



## Commentary- N°2021-19

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# India's climate change approach: what to expect

By Pooja Jain



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## Introduction

A crucial goal of India's Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC 2015) is to reduce the emissions intensity of its GDP by 33 to 35 per cent by 2030 from 2005 level. India is very much on course to achieve this goal. The Third Biennial Update Report 2021<sup>1</sup> by the Indian Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) points out that India's emissions intensity of GDP has reduced by 24 per cent between 2004 and 2016, achieving the target of reducing emissions intensity of GDP by 25 per cent by 2020.

The United Nations Emissions Gap Report 2020 states that India is projected to meet its NDC targets. It says that the decrease in India's emission projections for 2030 would be partly due to an increase in the use of renewable energy. The report cites two studies Climate Action Tracker 2020 and International Energy Agency (IEA) 2020 indicating that India may see larger reductions by 2030 compared with other major emitters.

As things stand, the probability of the above scenario is getting higher with and without planned government action<sup>2</sup>. Like China, India has intensity targets. Its reduction targets are defined per unit of gross domestic product (GDP). Therefore, the impact of the pandemic on India's GDP will directly affect its carbon emissions. According to the Pew Research Centre, the pandemic has caused 32 million people in India to slip into poverty making up the majority of the 54 million people worldwide who slipped out of the middle class<sup>3</sup>. In the near future, both the emissions intensity and per capita emissions are likely to fall in view of the economic downturn caused by a devastating second wave of the pandemic. The possibility of a third wave cannot be ruled out either.

India isn't likely to emerge from the pandemic by November 2021 given the paucity of vaccines and the sheer amount of time that is needed to vaccinate its huge population. The second wave of the pandemic saw India reversing its policy on foreign aid that it had stopped accepting since the tsunami in 2004. The calls for finance and technology transfer from developed countries will only grow louder at Glasgow for the 26<sup>th</sup> United Nations Climate Change Conference for the Parties (COP26).

However, given the glaring uncertainty in which the country finds itself, India would not be pressed upon to issue time-bound targets that are compatible with limiting the rise in global warming to 1.5 degrees C above pre-industrial levels. India's current NDC is compatible with restricting the warming to not more than 2 degrees<sup>4</sup>. It hasn't submitted a renewed NDC yet. It is also most likely that India would still not be in the position to announce its emissions peaking year<sup>5</sup>.

In light of the above arguments, this paper embarks on a multipronged analysis to understand India's approach to climate change. The paper will draw on a varied set of

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<sup>1</sup> MoEFCC. (2021). India: Third Biennial Update Report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

<sup>2</sup> What Covid and Clear Skies Meant to Drinking Water for 300 Million by Henri Fountain, Published April 26, 2021, Updated April 28, 2021, The New York Times

<sup>3</sup> Covid-19 Pushes India's Middle Class Toward Poverty, by Karan Deep Sing and Hari Kumar, The New York Times, Published April 16, 2021 Updated April 23, 2021

<sup>4</sup> India, Climate Action Tracker, September 22, 2020

<sup>5</sup> India "will not announce" carbon emissions peak year, By Navin Singh Khadka, July 2, 2015, BBC World News



variables, namely: negotiating principles, strategic engagement, domestic demand for climate action and personal inclinations of its larger than life Prime Minister. I will analyse how and why these variables allow predict India's position on climate change. The paper makes the case for the study for leadership and political economy incentives as decisive factors in predicting action on climate change.

***A multipronged analysis: distributive justice, strategic engagement, targeted prestige projects, the Indian polity and Modi, himself***

India's coin-of-realm distributive justice is at the heart of its ideological approach to climate change negotiations<sup>1</sup>. India has negotiated from a position of exception on behalf of its history, ideology, demography and the transient state of its economy and development. Sustainable development could take a whole new meaning from the perspective of many an Indian. The institutional definition of sustainable development<sup>6</sup> seeks a sagacious use of natural resources for the present generation without compromising on the needs of the future generation. For many developing countries, exploitative colonial rule of the past and unequal trade practices have compromised their ability to meet the needs of their present and future generations. They have argued that in the spirit of distributive justice, the developed countries should primarily shoulder the historical weight of the present day deterioration in climate conditions and finance change in the developing world. Hard-nosed negotiations that are able to successfully table and generate majority consensus on the relevance of individual and shared positions are a hallmark of diplomatic success in climate change negotiations. India has impressed upon its post-colonial status and its civilizational history and culture both as a riposte for criticism and as leadership credentials. The current Indian Prime Minister, himself, is a proud vegetarian<sup>7</sup>.

India bristles at unwelcome approbation and approval by external governmental or non-governmental agencies. Realistically, as long as India is a "trusted partner" in security, need it abide by standards and scrutiny that are subject to change with change in governments? Take for instance, the United States, a global leader, which under President Trump made a u-turn on several of its climate change pledges, most notably, its withdrawal from the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Drastic change in positions of this sort diminishes the credibility of external actors to question India. And, to India's credit, as an "obstructionist" or "spoiler", the country has remained consistent on the ideological underpinnings of its climate change position. Besides, insistence on "all countries respecting their climate agreements" gives each country the leeway to hinge its performance on those of others.

Diplomatically, though, there are two sides to the story. India's contemporary approach is veering towards prized diplomatic and economic engagements that could be strategic in providing greater leverage in climate change negotiations. The Western world's pivot to the Indo-Pacific, the reinvigoration of the QUAD is making India increasingly important to securitisation. Consequently, not playing by the book on setting the timeline of climate

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<sup>6</sup> "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>.

<sup>7</sup> The MIT Technology Review Insights, The Green Future Index 2021, puts India (ranked 21<sup>st</sup>) in "the greening middle" category thanks to its quick adoption of renewables and for being the world's largest vegetarian population. The United States, which is also in "the greening middle" category ranks 40<sup>th</sup>, while China ranks 45 in the climate laggards category.

change targets could result in megaphone diplomacy but these would be but incidental to the overall partnerships. Incremental climate mitigation and adaptation through strategic focus on selective issues of clean energy<sup>ii</sup> and water<sup>iii</sup> would permit India to stay focussed on its Nationally Determined Contributions while tempering the ‘undue’ expectations of its exacting partners from the northern hemisphere. Having said that, India could also adopt a more aggressive approach, which implies that in response to demands for more ambitious targets at the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) India could issue a counter call for flexibility on technology transfer from developed countries along the lines of the demand for patent waiver on coronavirus vaccines that it pushed jointly with South Africa. Paradoxically, the tragic proportions of India’s suffering could provide Modi with a moral prerogative to negotiate from.

This functional and morally bombastic approach has much to do with Modi who will not face an election until 2024. There is more grandstanding and less idealism to India under Modi who enjoys a single dominant party rule and strong domestic mandate not seen since the demise of Indira Gandhi. He has a penchant for hugging and personally receiving world leaders, playing international and domestic audience simultaneously. Modi is also sensitive to the aesthetics of foreign visits to India. Polluted air<sup>8</sup> and rivers do not make for good aesthetics. An image-savvy Modi, projecting himself as a strong and ahead-of-his-time leader has implications on India’s position on climate change.

The centrality of Modi in India’s current policy scenario cannot be understated.

A press release dating October 2, 2015<sup>9</sup> by India’s MOEFCC credits the prime minister for having guided the process of formulating the NDC, attributing an all-important role to his personal leadership. Technically though, the MOEFCC points out that the process of developing NDCs involves multiple consultations with ministries, Niti Aayog<sup>10</sup>, State governments, industry associations, civil society groups, academic institutions and think tanks, and consultations with members of the PM’s Council on Climate Change<sup>11</sup>. Unlike the Manmohan Singh government<sup>12</sup>, the current government does not have a special climate envoy<sup>13</sup>. However, as recently as November 2020, the MOEFCC issued a gazette notification on creating an inter-ministerial Apex Committee for Implementation of Paris Agreement (AIPA). AIPA has in its power to invite other bodies like academic institutions, industry and commerce and civil society for technical or professional inputs<sup>14</sup>. The latter should furnish a report about its activity to the Central Government once every six months suggesting that the decisive power on climate change policy remains with the central government headed by the prime minister.

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<sup>8</sup> Data by IQAir for the year 2020 ranks India as the third most polluted country in the world, just behind Bangladesh and Pakistan.

<sup>9</sup> Presentation on INDC in Press conference, October 2, 2015, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India

<sup>10</sup> National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) is the premier policy think tank of the Government of India. It was created in 2015.

<sup>11</sup> PM’s climate change council recast, Meena Menon, November 05, 2014, The Hindu

<sup>12</sup> Shyam Saran to get Minister of State rank, by HT Correspondent, Feb 17, 2010, The Hindustan times

<sup>13</sup> India will have to step up climate diplomacy, By Manjeev Singh Puri, Feb 24, 2021, The Hindustan Times

<sup>14</sup> The Gazette of India, Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Notification, New Delhi, the 27th November, 2020

Importantly, as in the world of development aid, India's case points out the recognition of "targeted prestige projects" in climate that are strategic in enhancing domestic and international status. The government of India has targeted renewable energy as a sector, which marries the twin objectives of making India a leading FDI destination and addressing climate concerns from the front. Energy diversification is also of crucial strategic importance in India, which is still significantly dependent on oil, the prices of which can weaken the Indian rupee, deepen the trade deficit and eventually become a major election issue. In its last election manifesto (2019) the BJP, the reigning party to which Modi belongs, proclaimed that India had "become a global champion in addressing the issues of climate change through effective and feasible interventions. We have achieved cumulative installed renewable energy capacity of 76.87 GW as on February 2019 and are on track to achieve our goal of 175 GW by 2022".

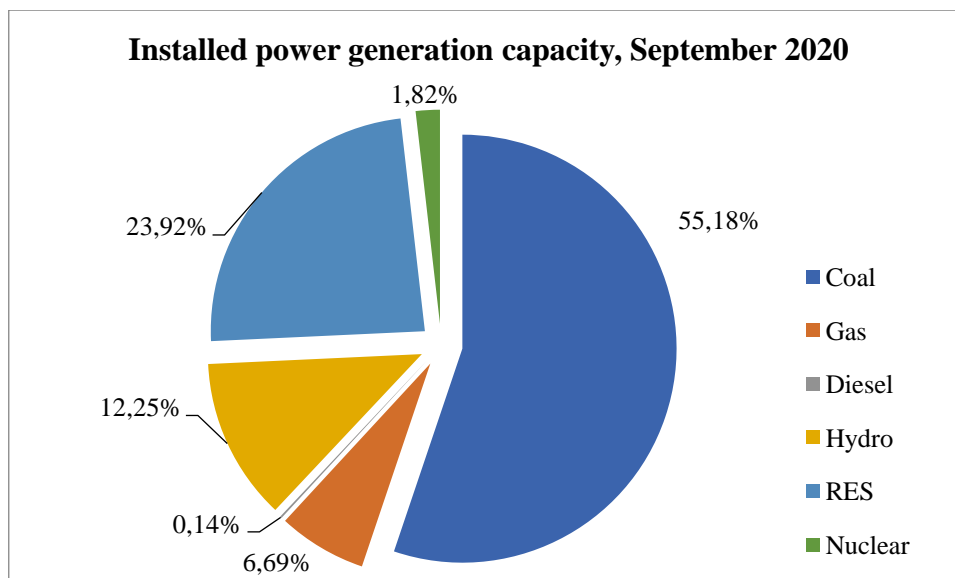
Indeed, the IEA commends India for its renewable energy expansion, especially solar<sup>15</sup>. India plans to ramp up its renewable energy capacity to 450 GW by 2030, which would reduce its share of coal consumption from 70 per cent to around 52 per cent and increase the share of solar PV to around 16 per cent<sup>16</sup> (See Annex). In November 2015, Macron of France and Modi of India jointly championed the International Solar Alliance, almost a year after Modi was first elected as Prime Minister. In March 2018, at the Founding conference of the International Solar Alliance<sup>iv</sup>, Prime Minister Modi insisted on India's renewable energy expansion program being the world's largest<sup>17</sup>. In the same vein, on his recent visit to India in April 2021, John Kerry, the US President's special envoy for climate, in a calibrated speech, reaffirmed admiration for India's focussed investment in renewable energy. This was while he exhorted his audience that together, they need to go beyond what countries agreed to in Paris in 2015. Kerry pointed out that roughly 90 per cent of the world's emissions came from outside the United States and about 70 per cent came from somewhere other than China<sup>v</sup>. At this stage, less than 4 per cent of India's electricity generation comes from solar and about 70 per cent is sourced from coal (IEA Reports India Energy Outlook 2021).

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<sup>15</sup> "Recent IEA analysis shows that in 2018, India's investment in solar PV was greater than in all fossil fuel sources of electricity generation together. By December 2019, India had deployed a total of 84 GW of grid-connected renewable electricity capacity. By comparison, India's total generating capacity reached 366 GW in 2019. India is making progress towards its target of 175 GW of renewables by 2022". Quoted from IEA India 2020 Energy Policy Review, Country Report, January 2020

<sup>16</sup> "This dramatic turnaround is driven by India's policy ambitions, notably the target to reach 450 GW of renewable capacity by 2030, and the extraordinary cost-competitiveness of solar, which out-competes *existing* coal-fired power by 2030 even when paired with battery storage". Quoted from, IEA India Energy Outlook 2021 Report

<sup>17</sup> The Prime Minister's grand solar initiative is in lockstep with his and Indians' affinity with the Guinness Book of World Records<sup>17</sup>. See: Why Is India So Crazy for World Records? By Samantha Subramanian, Jan. 23, 2015, The New York Times.



Source: CEA, 2020, cited from MoEFCC. (2021). *India: Third Biennial Update Report to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change*. Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, Government of India.

For the present, India knows that its argument on comparatively low per capita emissions<sup>18</sup>, and demand for distributive justice on behalf of, and along with other developing countries stands strong in principle. Moreover, countries, developed and developing regularly fall short of their commitments. That said, a country as geographically and demographically vast and as diplomatically active as India will always be in the ambit of international approbation especially, if India's global emissions continue to rise as predicted by the IEA. The very size of its emissions could make it an eyesore and literally indispensable to climate change efforts.

The planetary perimeter of climate change is precisely the reason why targets are expressed in terms of controlling the rise of the earth's temperature as a whole. The International Energy Agency's (IEA) India Energy Outlook Report 2021, points out that India's energy demand is set to surpass that of every other country on the planet with a possible rise of as much as 50 per cent by 2040. And, its total emissions could be around 50 per cent higher in 2040 than in 2019 (in a Stated Policies Scenario), making India integral to the world's climate efforts. In matters of equity, the impermeable developed-developing divide and the historical premise of distributive justice as the sole vantage point of discussions are being questioned<sup>vi</sup>. African countries are incomparably low emitters and outpace many a country in their energy transition<sup>19</sup>. Inevitably, India will have to navigate between different coalitions and negotiating groups and the arguments they represent. The need of the day is not just flexibility in negotiating positions but greater leverage in action on climate change concomitant to the well being of populations and the planet. Besides, what is true of income inequality is true of individual emissions. The carbon emissions of the poor in the United States or in India are much lower when compared to the rich in their countries even though

<sup>18</sup> According to the World Bank data, India's per capita emissions stood at 1.8 (metric tons per capita) in 2016 compared to 0.4 in Kenya and 4.6 in France, 7.2 in China and 15.5 in the United States.

The World Bank, Data, CO2 emissions (metric tons per capita) – India, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/EN.ATM.CO2E.PC?locations=IN>

<sup>19</sup> MIT Technology Review Insights, The Green Future Index 2021, cites that "seven of the top 10 countries for the pace of their energy transition are in Africa".





they are the most vulnerable to its ill effects. Global and per capita emissions are but a part of the picture, so to speak.

At present, India has most of the world's most polluted cities, not an enviable record<sup>20</sup>. According to the Pew Research Center's survey on Public views About Science in India (2019-2020)<sup>vii</sup>, 61 per cent of the public surveyed opined that protecting the environment should be given priority over creating jobs and 37 per cent opined that the government was not doing enough to reduce the effects of climate change. The survey suggests that the argument that in a developing country like India, people put jobs on par with climate change doesn't wash. Having said that, how exactly do public opinions translate in electoral demand and shift government policy does not fall in the purview of direct co-relation or causation. The same can be said of electoral priorities, which cannot truly reflect the absence or presence of demand for effective climate action. In a country that saw the seminal chipko movement<sup>21</sup>, it would just take a nudge from an immensely popular leader to displace the priorities of the voters<sup>22</sup>.

## Conclusion

Though favourable, public opinion on climate change science is not embedded yet in voting patterns subject to a five-year election cycle. In India, protesting climate-sensitive industrial projects can risk charges of anti-developmentalism. Power and organised interests can sway decisions in their favour in the name of development and jobs. And, it is the government that has the final word.

In the same vein, it wouldn't be judicious to underestimate the unpredictability and volatility of Indian politics and Modi himself. The man who can declare an emergency lockdown, invalidate most of India's currency on a populist whim, could indulge in yet another perfunctory policy on climate if he sees value in the exercise<sup>viii</sup>. Indeed, what would be political hara-kiri for any other politician is barely a setback for 'teflon' Modi who comes out unscathed controversy after controversy. If Modi wins a third mandate<sup>23</sup>, as an unchallenged domestic leader, he might think of investing more in his historical legacy as an international statesman<sup>24</sup>.

Politically expedient, the Modi government would make the most of COP26 to restore its lost sheen. The government has come under fire from all corners for its handling of the pandemic. India under Modi is posited to deploy current achievements and continuity of international and national initiatives that bear his name. New targets will be tied to the

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<sup>20</sup> According to IQAir's 2020 average, of the 20 most polluted cities in the world, 15 are in India.

<sup>21</sup> The Chipko movement was a non-violent agitation against the felling of trees that started in 1973, in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh, now Uttarakhand. See: What is the Chipko movement? By Express Web Desk, March 26, 2018, The Indian Express

<sup>22</sup> The drive to clean the river Ganges, still in a nascent stage could be one such project with popular appeal and climate benefits. The project *Namami Gange* features in the 2019 party manifesto of the BJP. Ganges, heavily polluted, is of spiritual significance in the Hindu religion.

<sup>23</sup> Will voters hold Modi to account for India's covid-19 crisis? Don't bet on it, Milan Vaishnav, April 30, 2021, The Washington Post

<sup>24</sup> Modi's international political journey is unique. From being a persona non-grata in most of the Western world, he is now warmly welcomed by the very same countries as the Prime Minister of India, the world's largest democracy. He more than any other politician, is in want of a legacy that could put his past in the oblivion of history.



evolution of India's energy mix. According to the MoEFCC) Report 2021, with 75 per cent, the energy sector contributed the most to India's overall emissions, followed by agriculture at 14 per cent. The environmental and economic imperatives shall compel India to increase the share of renewables and nuclear energy in its energy mix. In bold or in fine print these targets would be conditional to India's economic recovery and its capacity to attract investments.

India's own solar energy initiative needs to be put in perspective. Acquiring land for solar panels in India could compete with land use in other sectors. If India were to continue expanding solar energy, it would require coordinated planning<sup>ix</sup> and fast-paced bureaucratic machinery to clear land acquisition contracts<sup>x</sup>. The latter can turn into a politically and socially contentious issue in India<sup>25</sup>.

To sum up, it is only a confluence of factors along with the volatile but decisive "invisible hand" of domestic Indian politics that could chart India's future climate change.

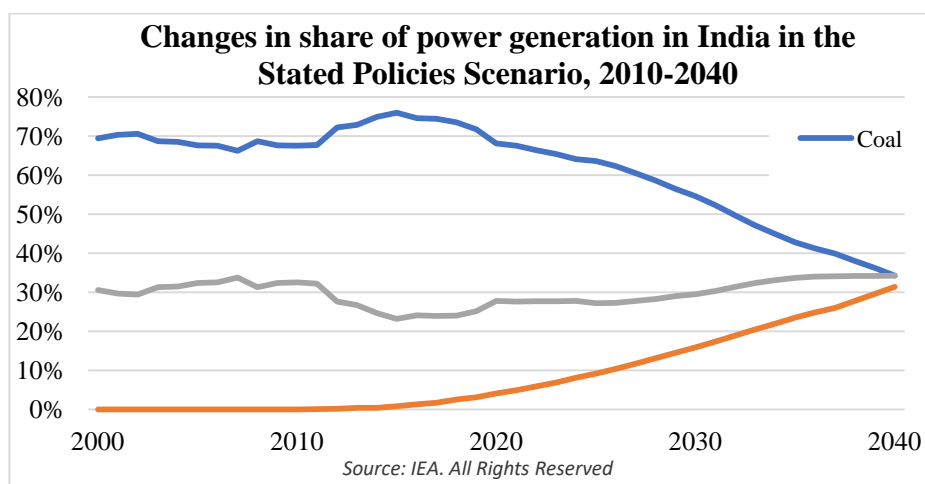
Going beyond the realm of India alone, this article also calls attention to the on the blink nature of climate change negotiations. Populism in domestic politics, and green washing<sup>26</sup> in the corporate sectors are spoken of in pejorative terms. The same cannot be said of diplomatic hogwash and gaming in climate change, which are understudied as a subject and could be of use in plugging the loopholes between discourse and committed action.

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<sup>25</sup> The recycling of photovoltaic panels, which use heavy metals and rare earth elements, (of which most are found in China) is another concern. See: MIT Technology Review Insights, The Green Future Index 2021

<sup>26</sup> In France, "greenwashing" can face legal sanctions under Consumer Code for misleading publicity.

## Annex



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