

Voices of Young Climate Activists of India

Climate change is one of the most pressing issues in the present times. It is affecting weather across the world in extremes such as heat waves, intense droughts, floods, and tropical cyclones. No country, developed or developing, has been left untouched by its devastating consequences. In 2021, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report reiterated the need for strong, rapid, and sustained actions to mitigate climate changes. Recently, the annual United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), was the 26th edition held at Glasgow, Scotland, United Kingdom from 31 October to 13 November 2021. Here, the need of converting climate 'promises to action' was underlined.

In this context, to bring together young climate change activists, United Nations in India launched a climate campaign, 'We The Change'. Its main objective is to identify and exhibit the innovative and sustainable climate solutions initiated by young Indians to tackle climate change. The movement provides a platform for young climate leaders to initiate a dialogue with the country's policy-makers, amplifying solutions, inspiring collective action, and working with the government to ensure a green and sustainable future of India.

This cover article features three Young Climate Champions of 2021's #WeTheChange campaign in India. The article captures their journeys and experiences while coming out with innovative solutions to curb climate change. They bring hope and inspire others to take action for a cleaner and healthier world.

Sneha Shahi

PhD Student

Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and Environment (ATREE), Bangalore, Karnataka

E-mail: sneha123shahi@gmail.com



The actions stem from empathy towards nature's biodiversity. Balancing science and actions should be strived for. In the initial stages of the Plastic Tide Turners Campaign, the team focussed on identifying issues and perceptions with waste segregation and reducing single-use plastics from everyday life. However, during fieldwork, the group caught the visuals of a stream suffocated with overflowing solid waste and untreated sewage. They were overwhelmed by sighting a crocodile in this polluted stream. The project was then curated to be more inclusive of water quality, stream flooding, and biodiversity, for which scientific analysis and hands-on public engagement were taken up. The essays and proposals brought the Champion title in 2019, and the team continued working on water-waste issues. While Sneha was steering the Tide Turners, her team came across an urban stream facing extreme anthropogenic stress.

The *Bhukhi* stream (local name) had been inundated and clogged with plastics and solid waste. The stream flowing through the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda campus pours down into the *Vishwamitri* River at some distance. The river is known for its crocodiles and turtles.

The impact seen in the first phase of the campaign continued to bear fruit as the team was able to work out a plan to clean up this small stream and the surrounding area under Sneha's leadership. Anthropogenic stress on the *Bhukhi* stream was due to improper urban planning, bank encroachment and release of large quantities of untreated domestic sewage in the kaans. Urban stream management requires community outreach and sensitization towards these degrading ecosystems. Streambank management employs restoring, protecting banks; excavating channels against scour, and erosion by using vegetative plantings, soil bioengineering, and structural systems. These methods can be used alone or in combination to manage streams on a sustainable basis.

The team monitored the quality, organized clean-ups, and conducted health surveys along the stream for residential societies and in informal settlements, as they are the ones to first-hand experience flooding due to clogged up conditions of the stream. The information regarding the importance of the *Bhukhi* stream and other such channels was broadcasted through social media platforms and newspapers in different languages to engage more people and help them interact better with researchers and not feel left out of decision-making for restoration proposals.

The team was amazed to find the support of local women, mainly homemakers, who wanted to learn about the water bodies near their homes, what causes their flooding, pollution and its impact on their health. They wanted to be a part of the solution. They are important stakeholders for the conservation process who often get sidelined during decision-making. Empowering them can help bring change and better outcomes in communities.

With collective actions, now the stream is cleaner and the biodiversity slowly restored. The chance of fair participation makes communities feel acknowledged, and case studies show that inclusion increases the sense of responsibility and makes them more aware, concerned citizens. River action plans and policies have been in place for a long time, yet we need to change our methods to approach these problems. Our ideas and innovations need to be at par with the ever-changing climate as older techniques might not be the best fit to address issues in the present scenario.

An appropriately framed ecological action plan is required to ensure longevity and enhanced environmental health of the stream. The Department of Environmental Sciences at the MS University backed the students in this endeavour. The campaign received support from over 300 volunteers from across the science faculty and gathered around 700 kgs of plastic from this patch of about 800 meters. The group segregated 300 kgs of this plastic to give it for recycling. The remaining plastic was handed over to the local municipal administration to dispose of. The result was an increase in the sighting of crocodiles and flap shell turtles in the patch. The team continued to visit the area to keep a tab, and the crocodiles



Bhukhi Stream before and after restoration



were indeed back due to less solid waste. During 2020-2021, the group cleaned up a patch under university jurisdiction, increased awareness about freshwater bodies and maintained the ecologically restored stream.

There are only a few policies in place to achieve conservation goals that too are riddled with loopholes to cater to capitalism and often fail to deliver on environmental objectives due to the lack of inclusion of indigenous people and women. Today, we see a lot of sustainable production advertised in the market, but is there a policy that could regulate and keep tabs on these hollow promises? Young grassroots conservationists are speaking up on behalf of the planet, but unfortunately, the platforms provided to them are insufficient, lack meaningful representation and completely ignore what they have to offer in terms of solutions. In about 20 years, the people in these high-walled buildings and offices will be gone, and we will have a world where people will wage wars for even the most basic necessities such as water. Sadly, this has already begun in most corners of the world.

The lives of younger generations are at stake, and their empathy towards biodiversity and humanity is what makes them role models to lead the change. Giving young people platforms and not paying heed to what they have to say is not the way climate change issues will be resolved. Young voices, innovations and ideas all these matters. Institutional and government support to leaders of change which create impact through public awareness and on-ground activities, need to be funded, supported and promoted. We must admire how so many grassroots level conservationists are using social media and other platforms accessible to them to voice their opinions and get their ideas out in the world. We wish to help them reach larger platforms and gain access to tools to build their capacity and start working on issues, be it in their town or outside. Environmental education is essential, and there should not be a bias in the ability to do conservation depending on the academic background of a person. Conservation is about empathy and passion, and this is what drives ideas. Actions, be it local or global, need to be acknowledged and supported to create a better, safer future.

Akhilesh Anilkumar

Director, Co-Founder

Bring Back Green Foundation, Trivandrum, Kerala

E-mail: akhilesh@bringbackgreen.com



The noises made by the young climate advocates across the world over the past few years have shown everyone that one of the biggest crises of the century is climate change.

I began my journey into being an environmental conservation activist from a small cleanup drive held near the beautiful hills of Munnar, Kerala, after the deadly Kerala Floods in 2018. An NGO and the Forest Department assembled a team of approximately 100 volunteers, including me, to combat the issue of plastic on the forest road. Most of the plastic came from landslides that occurred during the floods. Our task was to clean a stretch of 40+km by noon that day. Two things happened that day that led me to become highly engaged in environmental conservation.

One was the surprisingly large amount of single-use plastic straws that I collected that day. It led me to start a statewide campaign to curb single-use plastic straws called 'Swap The Straw'. The second incident gave me tremendous motivation and faith in the system. I was cleaning a stretch of land a bit away from the road when something unexpected happened. While the cleanup was in progress, a resort inauguration was happening near the area I was posted. A man came with a sack full of plastic waste from the venue and dumped it on the roadside. I was astonished by his audacity of dumping waste while the cleanup drive was on. I immediately approached the forest department officers and narrated the incident. To my surprise, they accompanied me and penalised the resort. The resort owner, who happened to be a politician well versed in waste management, was made to recollect the waste and dispose of it sustainably. This event gave me enormous motivation and showed how one person can bring about positive change.

The 'Swap The Straw', a 3-month state-level campaign founded by me, was conducted in association with a local NGO from Trivandrum, Kerala (Helping Hands Organisation). The campaign engaged with various stakeholders such as consumers, shopkeepers and hotel associations, government agencies, local clubs, etc. The campaign brought awareness about the dangers of single-use plastic straws to around 15,000 people across the state and raised a petition with 12,000+ signatures to ban single-use plastic straws, which was submitted directly to the Chief Minister of Kerala. The campaign made a huge impact, and several multiple shops and institutions in the area shifted to sustainable alternatives like steel, paper and bamboo straws. This one initiative helped immensely in reducing thousands of plastic straws daily usage.

We were also able to bring down sustainable straw manufacturers to the state and introduce them to shopkeepers and other stakeholders. The campaign established sustainable alternatives as a customer comfort experiment in one of the largest IT Parks in India, Technopark, Kerala, for a day. The team also worked with a municipality and introduced a single-use plastic ban in the region.

Seeing the success and impact of my first campaign, I decided to start an NGO which focuses on crucial environmental conservation areas and work with both youth and government stakeholders. The Bring Back Green Foundation was established in 2019. It works in various areas such as waste management, climate

education, climate activism, environmental research, public policy advocacy, sustainable menstruation, coastal erosion, etc. In 2020, we conducted the first International Conference on Climate Education and further organised a National and State Level conference on climate education. We also organised various physical and virtual conferences, events and webinars with renowned experts. Our organisation has submitted many studies and reports to several Ministers of respective departments on important environmental conservation issues. Some of our key reports/studies are Curriculum on Climate Education for Schools (2019); Ecological Impact of EIA Draft Notification 2020 on 10 sites in India;



Objections and Suggestions on EIA Draft Notification 2020 Implementation; Post-COVID Sustainability of Agriculture, Manufacturing and Service Sectors of Kerala (2020); Study on Coastal Erosion: Causes and Impact on Indigenous Communities (2020); [Updated Draft] Climate Education Curriculum for Educational Institutions (2021); Suggestions during the Implementation of Blue Economy in Kerala Coasts (2021). Our organisation has also published a book, 'Coastal Erosion and Indigenous Community of South West Coast of India' and has a documentary series on coastal erosion, 'Theeram'.

Our NGO works with various government agencies and is involved in public policy advocacy. Climate change is a huge issue that needs intervention and support from various public institutions and government agencies. We aim to identify critical environmental affairs, suggest practical solutions at the grassroots level and deliberate with the stakeholders in the government institutions to take necessary action. It is a general perception that government institutions do not listen to young activists seriously. However, what we experienced is entirely different. If our suggestions/ objections are valid, our voices are heard. We only need to communicate our concerns to the competent authorities sensibly.

Likewise, government institutions should also be more receptive to the suggestions/objections they receive. They should introduce more tools of engagement for the public, especially with youth.

A plausible strategy to increase youth participation in decision-making for the environmental cause could be through implementing decentralised climate parliaments across each Panchayat. It can be run with the help of local Self-Governing Institutions and the Ministry of Environment. The youth across each Panchayat shall raise issues closest to them concerning the environment and environmental degradation in their area. They may suggest specific ideas/ proposals for policy implementation and governmental intervention. Through such channels, the youth may be involved in various governmental processes and made capable of resolving local issues with a localised and decentralised approach.

Now is the time for action. The youth should be more involved in the decision-making processes and framing solutions across the world. If each individual focuss on creating solutions for their local problems and work in sync with the government agencies of their area, we could see a huge positive change and great hope for the future.

Garvita Gulhati

Founder, Why Waste?

Ashoka Young Changemaker, UN Youth Climate Leader

E-mail: garvita@whywaste.io



Garvita, India's Water Girl, started her journey as a changemaker at the tender age of 13. In 2015, deeply impacted by the water crisis faced by India, she founded 'Why Waste?' with an intent to change people's mindsets towards water by building simple solutions to solve the global water crisis. Today it is India's largest youth-led organisation working towards water conservation.

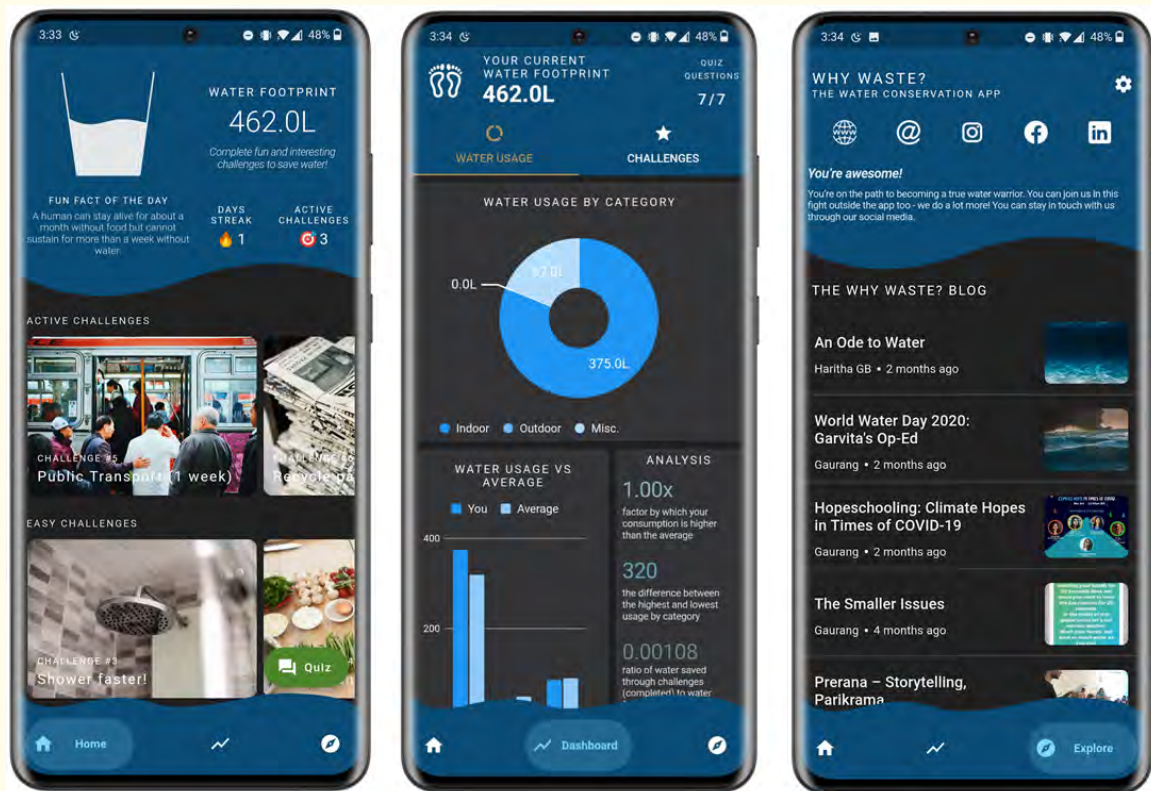
Why Waste? began working with restaurants, by helping them prevent wastage of water that is left behind in glasses through their viral #GlassHalfFull movement in addition to conducting workshops. Their work has reached over 5 lakh restaurants, 6 million people and prevented over 10 million litres of water from being wasted. Lately, the team published "The Sustainability Stories", a for the youth, by the youth collection of 13 new-age fables that talk about environmental issues and inspire children to be the change. The team published the books in partnership with Pratham, India's largest non-profit publisher. They are now bringing these to life on video with UNICEF. In 2020, the 'Why Waste?' app was launched that helps every individual to calculate their water footprint and helps them save at least 100 litres of water every day through a gamified approach. In partnership with CNN, Why Waste? is building this movement to encourage more people to calculate their water footprint and become part of the change through their national campaign "Mission Paani".



Here, she talks about her initiative and how it aims to bring a change.

My Initiative: Why Waste?

I believe that the climate crisis cannot be resolved without a strong focus on water. Taking on such a challenge always requires strong community support. "Why Waste?" was my way of realizing this community. We are currently India's largest youth-led movement working towards water conservation! Our goal is to help each individual understand the importance of water resources and join hands with us in protecting and conserving this natural resource. We build simple solutions to empower every person to be a part of the change.



Reaching the Masses

To reach a large part of the new digital India, social media provides the best option in terms of access and reach. It is also imperative to reach out to local communities that may not have digital accessibility yet. To motivate the public, we need to cultivate a deep empathy for the climate change crisis. It is important to remember that climate change is not an individual problem but a worldwide problem that is affecting all communities.

To realize that we all need to be a part of the change to achieve collective resilience when it comes to solving the climate crisis is key. I truly believe that empowering every individual to be a part of the solution by making them understand their importance would become our collective superpower! This is what we aim towards achieving through all of our initiatives - The Sustainability Stories, the Why Waste? app and the #GlassHalfFull movement.



Connecting the Dots

Each local community possesses different factors contributing to the overall situation of sustainability practices. Whether it entails logistical or economical difficulties, there might be several issues that prevent the populace of the region from being sustainable. To have a healthy and balanced community, we need to be sustainable and mindful of climate change. I have always believed that small changes add up to a huge impact and that by effectuating a change in every community, we can see large-scale growth in climate change solutions.

The concerned authorities must implement financial incentives to solve community problems. The young generation has a high

number of critical thinkers. They can make a difference by incorporating just a single principle into their work: look for innovative solutions with a positive impact. It is pertinent to motivate young thinkers to solve community problems. Introducing policies that incentivise the problem-solving approach can shift the paradigm. We need to be the changemaker in our capacity and bring about a lasting change in any cause we are passionate about. A policy change can set the ball rolling for this to happen on a larger scale.

Environmental Education

One of the biggest global environmental issues is perhaps the lack of environmental education. Among the most and least underprivileged communities, there is a huge gap in the understanding regarding the larger issues of the world. Even today, climate issues are expressed in a complex manner, making them difficult to understand for anyone. There is a need to make the climate dialogue more comprehensible and appealing.

“Life on Earth can recover from a drastic climate shift by evolving into new species and creating new ecosystems. Humans cannot...We need transformational change operating on processes and behaviour at all levels: individuals, communities, businesses, institutions, and governments. We must redefine our way of life and consumption.” - derived from Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis, Part II (Leaked Edition).

Climate Change can be resolved by changing the mindset of people, making them aware and conscious about their habits. Simple habit changes can bring remarkable transformation to the entire value chain. People can learn to own the solutions and solve various pressing issues within their communities. But none of this would be possible until we can empower and educate individuals about their current impact on the planet.

Policies driven in this direction would be a key to propelling us to achieve all the change we hope to bring about!

Educate, Engage, Empower

Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle aggressively. The latter two still consume energy to produce and re-form. Cutting energy demand by using less of it is a highly effective step. We must pressurize the policymakers to make renewable energy and sustainable resources affordable so that the general public can choose those options in daily life. Similarly, being aware of what you eat, where it comes from, thinking about how you travel, having a greater interest in all these things can impact energy and resource consumption. A simple example could be the *Why Waste?* app, where you can calculate your Water Footprint, i.e., your impact, and in turn make simple habit changes to save at least 100 liters of water every day. Impact through empowering individual action!

Secondly, we need to empower individuals in the remotest regions to mitigate issues in their communities. For example, providing small loans to a village household to build their wells to gain access to water instead of women having to walk miles to obtain it can greatly empower these households to own the change and become water resilient.

Further engagement from newer financial institutions like Fintech companies and neo-banks can be pivotal in introducing financial products and capabilities that can solve climate issues at the most grassroots levels; also mobilizing contributions from people like us, and not just wealthy philanthropists.