



IDEAS

# The World Has No Choice but to Care About India's Heat Wave

How the country meets an escalating demand for energy is a problem the whole world must reckon with.

By Bill Spindle



Prakash Singh / AFP / Getty

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CHANDIGARH, India—Soon after I arrived in the eastern megacity of Kolkata in February, temperatures began climbing. They always do when India's short winter turns into an early spring. But then they kept rising.

After the hottest March in 122 years of record keeping, the scorching temperatures continued through April, with the nationwide high averaging more than 95 degrees Fahrenheit. During my recent stop in New Delhi, the mercury topped 110 degrees for two consecutive days, overwhelming the air conditioner in my rental apartment. The maximum temperature last month in the capital, home to more than 30 million people across the metro area, averaged more than 104 degrees. Even higher temperatures have been reported elsewhere: 111 in other regions of India, and to the west, in parts of Pakistan, above 120.

I was fortunate to have any air-conditioning at all. Most of India's 1.4 billion people would consider themselves lucky to have a fan and the electricity to run one. A ride in a three-wheel *tuk-tuk* feels like having a blow-dryer directed straight at your face. The inside of a slum dweller's windowless room, often housing an entire family, can become a lethal hotbox. Health authorities have reported hundreds of deaths across the country from heatstroke, but the actual number is likely to be far higher.

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The only saving grace, as I write now from the northern state of Punjab, is that the unseasonable spring heat has come before the monsoon rains. Although that's led to drought conditions in some places, it has also kept humidity levels low enough for India to largely avoid a national spike in deaths from heatstroke. For the country's health and climate experts trying to plan for global warming, the "wet bulb" temperature is the danger they fear most. This deadly combination of heat and humidity, which prevents a human body from cooling itself by sweating, is a huge looming threat for South Asia's wet season, experts say. Although climate scientists are still puzzling out the precise details of global warming's role in India's current heat wave, the correlation is clear enough: Spells of blistering heat such as this are

becoming a regular feature of South Asia's weather, rather than a once-in-a-decade-or-more crisis.

The heat wave has been severe enough to make international headlines, but it is far from the only impact of climate change I've witnessed in the first half of my six-month journey through the country to research and report on climate change and the energy transition India is undertaking in an attempt to mitigate it. India is at the sharp end of this predicament. A recent report by Standard & Poor's concluded that South Asia's economies are the world's most vulnerable—10 times more exposed to global-warming threats over the coming decades, the consultants estimated, than the least vulnerable countries, mostly in Europe.

During a visit to the sprawling Sundarbans mangrove swamp, part of the world's largest tidal estuary, where several great rivers meet the Bay of Bengal, I saw for myself how rising sea levels and more frequent and intense cyclones are helping destroy what is not only a complex and sensitive ecosystem but also a major carbon sink. One island in the estuary, Ghoramara—pounded by four major cyclones from 2019 to 2021—has lost about half its landmass and more than half its population in recent decades. A tropical storm last year submerged the entire island under several feet of churning water. Thousands of residents were forced to take refuge in a school shelter. Though inches above the floodwaters, they escaped with their lives but lost practically everything else, including personal effects and the school's textbooks.

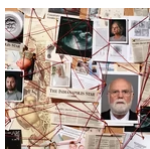
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Nearly a year on from the disaster, I met Ajiman Bibi, a 60-year-old mother of five who was born on the island. As we talked, she spread out grain to dry on a blanket in front of her makeshift shelter. “If the government didn’t give this to us, we would have nothing,” she told me.

Continuing my journey, mostly by train, to the tea-producing slopes of Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas, I saw the damage from last October’s shattering rainfall—a phenomenon associated with a warming climate. The autumn “rain bomb,” in which a month’s worth of precipitation fell in a single day, caused landslides that cut a path down the mountainside still visible from across the valley. Tea producers told me how irregular rains and higher temperatures, especially at night, have severely challenged the delicate crop in recent years, threatening the entire industry.

Here in Punjab, India’s breadbasket, wheat farmers who were looking forward to a bumper harvest in a year when prices have been boosted ahead of reduced yields from Ukraine have seen crop losses amid the searing heat. This is not just disappointing for them but, as *The Atlantic’s* Weekly Planet newsletter recently noted, deeply concerning for countries facing worldwide food shortages in coming months. The state’s power minister said electricity demand had jumped 40 percent, year on year, as people ran fans and AC units at home and industrial production picked up after COVID. Railways canceled dozens of passenger trains in order to rush coal shipments to power plants trying to avoid blackouts.

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Wherever I go, I expect to encounter more signs of climate change. In the northern Himalayas, rapidly rising winter temperatures have thrown snowfall patterns into

disarray and are causing glaciers to melt. Down south, cities such as Chennai are plagued by both drought and flooding, depending on the season.

In the face of these mounting challenges, Indians are scrambling to adapt. Cities have implemented “heat action plans,” halting some outdoor work and prompting special measures to distribute water. In Darjeeling, tea growers have turned to organic-farming techniques, partly to make their estates more resilient against the gyrating weather patterns.

“Everybody now is trying to work to mitigate the climate challenges,” Kaushik Das, an experienced manager for the Ambootia Group, told me as we drove through the Chongtong estate he oversees.

And in the Sundarbans, I met researchers who were studying how to restore the degraded mangrove habitats—as a crucial natural barrier against the rising sea level and tidal surges that accompany cyclones. Still, even if such strategies have further room to run, there are limits to adaptation. Solutions to climate change are also needed.

India has committed publicly to generating half of its energy from renewable resources by 2030 and aims to install 500 gigawatts of renewable capacity by then. That's a huge undertaking, building from a capacity of about 150 gigawatts today. India has added renewable energy at a faster clip than any other large country in the world, including an 11-fold increase in solar-generating capacity over the past five years, but it is playing a seemingly perpetual game of catch-up.

According to the International Energy Agency, as a developing nation, with large swaths of its population still living in poverty, India will account for more energy-consumption growth than any other country from now until 2040. To make that happen while scaling back on coal, the country will need to grow renewables much faster still to meet its pledge to reach “net-zero” emissions by 2070. This will require major foreign investment, which is becoming more active in India, but meeting the net-zero target is a daunting task.

On top of the heat wave, India's energy industry has been rattled by Russia's invasion of Ukraine. India imports more than 80 percent of its oil, so the cost of meeting demand is creating a yawning current account deficit. The prices of gas shipments from abroad—a vital input in manufacturing fertilizer—have similarly shot up. That, too, is hammering the federal budget as the government boosts subsidies to keep prices stable for struggling farmers.

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All of this casts a pall over pressing global climate negotiations. This fall, national delegates will assemble in Egypt for the 27th United Nations climate-change gathering known as the Conference of the Parties. Last year's COP26, held in Glasgow, Scotland, ended on a sour note when India, cheered on by China, forced a watering-down of the conference's ambitions to cut the use of coal (China and India are the world's top two users). The move came after India's and other developing countries' acute frustration over the abject failure, yet again, of the world's wealthier, industrialized nations to make good on a promise to deliver \$100 billion annually to help them deal with climate change.

Those tensions were already likely to resurface at COP27. This spring's heat wave in India is already ratcheting up the pressure. As Indian officials are quick to note, the country may be the world's third-largest greenhouse-gas emitter now, but it is a latecomer, and its share of the warming gases accumulated in the atmosphere is just 3.4 percent, compared with the U.S.'s 20 percent and fast-growing China's 11.4 percent. Although the developing world played little part in causing global warming, this is where the toll will be the worst.

A thundershower this week brought a welcome break in the weather here in Punjab, at least for now. But without new commitment from the developed world to bear more of the costs of climate change, India's spring heat wave will still be felt in the fall.

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Bill Spindle served as South Asia bureau chief for *The Wall Street Journal* and is a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow in India. He writes about climate change and related issues at [The Energy Adventure\(r\)](#).

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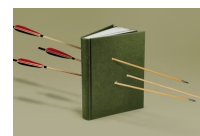
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