to exhaust all groundwater sources over the next two years.

If that were not apocalyptic enough, a World Bank report, *South Asia's Hotspots*, predicts that changing rainfall patterns and rising temperatures could depress the living standards of half of India's population by 2050. Hotter weather could trigger lower agricultural yields and labour productivity, affect public health and cost India 2.8 per cent of GDP.

Even if India takes proactive steps in line with the Paris climate accord, the World Bank says, average temperatures will rise by between 1.0°C and 2°C. Living standards will fall by over nine per cent in Chhatisgarh and Madhya Pradesh, followed by Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra.

The next time we argue that 'compensatory plantation' will enhance our green cover and justify cutting thousands of trees in the name of development, let's ask ourselves: what living hell are we condemning our children to? **BW**

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