

The view outside Vir Singh’s daughter’s window in south Delhi (Vir Singh photo)



by Bill Mitchell

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During a Holy Week darker than any in memory, blue skies across the globe are prompting debate about that other disaster awaiting us on the horizon: the climate crisis.

Reports are rolling in from some of the most polluted cities in the world, especially New Delhi and other cities in India, that residents are witnessing the freshest air they’ve experienced in years. Even if they’re forced to do so for the most part from inside, looking out.

Indian author Deep Halder put it like this on Twitter earlier this week:

As the byproduct of lockdowns prompted by a pandemic that has killed more than 100,000 people around the world, the cleaner air is not something to be celebrated under such circumstances.

But these dramatically different vistas do raise intriguing questions about where the climate movement goes from here. They include:

- In bailing out corporations crippled by the pandemic, to what extent should the government impose conditions – so-called “green stimulus" provisions -- aimed at easing the looming climate crisis?
- Now that we’ve been doing so to "flatten the curve" of coronavirus, how much might individuals be willing to alter our lifestyles to help head off the consequences of global warming?
- With clear evidence of the price we’re paying for responding too slowly to coronavirus, will climate deniers (and incrementalists) find less receptive audiences?

All critical questions. For this edition of the newsletter, though, I wanted to hear directly from people experiencing dramatically better air. So I reached out to friends and friends of friends in India.



(EarthBeat/Toni-Ann Ortiz)

Vir Singh is a journalist and researcher who has lived in the house his grandmother built in south Delhi since 1996. He sent me a photograph he took with his phone of the view outside his daughter’s window, the sky “a hue of blue that we usually see during the monsoon, when the rain takes care of most of the pollution.”

He added: "Many times you can’t see the sky at all – and if you can, it’s just a dull whitish-yellow haze."

He pointed out that "clean air is a luxury for the rich," noting that the millions of Indians living in poverty have been hit the hardest by the lockdown imposed by the government on March 25.

In an email exchange, he said getting the government to balance economic development with a clean environment will require "a more selfless society," adding: "The corona crisis just may get Indians to think in this direction and then act."

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The view from Sameera Kahn’s 17th floor apartment in Mumbai (Sameera Khan photo)

Seven hundred miles southwest of Delhi, writer Sameera Khan snapped a photo out the window of her 17th story apartment in central Mumbai.

Via WhatsApp, Sameera told me that a local oil refinery usually spoils her view with smog, often obscuring the tall buildings on the far reaches of the photo.

"Friends across the country are reporting clearer skies…sighting more birds even in the city," she said. "For now this does seem to be telling us that nature and the environment can clean up when we do not interfere with them."

She added: "I am not sure whether we will learn the lessons we need from this and will actually make the… necessary changes after the Covid-19 crisis is over."



A view of Perungudi Lake, which serves as a reservoir in South Chennai (provided photo)

Six hundred miles southeast of Mumbai, journalist Ananthakrishnan Gopalakrishnan sent me a photo of a local lake that serves as a reservoir for residents of south Chennai.

Before the lockdown, Anant said the sky in the picture is "usually a grey or dull blue, with the lower atmosphere carrying a humid later of particles."

The climate crisis presents India with especially high stakes, he said, noting the reduction in farm output as well as severe flooding and drought.

"Many see the coronavirus crisis as an opportunity to adopt a greener path of sustainable growth and greater equity," he told me by email. "Indians, too, nurture the same hope."

Back home, in a video conversation with Boston City Councilor Michelle Wu on Thursday, climate activist Bill McKibben said we can draw two main lessons for climate change from the coronavirus crisis.

Pointing out that South Korea and the United States experienced their first coronavirus deaths on the same day, Jan. 20, he contrasted the difference between fast action (South Korea, which has suffered about 200 deaths) and delayed response (about 17,000 deaths in the U.S.) The lesson for both the pandemic and the climate crisis: Delay carries a high price. Secondly, he said people are coming to grips with the idea that physical reality – even an invisible one like a virus – is real.

Perhaps coupled with the sort of change called for by Vir Singh in Delhi – clear action by a more "selfless" populace – such lessons offer hope for the climate struggle ahead.

Finally, I'd like to recommend a Good Friday experience for you that is the single most riveting media I've seen about the pandemic and climate change. Titled, "A letter from the virus," and written by Kristin Flyntz, it'll take you less than four minutes.

How is your experience of the pandemic affecting your attitudes about the climate crisis? Please let me know here.

Here's what's new on EarthBeat this week:

- Speaking of hope, Mauricio López Oropeza argues for what he calls "apocalyptical hope" that he describes as essential for living in the heart of a pandemic.
- As our Lenten Daily Food Reflections draw to a close (the last one will appear Monday, an Easter Week special), Brenna Davis offers a Good Friday mediation and suggests praying the Laudato Si' Stations of the Cross.
- In a story reported, for the most part, before the coronavirus shutdown, staff writer Jesse Remedios explores what climate change demands of Catholic education.

- Reader Carolyn Morrin lets us know how our Lenten Daily Food Reflections have taken root in her Michigan kitchen in this week's Small Earth Story.
- And in case you missed them, Jesse has addressed the challenge of climate activism amid the pandemic, both in last week's EarthBeat Weekly and in this Burning Question.

Here's some of what's new in other climate-related news this week:

- In an interview with Austen Ivereigh published in Commonweal, Pope Francis discusses recent natural disasters as "nature's responses."
- David Wallace-Wells, in New York Magazine, frames coronavirus as "a preview of our climate-change future."
- In Inside Climate News, Neela Banerjee and David Hasemyer argue that " decades of science denial related to climate change has led to denial of the coronavirus pandemic."
- Grist, the environmental news site, suggests "14 ways to turn your coronavirus cabin fever into climate action."
- Environment Massachusetts suggests "fifty environmental activities kids can do at home."
- Thanks for those last two items to Fran Ludwig at the Boston Catholic Climate Movement. Their newsletter is useful not just for Boston-area readers but anyone interested in climate issues.

Upcoming event:

April 22: An Earth Day prayer service sponsored by the Archdiocese of Chicago. For more events, check out Earth Beat's Event Calendar. One advantage of so many events moving online is their accessibility to a wider audience. If you'd like to expand the audience of your next virtual climate event, please post it here.

Closing beat:

Realizing that the pandemic has changed most everything about our daily lives, we invite you to share its impact on your everyday activities vis-à-vis climate change. Please submit your 150-word Small Earth Story here. And if you have a Burning Question you'd like us to address, let us know here.

We hope you'll forward this week's newsletter to anyone you believe might want to subscribe. They can do so here. And if you'd like to support EarthBeat, please join NCR Forward for as little as five bucks a month.

Thanks for reading!

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