**Climate Vision for South Asia**

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A vision is the planning and ability to imagine how an institution, country or region can develop in the future. The first and foremost requirement to formulate a vision is to carefully identify the prevailing environment and its allied issues. Climate Change is a global phenomenon which defies manmade boundaries and is anti-thesis to the state system. Its global outreach and similar effects on the countries, pave the way for transnational cooperation, and regional solutions built on common grounds. South Asia is most vulnerable to the effects of climate change and therefore requires a regional climate vision.

South Asia, with eight nations (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), constitutes about 25 percent of the world’s population. The academic discourse about the region revolves around the oldest civilizations, extremism and terrorism, Kashmir and border conflicts, nuclear weapons, lack of regional cooperation, low human development index, and cricket. However, climate change and environmental issues are less focused which are more disastrous than other issues.

Quantification of the South Asian region in the climate context is also very intriguing. Climate Risk Index (CRI), a combination of three elements: sensitivity, vulnerability, and adaptive capacity, is used to measure the effects of climate change. Sensitivity is geographically oriented, which cannot be changed, and states must live with it. Vulnerability occurs due to planning or lack of planning. Switzerland and Nepal are equally sensitive to the effects of climate change, but Nepal is more vulnerable as compared to Switzerland. The adaptive capacity is another challenge, usually, some states behave in a reactive and firefighting mode rather than being proactive and the same is the case with South Asia.

Due to these factors, the eight South Asian nations are among the top twenty on CRI. Moreover, eight out of the top ten polluted cities in the world are in South Asia. Northern South Asia comprises the biggest glaciated areas after Polar Regions, which are fast melting which leads to flash floods in various areas. Siachen, the highest conflict zone in the world, is also located in South Asia and it further exacerbates the effects of climate change. It is time to adopt a joint climate action which can convert Siachen from the ‘glacier of war’ to the ‘glacier of peace’ and a global case for solar geoengineering.

The bulk of the population from South Asia is youth who are suffering from ecological anxiety, and it is much more dangerous as they don’t even know that they are suffering. Coupled with this is the lack of climate literacy. In this part of the world, climate change is not a priority. Here people say that it is difficult to meet end of the month, so why worry about the end of the world? One may deny it but a substantial number of people in South Asia believe that climate action is an elitist talk and is not a popular topic among masses.

Climate being a cross-cutting subject needs a whole of the nation and region approach. It needs to be dealt with both with bottom-up and top-down approaches, implying state and societal actions.

At the state level, the developed and underdeveloped countries have varied preferences. In advanced countries, crafting a climate strategy is important for winning elections. This is evident from the change of Mr Trump to Mr Biden in the USA, Mr Bolsonaro to Mr Lula da Silva in Brazil, and Mr Moris Scott to Mr Anthony Albanese in Australia. However, it is the opposite in the underdeveloped countries of the Global South. In South Asia, Bangladesh had elections on 7 Jan 2024, Pakistan will have on 8 Feb 2024 and India in April 2024. Is the environment a consideration in the election manifesto and the top leadership? Surely not.

At the societal level, are the people of South Asia even aware of the fact that they are living in a danger zone? Are the living habits following the sustainable requirements? Do they follow the 5R (realise, reduce, reuse, recycle and rest in nature)? The answer is a big no. Their lifestyles are not sustainable in a region with a growing population and finite resources.

South Asia needs climate securitisation to create awareness at the state and societal levels. Presently, South Asian media give less than 3 percent coverage to the issues related to climate change which is seriously affecting all segments of society. There is a need to develop a collective threat perception of climate change, which can be politicised by making it a part of public debate. It can only happen when the existential threat arising out of climate change is framed as a security question. This will compel the decision-makers to plan and adopt emergency actions.

Countries have planned national projects to mitigate the effects of climate change, but these projects do not include a regional framework. There are success stories in the region, Pakistan’s Living Indus project, Bangladesh’s success in climate financing and Bhutan’s negative emissions are cases in point. However, the days of myopic view of isolationism and individual efforts are over, Covid-19 is a case in point. Therefore, there is a need to conceive a collective Living Indus, Living Ganges, Living Brahmaputra, combined Surviving K2 and Mount Everest projects. This joint action requires multilateralism, regional connectivity, and data-driven solutions with support from indigenous people.

South Asia needs to form a joint framework namely the ‘South Asian Environmental Charter’ to foster regional environmental cooperation. Environmental consideration needs to be incorporated into the constitutions and all the ministries must identify quantifiable and tangible objectives with specific timelines. Technology-enabled and data-driven solutions incorporating the indigenous people should be developed.

With the crisis, there come opportunities. So, it would be in the national interest of all countries to show that they not only want to live in peace with each other but also want to live in peace with nature. The leadership needs to come out of the conventional mindset and think big. This is vital for the future generations of South Asia.

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