

Change Agent

Sparks flew as the UN climate change report was put together, yet panel head R K Pachauri found the experience exhilarating
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Back from Paris after presenting a climate change report, Dr Rajendra Pachauri was disturbed by a mosquito's buzz as he rested in his New Delhi home last week.

What alarmed the environmental expert, who chaired the United Nations-backed panel which issued the report, was not the insect's presence so much as the timing: This is the height of the northern Indian winter and flies and mosquitoes ought to have vanished.

They are surviving because the period of intense cold tends to be very short. And as these vectors of disease thrive, they cause anything from a loose tummy to dengue and malaria.

For the 66-year-old scientist, it was one more reminder of the challenges facing humankind.

If the Pachauri panel's report is accurate – and, indeed there is wide acceptance of its findings – the evidence is as clear as it can get that “anthropogenic” factors are at play. In other words, human beings are to blame.

From warming temperatures to rising sea levels, the climate is changing alarmingly for the worse. Man's quest to travel further and faster in vehicles powered by fossil fuels such as petrol and the appetite for meat reared on grain that is causing the flattening of forests into farms are part of the problem. So too the energy consumed by man's desire to work and rest in air-conditioning.

But try getting man to acknowledge his errors.

For a person whose appointment caused controversy – many thought he would be a patsy for the rich nations of the Western world – Dr Pachauri found that even getting scientists to agree on issues wasn't easy.

The report was put together by 150 lead authors and another 450 contributing authors. Another 623 experts from 43 nations made expert reviews, offering 30,000 comments. In the final days when the panel's findings were knocked into shape, 300 delegates from 113 countries fiercely debated its contents.

For instance, the issue of hurricanes caused a tempest on the panel. One author was critical of another's view on the frequency and intensity of hurricanes, which are common in North America. That caused the other to withdraw.

For Dr Pachauri, this sometimes meant taking an upset expert to a bar for a drink to calm down. Even so, he says the experience was exhilarating.

“It was joy, I had a set of very capable colleagues and co-chairs of the working groups,” he says.

Dr Pachauri split up the panel into three working groups, each with co-chairs from a rich nation and a developing country. The groups met in cities like Bergen, Trieste and Beijing.

“We deliberately chose different locations because it was important for scientists in different countries to interact with the working group,” says Dr Pachauri. “It takes a lot of management and organization but the spirit and motivation you get are extremely heartening.”

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The climate change report caused a worldwide stir. Dr Pachauri says he is amazed at the overwhelming response it has received.

This gives him hope that some steps may be taken to check the deterioration. Governments, he says, will fall in line when the public begins to articulate its concern.

For instance, people could begin by installing solar water heaters in homes, thereby expressing a demand for “green electricity”.

“It may be a small segment to start with, but it can escalate and multiply,” he says.

At the rate at which things are moving, how quickly will the planet be inhospitable to man?

Dr Pachauri says there are parts of Earth, such as the Maldives, where people may believe that the world has passed the debating point.

“If you talk to the President of the Maldives, he’ll tell you they are already in a very difficult situation. If you look at their point of view, the answer you would get is we have crossed the stage where things could have been acceptable,” he says.

- **Your report sounded like a doomsday forecast.**

What is bothersome is the trend basically. There are several issues on which we can now carry greater scientific conviction and credibility. What is serious are two aspects. First, that we are going to see many more extreme events and that could impact on very fragile and vulnerable sections of society across the world. And the second concern is the differential impact in different parts of the world. For instance, the Arctic is warming at the rate of twice the global average. With the melting of the ice... sea-level rise is going to become of greater concern than in the past.

- **Are any parts of South-east Asia under threat?**

There are parts of Thailand which are certainly vulnerable. There are parts of Indonesia which are very vulnerable. When you talk about vulnerability, sea level rise is only one part of the problem. We also have other impacts, on agriculture, for instance.

- **Singapore?**

Here is any place which is less than a metre above sea level, there is reason for worry. The important thing to remember is one doesn’t really have to wait for the complete

submergence of some of these areas, but the very fact that the sea level will increase and pose threats translates into much more severe storms, storm surges that take place, and a lot of these extreme events would lead to far more severe consequences than would be the case otherwise.

▪ **Did you look at the haze in South-east Asia?**

We are aware that you have this haze arising from Indonesia by burning of fire or whatever. In the region it certainly does have an impact, but a lot of localized studies have to be done to understand what this would be.

▪ **Are monsoon patterns changing?**

There is some evidence of that and of course our projections this time show that, in sub-tropical areas, precipitation levels are going to come down, in temperate areas they are going to go up.

▪ **Which means more droughts and less rains?**

It means more droughts and more floods. In other words, we would have very low levels of water available in certain periods and an excess of it during other periods. It also has some policy implications. How do you impound that water, how do you protect people?

▪ **The rapid economic growth of China and India are often mentioned in climate change. What do you say?**

The problem is caused by the concentration of gases in the atmosphere, which is the result of cumulative emissions by the industrialized countries since the middle of the 19th century. We must understand what the causes of climate change are. These causes are not emissions that are taking place today but a result of emissions that have taken place over a long period of time.

For this reason, the framework convention on climate change clearly requires the developed countries to take the first set of actions. Those unfortunately have not happened... I agree that China, India and the larger developing countries should certainly not make the mistakes of the developed world.

▪ **Are these countries doing enough to check the emission of greenhouse gases?**

For a variety of local reasons we (in India and China) are certainly doing much more in terms of improving energy efficiency and greater use of renewable energy. There is a lot more we can do.

▪ **What do you say about Asia's rising fascination with cars?**

This fascination cannot be changed. But what we can change is the extent of the usage of these cars... What we need to do is to create options, alternatives by, let's say, provision of public transport.

▪ **Do you think that the best thing at this point for the world is that Al Gore runs for the US presidency and wins?**

I have known Al Gore for a very long time and as senator he was extremely active. If you read his book *Earth In The Balance*, the man has laid down environmental protection as a religion and he certainly believed in it. But while he was vice-president he just sort of became mute on the subject and really didn't do too much.