## CULTURAL JUSTICE IS CLIMATE JUSTICE!

- Apoorva Nangia

### *The Problem and the Solution*

The climate justice problem that I chose to solve in this course was based on my personal experiences. In January this year, I visited an art exhibition in Fort Kochi, Kerala called Aazhi Archives. I was deeply moved, both personally and politically, by a set of photographs that I saw and engaged with there. These photographs were by K.R. Sunil. They [portrayed](#) the loss of livelihood and artform in a Dalit fishing community in Kerala due to rising sea levels. As someone who did not think much of climate change earlier, I was jolted into the reality of its complicated and nuanced effects. While rising sea levels and loss of livelihood were imaginable problems, I had never thought of climate change as a problem of cultural identity and community. A little more introspection and reflection made me wonder – why did I not think of climate change this way?

Through some research, I found that the dominant narrative on climate change and even climate justice is about science, economics, technicalities, and expert-driven solutions. Newspaper articles, blogs, and academic writing rely on scientific reasoning and technology as ways of talking about the problem and its solutions. Most people are exposed to this narrative and are living in it. Hence, they are also thinking of climate change in this manner. This way of thinking was also ingrained in me until I saw those photographs. I found that there is very little research, writing, and portrayal of the cultural effects of climate change that impact us beyond our bodies but go to the root of our persons, identities, emotions, and communities.

As someone who is otherwise engaged in critical scholarship and literature, I quickly realised that this is a problem as our ways of thinking, understanding, and relating to the climate are dominated by the epistemic violence of scientific knowledge. This has implications as we are making meaning through this way of scientific thinking. If we think of the problem, its effects, and its solutions in the language of science, we are distancing ourselves and our communities from climate change and climate justice to be loyal to scientific rigour. The artists' photographs made me realise that we have completely ignored parts of ourselves by pledging allegiance to science. Can scientific language really account for our cultures and identities when culture (with all its subjectivity, personal attachment, community identity) is seen as the anti-thesis of science? We therefore need to move beyond scientific language to fully comprehend climate change and climate justice.

To solve the problem of language and discourse, I have written an online blog post titled 'Cultural Justice is Climate Justice!' (see point (1) of Annexure) that provides an alternative account to show the impact of climate change on our cultures. My solution to the problem of dominant discourse is based on challenging the scientific narrative. I use the language of culture to personalise and politicise climate change and climate justice. I have used multiple examples from mainstream and marginalised cultures to show that our culture is dependent on the environment around us and that it mediates our interaction with nature. Since climate change impacts the environment and nature, it also impacts our culture negatively. Through the blog, I push readers to think outside the bounds of scientific language and knowledge for them to recognise cultural loss to climate change and consequently push for cultural preservation and regeneration as a part of climate justice. (For more details on how my blog solves the problem, see the Theory of Change worksheet and pictorial representation in the point (5) of the Annexure.)

### Target Audience

I put up my blog on a WordPress website titled Climate Vulnerabilities. This website also has pieces by other people in the Climate Justice course (Lakshmi, Anshita, Aditya). What ties all our pieces together is that we are each talking about different kinds of vulnerabilities to climate change. I specifically deal with how cultures are vulnerable to climate change.

My target audience for the project is an online, English-speaking public primarily based in India. I used social media channels including WhatsApp and Instagram to publicise my blog and ensure that it reaches those who are not generally involved in climate justice. My blog is designed to attract the attention of readers who are completely unfamiliar with climate justice and only somewhat familiar with climate change. In order to connect with my target audience, I have relied on the following:

*First*, I use a lot of pictures and examples to help my audience visualise the various ways in which culture is vulnerable to climate change, as opposed to arguing in the abstract. Some of these pictures are personally important to me and are meant to evoke an emotional connect from readers as well. The pictures from the NLSIU campus are a way to connect with readers who are from here or from any other college (as these pictures may make them think about their own college space). I also used some pictures that I had taken at various beaches. These pictures are meant to represent moments of joy and love that we all feel when we go to the beach. They are meant to make us think about nature as personally, emotionally, and culturally important as opposed to being a background to our lives. The other pictures and examples are

meant to represent both mainstream and marginalised cultures. They are a way to materialise cultural loss to climate change in order to make it more relatable.

*Second*, I use simple language as the blog is meant to be accessible, non-academic, and personal.

*Third*, at the end of my blog, I have requested readers to engage with me via Comments. I use the comments section as a space where readers can reflect on their own cultures and how they are affected by climate change. The comments section serves two purposes. One, it helps me see the impact that the piece has on readers and is a way for me to test whether I have reached my target audience. Two, the reflections here are not only meant as responses to the blog but are also a way for other readers to see how different kinds of cultural practices are being impacted by climate change. The comments actualise and further personalise my blog's argument.

### *Timeline of the Project*

I started working on the project in March, which is when I thought about the problem that I wish to work on. I did preliminary academic research on the place of culture in conversations about the climate. Through this, I found scholars talk about how we do not imagine a place for culture in climate change and climate justice and how this is problematic. This reified my faith in the need to solve this problem. However, I did not want to do it in an academic manner as it would distance my work from the larger public, whom I wanted to reach.

Initially, I was unclear about the format of the solution. I was clear that I wanted my project to be a piece of writing that challenges dominant narrative. In order for it to reach a lot of people, I had hoped for it to be published on a more widely read platform like an online newspaper. However, I realised a few things – *first*, publication timelines will not fit well with the rapid timeline of this project; *second*, it is important for me to be able to put in a lot of personal material into the piece, which I may not be able to do with the politics of knowledge and writing in publication spaces; *third*, it is more important for me to change the way of thinking of even a few people and get them to engage with my work rather than reaching a very big audience where I do not have a way to gauge impact and interaction with my work. Due to these reasons, by the first week of April, I decided to switch to an online blog post that is published on a self-built WordPress site (see Project Proposal in point (3) of the Annexure for more details).

In April, I worked on my prototype. I researched about the various ways in which cultural practices are dependent on nature. This involved reading a lot of non-academic literature including magazines about nature and climate, personal blogs, newspaper articles (especially

opinion pieces). While conducting this research, I was careful to ensure that I am providing enough space to both mainstream, dominant cultures and marginalised cultures. Further, I also wished to show culture beyond religion and through a more secular lens. For the prototype report, I put together this research and wrote the initial version of the blog.

After the submission of the Prototype Report (see point (4) of Annexure) in the end of April, I worked on refining my blog and adding visual representation to it. I requested one of my friends from NLS who is otherwise unfamiliar with this area to read my blog and reflect on whether it changed their way of thinking. While they found the blog to be helpful, they suggested that I put in pictures that are personally important. This led me to using pictures of the NLS campus and the beach, as I discussed above. I sourced the pictures of NLSIU campus from various students so as to get multiple perspectives of campus life. I got in touch with them for permission to use their work in my blog.

I also went through a lot of other images on the Internet to find those that are relatable and represent cultural practices of various communities. Along with adding visual material, I also proofread and simplified the language of the blog. Lastly, while I had hoped to have a more personal background to the blog, my lack of knowledge in website design and the limitations of a WordPress website prevented me from doing so. I planned to publish my blog by 12th May but could only do so on 15th May. On 15th and 16th May, I used social media channels to publicise the blog to an online audience (see links to these in point (6) of the Annexure).

### *Gauging Impact*

I gauged the impact of my blog in 3 ways: (the proof to these three can be found in point (7) of the Annexure)

*First*, the number of reads. As on 18th May, 2023, I had 148 reads on my blog as per the statistics collected by the website. (See point 7(i) of the Annexure)

*Second*, comments on the blog. I received both anonymous and named comments on the blog where readers reflected on how they are culturally and emotionally connected with nature and how that relationship is vulnerable to climate change. Some readers also reflected on how their way of thinking has changed after reading the article. I particularly enjoyed a comment by Aditya where they talk about how rituals about rivers in their region no longer hold meaning and significance because of our counterproductive efforts to control rivers. Another comment by Poorvi Yerrapureddy details how their celebration of Sankranthi has changed because of global warming and changes in weather patterns. (More details of these comments can be found in the point 7(ii) of the Annexure.)

*Third*, some personal messages that I received from readers. One of these messages (attached as the last picture in point 7(iii) of the Annexure) provides a very interesting caveat to my article – that we must also recognise how our cultures may end up harming the environment and contributing to climate change. We must be cognisant of whose cultures we are talking about so that we do not perpetuate cultural hierarchies in the name of climate justice.

While the number of comments and messages have not been very high (9 comments + 3 messages), I feel good about making these 12 people (at least) think about climate change differently. Their interaction with my blog and feedback is a way for me to see the impact of my work and that I have in fact made a small dent in changing the scientific discourse on climate.

### *Overall Learnings from the Project and Course*

I have two broad learnings from making this project and engaging with the Climate Justice Course:

*First*, I moved beyond imagining my work as having no potential for change to conceptualising a blog that actually created impact. Throughout Law School, I never imagined myself doing a solution-oriented project. My work usually stopped at the stage of writing but in this case, I pushed past that (thanks to feedback from both course instructors) by thinking about presentation, format, distribution, and audience engagement. This has not only taught me to be solution-oriented but has also shown me the value and joy of being able to reach other people through my work.

*Second*, my understanding of climate justice is now one of inner reflection, introspection, and connecting with people and beings around us. I am generally sceptical about the idea of justice because I always thought of it in an abstract, vague, and impersonal manner. This course has introduced me to new meanings of justice that are grounded in community and emotion. As someone who believes in feminist and queer politics, the project and course have helped me visualise and materialise meanings of justice that are faithful to radical ideas of love, connectedness, and community. My learnings from the course are based on both its content and its methods. Our class discussions about ourselves and our *feelings* (especially in an academic space where we only talk about thoughts and not feelings, which is a manifestation of scientific knowledge), our focus on an inner journey that is slow, careful, and change-oriented, and the various people we listened to gave me new ways of thinking about the climate. I hope that through my project, I have extended this change to others as well by vocalising a different language that is rooted in community and identity to think about climate justice.

# ANNEXURES

1. The Climate Vulnerabilities website is [here](#) and my blog is [here](#).

2. The above report is based on addressing various components of the Strength of Idea Rubric, which can be found [here](#).

3. Project Proposal: The initial proposal for my project (as formulated by the end of March) can be found [here](#).

4. Prototype Report: An intermediate level report and a prototype of the blog (as of end of April) can be found [here](#).

5. The transformative nature of my project is highlighted through [this](#) Theory of Change worksheet. A pictorial representation of the change brought about through my project can be found [here](#).

6. Social media distribution of the blog on my [WhatsApp](#) and [Instagram](#).

7. Impact via:

   i.     Number of reads:



   ii.    Comments: All the comments can be found at the bottom of the online blog [here](#). Please see images of comments I have referenced above:

Aditya

16th May 2023    Edit

Very interesting and relatable. I was forced to rethink how my culture is shaped by the annual flooding of the Kosi and Bagmati rivers, and how the food, clothing, festivals, and even the marriage rituals are shaped around the flooding. Historically, floods were an annual event where river water would slowly rise, deposit silt across the countryside, and then recede in a month.

The unmindful construction of dams and sand mining from the bed has disrupted the river flow, resulting in a stark incompatibility between the flooding pattern. Now the water keeps filling in the reservoir (which we don't need at all, as we do not need to store water), until it overflows, and the water comes with a force which destroys the land and the soil, instead of enriching it. This also has a cultural bearing, because the newer generations are unable to understand the rituals, and the respect for the rivers which the ancestors had in their rituals, religion, folk tales and songs etc. That also has an impact on the soil profile, due to which the green cover is receeding and agriculture is getting impactd adversely, leading to global warming.

iii.    Personal messages: (I have removed the names of senders to ensure privacy and anonymity.)
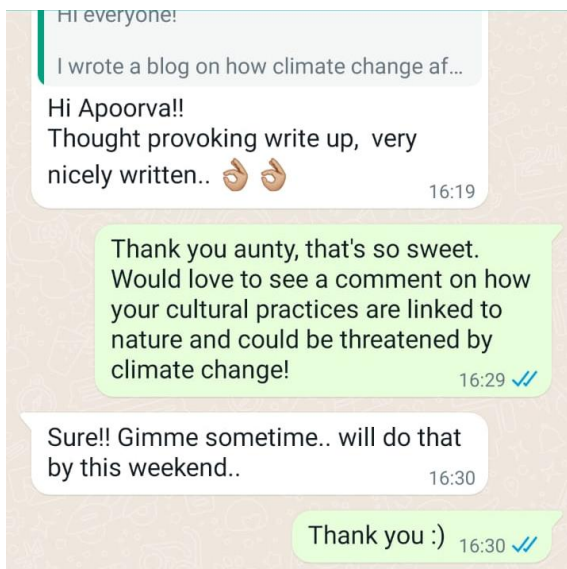
This was a lovely read! Thanks for writing it.

Thank you!

Replied to your story

That was so good! I learnt so much through reading that. Indigenous communities around the world have been saying the same things but modern, capitalist ways of viewing nature and the world around us is part of what has contributed to climate change. Climate change not only has a cultural impact but the way we interact with nature is often cultural in itself. So it's nice to challenge whose idea of culture are we following? Anyway, that was just a different point to your article and not really directly related. All that to say, i really enjoyed reading that and u r doing so many cool things!!