

Youth Led Climate Action: Empowering Voices, Driving Change

Keerty Dabas¹

“...hands reaching out -fists raising up -banners unfurling -megaphones booming

And we are canoes blocking coal ships -we are the radiance of solar villages - we are the rich clean soil of the farmer’s past -we are petitions blooming from teenage fingertips.²”

Abstract

This paper examines the importance of youth-led climate action in the context of global efforts to address climate change. It begins by highlighting the Paris Agreement's recognition of the rights and concerns of children and youth, particularly those who are economically and socially disadvantaged, in the face of climate-related disasters. Despite being disproportionately affected by climate change; the voices of young people are often marginalized in discussions on climate action. However, there has been a significant rise in youth-led climate activism, characterized by civic engagement, dissent, and protests, challenging government inaction and advocating for sustainable solutions. The paper traces the role of courts in amplifying youth voices and holding governments accountable for climate action. While bringing out Indian climate actions perspectives, it argues for more inclusive and youth-centred climate policies to ensure intergenerational and intragenerational justice, emphasizing the importance of actively involving young people in decision-making processes. The paper also addresses the challenges faced by youth-led climate action from traditional climate lobbies and calls for greater

¹ Ph.D. Climate Law, Faculty of Law, University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

² Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, United Nations Climate Summit opening ceremony: My poem to My Daughter (Sep.23.2014), <https://www.kathyjetnilkijiner.com/united-nations-climate-summit-opening-ceremony-my-poem-to-my-daughter/> (last visited on feb.25.2026)

recognition of the role of young people in shaping a liveable planet for future generations.

Key words: *Human Rights, Youth Climate Action, Fridays for Future, School Strikes, Climate Activism*

I. Introduction

The excerpt is from a poem addressed by a mother to her then seven-month-old daughter, performed at the UN Climate Summit held in New York in September 2014. In the backdrop was a large-scale people's climate march which garnered attention due to its sizable young participants. The poem expresses a mother's love and determination to protect her daughter from the effects of climate change, especially the rising sea levels that endanger their homeland, beaches, and islanders. She expressed how her daughter is not the hope for the future (as the West conceptualizes our youth to be) but rather a powerful symbol of intergenerational solidarity. The performance resonates with youth movements, empowering youth voices, urging collective action, emphasizing intersectionality, and inspiring resilience in the fight against climate change.

The poet-activist leading 2015 Paris delegation of Marshall Island representing Alliance of Small Island State, voiced the concerns of vulnerable island nations and pushed for a higher ambition i.e. to pivot the global target of limiting global warming from 2 degrees Celsius to 1.5 degree Celsius. This half a degree difference is critical for small island nations and low lying coastal states, who are at significantly higher risks of displacement due to sea level rise. This form of climate activism inspired the youth for greater participation in grassroots climate action through art and poetic expressions or "artivism", beyond conventional forums.

Year 2015 also signalled a broader shift in climate discourses wherein the young people were no longer an afterthought or on the margins of climate negotiations but rather increasingly placed at the centre of the climate action - as active participants, political actors and as vulnerable community bearing distinct rights against climate change. Adoption of Paris Agreement further marked an important moment in this shift with focus shifting to

intergenerational equity and recognition of human rights implications of climate change.

While the Paris Agreement does not incorporate specific human right obligation in its operative provisions, its preamble shapes the interpretation of its substantive provisions. It expressly requires the parties to align their climate action with their obligations towards rights of vulnerable and marginalised communities, including children, local and indigenous communities whilst also being guided by principles of equity, promoting gender inclusiveness, women empowerment and intergenerational equity.³ This gives formal recognition to children being as distinct vulnerable group and obligation of parties to protect rights of children vis-vis climate change. It further affirms that economically and socially disadvantaged children are disproportionately affected by climate disasters such as extreme weather, floods, droughts and diseases, destruction of food sources etc. That risk to children is exacerbated by crushing poverty and widening disparities in health, education and protection.

Climate change impact on people majorly depends upon several factors such as gender, age, access to resources, geographical regions, economic, political and social situation. However, it is the youth and children of the present and future who are set to bear most of the burden of climate change. Despite the profound impact climate related events can have on their quality of life, the rights, interests and concerns of the young generation are not at the forefront of global discourse on climate actions. Recently the youth across the globe have started to take matter into their hands, raising their concern for a sustainable future. A watershed movement of youth led climate activism, participation, civic engagement, dissent and protests is ongoing and has even reached the courts. They have been championing the cause of positive climate action plans, while questioning the lackadaisical approach of the governments towards climate change, carbon emissions and use of fossil fuels, and other environmental concerns. Adopting more inclusive, youth-centred policy related to climate change so as to ensure inter-generational and intra generational justice is key towards ensuring a liveable planet. The involvement of young people as active participants in addressing the challenges of climate change holds great

³ Paris Agreement to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, Preamble. Dec. 12, 2015, T.I.A.S. No. 16-1104.

importance and should be explored. The paper focuses upon the importance of youth led climate action, its changing nature from incrementalist to more transformative and anti-dialog approach. Lastly the paper reflects upon the challenges the youth climate action faces from conventional climate stakeholders and fossil fuel lobby.

II. Impact of Climate Change on Children, Youth, and Intergenerational Equity

The category of “youth/ young” people is complex one. What ages fall into this group is not specifically defined and often varies because of social construct around it. The United Nations defines “young person” as someone who fall into ages of 15 years to 24 years. According to Indian youth policy, people who fall into ages 15 to 29 are considered as youth and almost 27.2% of Indian population falls into this category⁴. In United Nations convention on child rights, persons of ages up to years 18 are considered as youth/children. Globally, the children/youth make up to sixteen percent (16%) of world population, i.e approximately 1.5 billion young people aged between fifteen to twenty years of age (15 to 24 years).⁵ For the purpose of the paper, whom to consider as youth, is taken in broader perspective to include the children, the adolescents and the young, mainly because of overlapping and in-transition nature of biological age in this category. This will also help in bringing forth a conceptual understanding of what challenges climate change poses for our future generations and custodians of planet.

A UNICEF report of 2021, introduced a global “children climate risk index”⁶ (children under the age of 18), (CCRI) of 163 countries, which comprehensively analyse the vulnerability of young children to the threat, risk and exposure posed by rising temperatures, climate change and related environmental

⁴Government of India, Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports, *The Indian National Youth Policy* (2014). <https://yas.nic.in/documents/national-youth-policy-2014>

⁵ *Youth*, United Nations <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/youth>, (last visited on feb.25.2026)

⁶ United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), *The Climate Crisis is a Child Rights Crisis: Introducing the Children’s Climate Risk Index*, New York (2021). <https://www.unicef.org/media/105376/file/UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf>

hazards such as extreme weather , pollution, water scarcity, access to basic healthcare, nutrition and other essential services etc. Accordingly, roughly one billion children or nearly half of the world's children below 18 years of age, live in 33 countries which are categorised as “extremely high risk” due to climate vulnerability.⁷ India was ranked 26th among four other south Asian countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh Afghanistan), wherein approximately 600 million children extremely vulnerable due to climate crisis making south Asia as one of the most impacted region on earth. The disconnect is that collectively these 33 most climate vulnerable countries including south Asian countries contribute to only 9% of global emissions and bear the burnt of shock generated by top 10 emitters responsible for almost 70% of global carbon emissions.⁸

This disproportionate distribution of burden and responsibility have significant adverse implications for the young populations and children who are most vulnerable to climate induced risk. The children/youth are not only exposed to immediate threat to life and health experiencing climate related harms such extreme weather events, food insecurity, heat stress etc. but also experience disruptions in education and development, family instability, risk of displacement. Moreover, they have limited agency in political and economic decision making, largely getting excluded from climate governance structures and policy negotiations. This consequently renders them disproportionately dependent upon the state for protection of their basic human rights. These intersecting vulnerabilities underscore the need to assess climate change not just as environmental or economic challenge but necessities its examination through lens of children's right.

Comprehensive set of rights were first globally recognised under “United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children or CRC”⁹ . It serves as a framework for safeguarding the well-being of children under the age of 18 years and applies to all children, irrespective of their race, religion, gender, or

⁷ Press Release, UNICEF, *Children in four South Asian countries at 'extremely high risk' of the impacts of the climate crisis*, UNICEF (Feb. 18, 2023), <https://www.unicef.org/india/press-releases/children-four-south-asian-countries-extremely-high-risk-impacts-climate-crisis>. (last visited on feb.25.2026)

⁸ *UNICEF* , *Supra* note 5

⁹ Convention on the Rights of Children, Nov. 20, 1989, 1577 U.N.T.S. 3.

any other status. The convention provided a broad spectrum of rights reflecting lived realities of children in different spheres of life such as their civil rights and freedoms, political rights and participation, economic security, social protection, health and cultural identity.

“The CRC includes several provisions that are particularly relevant to the rights of children in relation to climate change. Some of the key provisions include: right to life, survival, and development (Article 6); right to the highest attainable standard of health (Article 24); right to education (Article 28) and lastly right to participation (Article 12).”¹⁰

Climate change poses significant risks to children as they are more susceptible to injury and mortality caused by increasing extreme weather events such as heat waves, cold waves, droughts, flash floods etc. and other related climate harms. Climate Change also results in water and food scarcity, amplifying the likelihood of diseases and malnutrition among children. It is estimated that there is a near universal exposure of children to climate harms wherein almost every child on earth has experienced at least one major climate and environmental hazards, shocks and stresses¹¹, putting them at constant risk as the planet becomes more precarious to live. For example, over “820 million children globally are highly vulnerable as they experience severe and increasing events of heat waves, whereas health of over 2 billion children are at high risk due to exposure air pollution ; around 920 million children are experiencing to water scarcity aggravated by climate change.”¹² These climate realities and degrading environment directly violates and jeopardises children’s right to life and health.

Another impact of climate change is the induced displacement of people from their homes and communities, consequently effecting children as it often leads to their separation from families and increase their vulnerability to violence and exploitation. Displacement also causes loss of social and economic support systems, loss of basic services like health care, shelter etc which are essential for survival and development of children. There is also loss and disruption of education as school and colleges often shutdown due to extreme weather

¹⁰ *Id* arts. 6,24,28,12

¹¹ UNICEF, *Supra* note 5

¹² *Id.*

events. In certain cases, children are even forced to leave school due to damage to educational infrastructure. This becomes a challenge when states seek to realise children's right to have quality education.

Changing climate can affect employment opportunities for young adults. Erratic climate changes, monsoons, frequent droughts and depleting groundwater ends up disrupting agriculture and dependent livelihoods. Increasingly degrading environment and frequent ecological disasters often end up destabilising traditional livelihood sources and tourism dependent communities especially coastal or tribal communities. Consequential job losses and economic instability is then seen in sectors which are sensitive to climate change. As these traditional livelihood and income sources become increasingly unstable and economies transitions towards less carbon intensive future, it becomes necessary to create new employment pathways for young workers through up skilling and training them to navigate emerging green economies and clean technologies.

Existing literature highlight that uncertainty and anxiety associated with climate change have significant adverse effect on mental health of young people . The long-term impacts of climate change, such as food and water scarcity, extreme weather events, and ecosystem degradation, threaten livelihood security and diminish opportunities for young people to thrive. As a result younger generations specifically those between 16 to 25 years of age are increasingly experiencing "climate anxiety" , driven by concerns about having viable future and related uncertainties that climate change presents for them . As climate risk intensify and policy responses remain inadequate, young people have developed scepticism and frustration towards government inaction towards climate change.¹³

This erosion of trust is further compounded by limited participation of youth in formal climate decision making process, reinforcing feelings of exclusion and political marginalization. Young generation is often excluded from climate negotiations even though it affects them the most. This undermines their right to be informed, their right to participate and political agency in global climate

¹³ Caroline Hickman et al., *Climate anxiety in children and young people and their beliefs about government responses to climate change: a global survey*, 5 THE LANCET PLANETARY HEALTH e863, e863-873 (2021).

governance discourses. The fact that the effects of climate change are already being felt today, but the worst impacts will be felt in the future creates a moral dilemma. Where current generations are already experiencing the effects of rising temperature, environmental degradation, and future generations will likely experience even greater impacts, such as more frequent extreme weather severe heat waves droughts, floods, as well as increased climate related displacement of people and loss of biodiversity. Even though the current generations are responsible for the emissions that are driving climate change, it's the future generations who bear the brunt of its aggravated effects.

In this context, the principle of intergenerational equity which seeks a fair apportionment of climate related risks and responsibility across generations, becomes particularly salient for protection of rights of children. There is moral obligation requiring the present generations to safeguard and sustainably use the resources without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs, this include building adaptive capacities across generations. Herein, youth led climate actions play a crucial role in advocating intergenerational equity and asserting rights of younger generations in face of changing climate. These movements don't merely demand equitable access to resources but rather call for structural transformation to ensure a viable liveable future. Youth led actions demand climate justice, challenge extractive, resource- intensive models of development and demand meaningful policy reforms which prioritise sustainability, equity and long term ecological integrity. In doing so, the young adults are advocating for just transition towards greener and more sustainable systems.

III. Youth Climate Activism, Right to Participation and Challenges

International climate frameworks have begun to incorporate rights-based considerations and vulnerable communities into climate action. Furthermore, emphasis is being given to role of education, capacity building, access to information, all-inclusive participation and cooperation across global, national and sub national levels as essential components to tackle climate crisis.¹⁴

The youth right to participation and information are integral part of climate change dialogue which are often neglected and are not given same

¹⁴ Paris Agreement, *supra* note 2, pmbl.

legitimization as formal political actions. The global climate change discourse and negotiations are largely steered by traditional political players, wherein the zealous voices of the young are often lost or ignored or given a gimmicky pedestal without any outcome. Youth often face societal constraints that shape both their perceived role in effecting change and how their efforts to tackle issues like climate change are viewed. It's not just the biological age but also their lack of experience, wisdom and lack of resources which is often seen as hindrance to their ability in decision making. Attempts are made to delegitimise certain acts of dissent such as the global climate strike for school children (Fridays for future which is now a global movement engaging 7 million school children across countries including India¹⁵) led by Greta Thunberg. Often narratives against such acts of protest are made which portray the children and youth involved as immature, ignorant and irresponsible. Their actions are met with reluctance and scepticism and certain dismissal from the political discourse.¹⁶

As the youth of today is exposed to the environment concerns and subject of climate change crisis, they have to deal with complex global challenges. They question the status quo of economic and social conventions, oppose the irresponsible consumption behaviours and practices and the idea of using fossil fuels and carbon emissions etc. Such discontent is directly related to concerns of social inequality, poverty, and violence, as well as to environmental problems such pollution and the extinction of species.¹⁷

Government climate inaction, a sense of government failing them is a common sentiment which motivates the youth to act against climate change.

¹⁵ Koichi Hasegawa, *Fridays for Future: A Social Movements Perspective*, GLOBAL DIALOGUE (Oct. 13, 2022), <https://globaldialogue.isa-sociology.org/> (last visited Feb. 26, 2026).

¹⁶ Heejin Han and Sang Wuk Ahn, *Youth Mobilization to Stop Global Climate Change: Narratives and Impact*, 12 SUSTAINABILITY 412 (2020).

¹⁷ Karen O'Brien & Elin Selboe, *Exploring Youth Activism On Climate Change: Dutiful, Disruptive, And Dangerous Dissent*, 23 ECOLOGY AND SOCIETY 42 (2018).

also see , Kate Prendergast, Bronwyn Hayward et al , *Youth Attitudes and Participation in Climate Protest: An International Cities Comparison* *Frontiers in Political Science Special Issue: Youth Activism in Environmental Politics*, 3, FRONTIERS. POL. SCI (2021).

Most young adults go through a sort of transformation when they see destruction of environment. Then there is strong sense of solidarity among the activists, fuelled with a desire to bring change in politics, anti-capitalist and social justice sentiments¹⁸.

Thus how the young see climate action is rather radical in itself. For them climate change is not a far future but a reality they live in, a crisis so urgent and catastrophic that it requires destruction of traditional society, environment concerns surpass the economic concerns. In their story the villains are the state leaders, the media and the past generations who have now left the future generations, the young with this a huge burden of their inaction. The narrative changes accordingly as now the young instead of being victims- seek out justice, assert accountability, advocating for systemic transformation to address climate change¹⁹.

Dissent and protest have a legacy in global environmental movements and political discourse²⁰. It has always been non-confrontational – traditional - dutiful in its nature and participation (often adult led movements). However, since the understanding of climate change in youth is radical in a sense, the actions of youth are also somewhat radical and not conventional. The young generations often express their discontentment through non-traditional forms of dissent that are often disruptive, symbolic and confrontational in nature²¹. The general approach is to “do it yourself” “without relying on traditional structures such as lobbying and petitioning or associating politically²² . Certain young individuals take direct initiative in combating climate change by collectively engaging in grassroots, community-driven efforts. These include organizing events to raise awareness, developing educational programs, and leading campaigns centered around.²³ Recently more formal volunteer based global

¹⁸ Sarah Pickard, *Young environmental activists are doing it themselves*, 10 POL INSIGHT 4–7. (2019).

¹⁹ Han & Ahn, *Supra* note 15.

²⁰ Ramachandra Guha, *ENVIRONMENTALISM: A GLOBAL HISTORY*, Oxford University Press (2000).

²¹ United Nations, *Growing together in a changing climate: The United Nations, young people, and climate change*, (2009), <https://unfccc.int> (last visited Feb. 26, 2026)

²² Pickard, *supra* note 17.

²³ O'Brien, *supra* note 16

organization backed by social media have made their presence felt such as Fridays for future, Friends of the Earth, Gen Zero, and Climate Youth²⁴. Others youngsters are “ politically active through issue-specific activism, such as encouraging recycling or bicycling, signing online petitions, or purchasing "green" goods and adopting sustainable lifestyles.”²⁵ Thus the youth led activism goes beyond just climate strikes or school strikes and is becoming proactive, multifaceted and inclusive.

IV. In Court : Youth Civil Disobedience versus Government

In addition to traditional forms of protest like holding placards and marching with slogans, today's youth are embracing new and symbolic acts of protest, empowered by global access and social media platforms. Young activists effectively utilize social media platforms for coalition building, narrative creation, political conversation, and group cohesion. Social media also fosters group solidarity by providing spaces for interaction and emotional attachment within activist communities. Symbolic protest such using music , enacting drama plays in trains buses metro, to more disruptive form of protest such as : throwing food and paint on iconic artworks and cultural symbols , provocative acts of cycling to airport to halt private flights and gluing themselves to the planes etc., are some creative form of dissent being used to prompt debate on societal priorities, to raise questions about the ethical dilemmas of valuing art over urgent climate crisis and demand meaningful action on the same²⁶ .

In a response, the corporations and government have started to file law suits against protestors, charging them with criminal trespass, offence of causing public nuisance and criminal damage to properties etc.²⁷. According to global climate litigation database, there are more than 70 cases filed against protesters

²⁴Mathew Taylor & Johnathan Watts, *Climate crisis: 6 million people join latest wave of global protests*, *THE GUARDIAN* (Sep. 27, 2019), <https://www.theguardian.com>.

²⁵ O'Brien, *supra* note 16

²⁶ Fadeke Banjo, *Most Creative & Powerful Climate Change Protests Around COP 27*, *GLOBAL CITIZEN* (Nov. 22 2022), <https://www.globalcitizen.org> (last visted feb.26.2026)

²⁷ There are more than more than 70 law suits pending against protestors globally, Sabin Ctr. for Climate Change Law, Columbia Law School, Climate change Litigation Database, <https://www.climatecasechart.com/> (last visted on Feb 26,2026). also see, *R v. Brown* [2022] EWCA Crim 6.

of climate non action. However, the young activists have managed to use the courts of law as platform to not only raise climate awareness among masses, but also get them to legally recognize the existence of climate emergency.

Protestors are reviving legacy tactic of “**civil disobedience and necessity defence**” in courts while advocating for climate justice. The concept of civil disobedience is commonly understood as conscious, “deliberate violation of legal Norms in pursuit of vital social change”²⁸ which involves peaceful protest actions that intentionally violate laws, such as trespassing or blocking access to government property, to draw attention to social or political issues. Civil disobedient protestors then may use the “necessity defense” in court, arguing that breaking the law was necessary to prevent greater harm caused by the government policies they are protesting. This defence aims to highlight moral and political issues and educate the jury about the protestors' grievances. While protestors may hope for acquittal, their main objective is often to raise awareness and advocate for change rather than simply avoiding legal consequences. In present context protestors often raises the contention that the impact of climate change are so serious that acts of disobedience are necessary to avert the risk.

In the 2008 "Kingsnorth Trial" in the UK, six climate activists were acquitted of criminal damage charges for shutting down a coal-fired power station. Despite admitting to causing £30,000 in damage, they argued their actions aimed to prevent greater harm from climate change. The jury agreed, recognizing the necessity of their protest in light of the risks posed by climate change. This marked a significant legal acknowledgment of the defence of climate necessity.²⁹

Several other Courts have also shown sensitivity to the issue and have observed that climate protests even though involve elements of trespass and nuisance, are not without authority or not unlawful, as same are protected by fundamental

²⁸ John Alan Cohan, *Civil Disobedience and the Necessity Defence*, 6 PIERCE L. REV. 111 (2007).

²⁹John Vidal, *Not Guilty: The Greenpeace Activists Who Used Climate Change as a Legal Defence*, THE GUARDIAN (Sep. 10, 2008) <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2008/sep/11/>

rights of expression and assembly³⁰. Moreover, the citizen's means of expression and dissent cannot be limited to merely voting for or against governments and thus climate protests are necessary substitute when dialog between government and people become impossible³¹.

Young activists are also now using litigation to take their governments to court for in action and violating human rights obligation. In *Sacchi V. Argentina* case, sixteen young climate activists invoked the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) alleging failure on part of several states Brazil, Argentina, Germany, Türkiye, and France to adequately protect children's rights amid the climate crisis, particularly affecting indigenous communities, by failing to address climate change.³² The Committee acknowledged that states bear extraterritorial responsibility for the adverse effects of transboundary carbon emissions. However, it found that communication inadmissible due to non-exhaustion of available domestic remedies.

Although the committee declared their communication inadmissible on technical grounds, the case itself carries a broader significance as it brought the linkages between climate change effects on human rights in context of children to the forefront. Moreover, it reinforced that young people can be active participants within climate discourse, and bring about through legal avenues beyond traditional protest based activism.

V. Perspectives from India

When it comes to the developed and industrialized countries, it is often the upper class who has lead the protest on the forefront and often raise issues of climate change, carbon emissions, fossil fuel use, pollution etc, using law and litigation³³ as primary tool to express dissent. In developing countries such as

³⁰ Court of Appeal of LYON, September 16, 2019, no. 19168000015; See also, *Climate Activists On Trial In Paris For Stealing Macron Portraits*, THE GUARDIAN (Sep. 11, 2019). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/11/climate-change-activists-trial-paris-stealing-macron-portraits>.

³¹ District Court Mönchengladbach-Rheydt [District Court of North Rhine-Westphalia] Mar. 14, 2022, 21 Cs 721 Js 44/22 – 69/22(Ger.)

³² *Sacchi v. Argentina*, comm'n No. 104/2018, UN. Comm. On the rts. Of the Child, U.N Doc. CRC/C/88/D/104/2019(sept.22, 2021

³³ *Juliana v. United States* 947 F.3d 1159 (9th Cir. 2020).

India, its often the tribals, lower classes and middle classes who engage in socio-ecological movements related to forest use, deforestation, displacement, rampant infrastructure development, construction of dams, and loss of livelihood etc. To name a few, The Chipko Movement³⁴, Save Silent Valley Movement³⁵, and Narmada Bachao Aandolan³⁶ are major ecological protest that shaped the future of environmental movements in India.

India saw its first mass youth led transnational movement in as early as 1990's the response to the Bhopal disaster in 1984 sparked a transnational campaign for justice that continues till 2008. The International Campaign for Justice in Bhopal (ICJB), a transnational advocacy coalition formed in response to the disaster with a purpose to advocate for environmental justice by holding the Indian government, the Madhya Pradesh state government, and Dow accountable in the case. In its early phase, the ICJB brought together a range of activists groups in United States, but over time its outreach brought on board Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), wider Indian diaspora and student communities. By 20th anniversary of the disaster in 2004, student-led organizations such as Students for Bhopal (SfB), raised awareness, mobilized support, and pressured institutions and facilitated engagement from the Indian diaspora to take action. Through campus-focused campaigns, students have urged universities to divest from Dow Chemical, reject its funding, and demand accountability.³⁷

However, Climate change activism is still at nascent stage in India. A significant and refreshing role is being played by the non-governmental organizations, youth led organizations such as "Youth Climate Network

³⁴ Amit Mishra , *Chipko: an unfinished mission*, DOWN TO EARTH (April 30, 1993) ,<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/chipko-an-unfinished-mission-30883> (last visited Feb 26,2026)

³⁵ Shekar Dattatri , *Silent Valley – A People's Movement that Saved a Forest* , CONSERVATION INDIA (Sep.25, 2015),<https://www.conservationindia.org/case-studies/silent-valley-a-peoples-movement-that-saved-a-forest> (last visited Feb 26,2026)

³⁶ Pradip Swarnakar, *Climate Change, Civil Society, and Social Movement in India*, in INDIA IN A WARMING WORLD: INTEGRATING CLIMATE CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT (Navroz K. Dubash (ed.,2019).

³⁷ Renu Pariyadath & Reena Shadaan, *Solidarity after Bhopal: Building a Transnational Environmental Justice Movement*, 7 ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE 146-150 (2014).

(IYCN), Let India Breathe, Asian Environmental Youth Network” etc. Here is an example with which one can understand the present state of environmental and climate justice movement in India. In February 2022, Mumbai's Aarey Colony faced a sombre moment as nearly 1,500 trees were cut down despite public outcry and legal challenges. This action prompted protests across the city, leading to the arrest of 29 demonstrators mostly students and women, who were later granted bail. Authorities also enforced section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code in Aarey Colony and its vicinity, restricting movement and gatherings in the area³⁸. In another instance Disha Ravi, an activists affiliated with 'Fridays for Future,' an environmental organization known for its advocacy on climate change issues, was arrested. The group had previously engaged in protests against the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification, 2020. Following these activities, the group came under official government scrutiny and was subsequently issued legal notices as well.

Thus, government crackdown on green activists through arrest, detention, the shutting down of organizations and blocking of websites, not only pose a threat to democratic principles but violating the rights of youth to protest and express their concerns. Such government actions further infringe upon fundamental right to speech and liberty, as well as human right to life.³⁹

Where attempts are made to suffocate dissent, the courts have stepped in and restore check and balances. Bombay high court in a significant judgement related with the array protest upheld the rights of green activists to protest and dissent under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution. While hearing case against protestor arrested on charge of obstruction of public servant, court observed that the protestors was acting in a bona fide manner while exercising his democratic right as citizen to object, persuade and protest. The court quashed the FIR and stated that registering such cases is an invasion upon the rights of

³⁸ Mohua Das, *Creative dissent that is now shaping the 'Save Aarey' protests*, THE TIMES OF INDIA (Sep. 25, 2022), <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/creative-dissent-that-is-now-shaping-the-save-aarey-protests/articleshow/94431385.cms> (last visited Feb.26, 2026).

³⁹ Nagraj Adve, *Coming of Age of India's Youth Climate Movement*, THE INDIA FORUM (Mar. 16 , 2021), <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/coming-age-india-s-youth-climate-movement> (last visited Feb.26, 2026).

the citizen's protestors and amount to it suppressing their voice against what government considers to be a wrongful thing.⁴⁰

Despite facing challenges and risks, including legal actions, the movement has been successful in raising awareness and influencing public opinion, particularly among young people. Protest and climate activism by youth is significant in a way that it has successfully given pro-environment voices of the young some recognition and agency in politics of climate change. At COP25, Madrid saw world leaders united with youth activists to endorse an Intergovernmental Declaration on Children, Youth, and Climate Action, reflecting growing engagement between policy makers and young climate advocates.⁴¹ This ground-breaking commitment marks the first of its kind, aiming to expedite the implementation of inclusive, child, and youth-cantered climate policies and actions on both national and global scales. Thus youth climate movement has brought the issue of climate change on public agenda again. However, there are still certain challenges and gaps as the community do not have much leverage to bring about systematic changes in climate discourse.

VI. Conclusion

The involvement of youth in activism is often labelled as "click activism," reflecting their preference for online engagement over traditional on-the-ground protests. The narrative is changing, the climate action groups albeit unorganised and centralised are getting more vocal with more ground level engagement, participation through cleaning drives, holding protest at site etc. However, the government response towards dissent makes this a risky business, suffocating the youth movement at a nascent stage

On the mellow side of things, we are increasingly seeing more collaboration between government and youth moving towards more inclusive climate governance. For example, to foster youth led sustainable action, Environment and Climate Change Department of several State governments are appointing young experts as 'Climate Fellows' to focus on key areas such as waste

⁴⁰ Avijit Michael v. State of Maharashtra, Through Senior Inspector, Mumbai & Another Criminal Writ Petition No. 4181 of 2018 (Bom.).

⁴¹ UNICEF, *Declaration on Children, Youth and Climate Action*, <https://www.unicef.org/environment-and-climate-change/climate-declaration> (last visited Feb.26, 2026).

management, biodiversity, renewable energy, and water conservation⁴². Young environmental activists are expanding their efforts beyond individual and group climate actions to shape the climate agenda at various levels, from local to global. They are increasingly participating in policy discussions, fostering a closer partnership between youth and government representatives. Youth climate movements have not only advocated for improved environmental protection but have also bolstered civil and political rights such as access to justice, information, and protest. Their proactive engagement highlights their role as crucial actors in upholding human rights. It underscores the importance of including them in international dialogues strengthening global climate change decision-making forums

However, there is still much ground to cover. Prajesh Khanal, a YECAP Fellow and Youth Delegate, emphasized this point during the LDC5 Conference, stating, "We want you to trust us, allow us to be part of the dialogue, and discuss our future. It's not just the future of the youth, but the future of all of us." ⁴³

While young people are seen as both potential catalysts for change and the hope for the future, it's crucial for young individuals to translate their activism into tangible actions in their personal lives as well. It's imperative to equip them with the knowledge and tools to cope with these challenges and to ensure that national climate policies consider the rights and needs of children. Youth should be regarded as key stakeholders in climate discussions, and their ideas and activism should be respected and supported rather than dismissed as uninformed.

⁴² The Climate Group, <https://www.theclimategroup.org/> (last visited Feb.26, 2026).

⁴³ United Nations, Fifth United Nations Conference on The Least Developed Countries (LDC5) <https://www.un.org/ldc5/> (last visited Feb.26, 2026).