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VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES: THE HUMAN COST OF CLIMATE CRISIS

-by: Shubhransh Vir¹

India is one of the most socially and ethnically diverse regions of the world. At the same time, it is also one of the most vulnerable to climate change. When it comes to the people who inhabit the Indian subcontinent, we need to keep in mind that the **social stratification** of society often leads to a rejection of the under privileged. Various researches indicate that such deprived communities can be found to be living in unwelcoming conditions and are prone to the damages of climate change, which could be much more than their privileged counterparts in the world. This is where the core of the issue lies, it indicates an aspect of climate change which is often not a part of the dominating conversation. If such communities, which more than often lack a voice, are left unheard, they will eventually cease to exist in a framework which is supposed to ensure representation of all.

KNOWING THE VULNERABLE: THE HUMAN FACE OF CLIMATE CRISIS:

In order to understand the depravity faced by them, one must understand or at least know the communities which face these threats. The communities like small **sustenance farmers, forest dwelling tribes, slum dwellers and urban poor**, just to name a few bear a heavier brunt of climate change and policy inaction. For such communities, survival is a daily chore, any uncertainty created in their lives often derails them for a very long duration. With that in mind, the climate change which we see, comes with various uncertainties. The **small farmers** cannot be certain of the monsoon which has become more discrepant since climate change. The **forest dwelling tribes** are losing forest which signifies not only their home but also is a source of their culture. The **slum dwellers and the urban poor** are often living in conditions which mandates them to

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breath toxic fumes of nearby plants set up for various purposes, which in turn causes ailment that cannot be cured by their financial capabilities.

Such are the conditions of the vulnerable in India, but it needs to be understood that their problems are aggravated by the severely lacking policies or the ineffective implementations of the existing policies. Due to various other **social, economic and structural factors** this might extend to certain other communities too; For example, the **low-income groups** of our society often face the brunt of the climate crisis. Most of the society they live in is one step away from complete destitution and they survive on daily activities. If such a community faces a drastic change in the way they utilize their daily income, there will be no scope for them to save themselves. This is something we see in regard to rebuilding in case of **coastal fishermen** after the storms, since they cannot stay due to loss of livelihood or relocate due to the cost associated with it. For a similar reason we see the low-income communities living in some of the most polluted areas of the cities, unable to bear the cost of relocation, they are forced to live in the polluted environments which causes more health issues for them in the long run. This is why a strong policy framework is required, to save such communities from the perils of climate change.

DEALING WITH POLICY INACTION: LESSONS FROM ENVIRONMENTAL JURISPRUDENCE:

Indian environmental jurisprudence is mostly made out of judicial decisions on key issues and some legislative milestones. It is these instances which have given us instruments like: **Public Trust doctrine**,² Public Consultation processes associated with **Environmental Impact Assessment**,³ etc. It must be stated that sometimes when the custodian of resources breaks the trust, the outcomes could turn violent and a good example for the same could be the violence that took place following a long term of silence of the government over the woes of the people regarding **the Sterlite Copper Plant in Tamil Nadu**,⁴ This case could be a perfect case study of what not to do when it comes to public consultation. The meetings done with the people of the

² Read more at: Lavanyya Rajamani, *Doctrine of Public Trust: A Tool to Ensure Effective State Management of Natural Resources*, 38 J. **Indian L. Inst.** 72, 72-82 (1996), Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43951624>, (Last Accessed on: July 14, 2025).

³ Read more at: J. Treweek, *Ecology and Environmental Impact Assessment*, 33 J. **Applied Ecology** 191, 191-99 (1996), Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/2404742>, (Last Accessed on: July 14, 2025).

⁴ Read more at: "Closure of Sterlite Copper Unit in Tamil Nadu: Supreme Court to Consider Hearing Vedanta's Plea," **The Hindu** (Oct. 26, 2023), Available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/closure-of-sterlite-copper-unit-in-tamil-nadu-supreme-court-to-consider-hearing-vedantas-plea/article67697947.ece>, (Last Accessed on: July 14, 2025).

community which would be affected by the plant were done at a distance too far for them to travel, in a language not comprehensible to them and a bureaucratic web too difficult for them to unravel. The women and indigenous of the communities were not able to navigate the complex bureaucratic blunder caused here.

Another aspect of such cases can be seen from the **Niyamgiri Mining case**⁵ where the indigenous who hold the mountains as a symbol of their culture, tradition and even a deity were run over by the corporate giants looking for places to mine bauxite for “development.” This case can be seen to enforce the claims of the indigenous over the land to be superior to that of the corporates who followed the process to get the land for mining; thus, effectively reducing the human cost of climate change in this case. However, it needs to be understood that most of the stories, when it comes to a clash between the corporate giant backed by the government's ambition of development and the climate vulnerable, don't go the way of the people showing the lacking policy framework.

CONCLUSION: BALANCING SUSTAINABILITY WITH INCLUSIVITY:

While climate change does have the capacity to uproot the communities that are particularly vulnerable to its effects, the same can be mitigated by making correct policy decisions. While the issues seem grave and violent, they can be mitigated by an inclusive approach. Having people affected to be a part of the consultation process is the first step, listening and making adequate modifications in the planned framework could be the second step. It must be stated at this point that there would be no final step of the process since the effects could be both short and long term and depending on the trajectory the case goes, it could be in favors of the community to have effective surveillance mechanisms to check in with them from time to time. This is the way to balance sustainability with inclusivity and creating a win-win situation.

5 Orissa Mining Corp. Ltd. v. Ministry of Env't & Forests, (2013) 6 S.C.C. 476 (India).