

WHY NORTH-SOUTH INTERSECTIONALITY MATTERS FOR CLIMATE JUSTICE

Perspectives of South Asian
Australian Youth Climate Activists



A report by Sapna South
Asian Climate Solidarity



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Sapna Sydney catch up and banner painting, 2022

FOREWORD

by **Dr Ruchira Talukdar**

Why the Global South matters in climate activism

“If you were going to pick the worst continent to live on as the climate changes, it would be Australia. We are “a poster child for what the rest of the world will be dealing with,” US Climatologist Michael Mann, in *Wild Weather*, A BBC Panorama Production, screened on ABC News on 29th March 2022.¹

Climate change is already unfolding in Australia, as seen through the catastrophic floods in southeast Queensland and Northern New South Wales in late summer this year.^{2,3} However I feel at odds with having to imagine Australia as the epicentre of the unfolding global climate crisis, and this is why. I come from South Asia, a region that includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and is home to a quarter of global humanity. It is one of the world’s most climate vulnerable regions on account of a large poor, rural, and subsistence-livelihoods-based population. Millions of such South Asians are already on the frontlines of climate impacts and have far less coping capacity compared to average Australians owing to a range of factors.⁴ We only need to observe the devastation to human lives caused by the Pakistan floods to appreciate this difference.⁵

The global South and low-lying island-countries are already facing irreversible climate impacts. If Australia is a poster child for what the rest of the world WILL be dealing with (note the future tense), then has South Asia, and broadly the global South, and millions who are already climate-vulnerable there, been rendered invisible? Since we are all in this climate crisis together, what role can Australian climate activism play to ensure that climate vulnerable people in the global South are not rendered invisible in the western imagination?

“

Diversifying the climate movement and its narrative can, through inclusion of intergenerational migrant stories that connect climate vulnerable places in the global North and South such as Bangladesh and Western Sydney, create a model for effective climate solidarity.”

DR RUCHIRA TALUKDAR

These questions lead into the purpose of this research report which is a first-of-its-kind of climate justice report highlighting the role migrant people of colour activists can play in Australian climate activism by: putting the global climate crisis in perspective and asking Australia, an affluent country where settler colonialism still persists, and one of the world's largest exporters of coal, the fossil fuel most responsible for climate change, to take climate responsibility for the whole planet.

Why North-South Intersectionality Matters in Climate Activism; Perspectives of South Asian Australian Youth Climate Activists is based on interviews with 12 Australian youth climate activists of South Asian origin. The report highlights stories connecting climate impacts in South Asia and Australia that respondents have intergenerationally learnt and experienced. It addresses challenges faced by youth activists of colour in making space for such climate stories in a white-dominated Australian climate movement, where the narrative emphasises risks to Australians in the future. The report suggests pathways for diversifying the story in Australian climate activism to make it inclusive of life-experiences of migrants from South Asia and more broadly the global South.

Why North-South Intersectionality Matters in Climate Activism and its suggestions provide a timely intervention into Australian climate activism and its narrative. Successive Australian Bureau of Statistics data demonstrate that Asian and particularly South Asian migrations are rapidly increasing racial diversity and multiculturalism in Australia.⁶ Evidently, this rapid increase in racial diversity and multiculturalism in Australia is being driven by migrations from parts of the world that are already climate vulnerable. But Australia's climate movement remains largely white-dominated and does not reflect this increasing diversity in Australia society.

Diversifying the climate movement and its narrative can, through inclusion of intergenerational migrant stories that connect climate vulnerable places in the global North and South such as Bangladesh and Western Sydney, create a model for effective climate solidarity. With geo-political relations between Australia and South Asia, based on coal and other forms of energy increasing, and with a sizeable South Asian diaspora in Australia that is well engaged in public dialogue, building an Australian-South Asian climate solidarity can prove especially relevant as a first step towards North-South solidarity.

Finally, this report is both for youth and older South Asians and POCs in Australian climate activism; to think through how they can strengthen their stories and leadership. It is also for the entire climate movement in Australia; to reflect and transform its narrative and approach towards diversity.

Dr. Ruchira Talukdar

Climate Justice Researcher,
Activist working across Australia and India,
Co-Founder at Sapna South Asian Climate Solidarity



Sapna Melbourne catch up, 2022.

INTRODUCTION

South Asian Australian youth activist stories can bring North-South intersectionality and strengthen climate justice

A defining feature in the Australian climate movement in the last decade has been the rise of the next generation, prominently seen through youth activism by groups such as Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC), First Nations Seed mob network (Seed), Pacific Climate Warriors (PCW), and most recently School Strikes for Climate Change (SS4C). The next generation's activism is seen as distinct from mainstream climate activism owing to factors discussed below.

Youth movements are decolonising and diversifying climate activism

Critical environmental scholars have noted that mainstream environmental and climate organisations and their networks in the Global North often lack racial diversity,⁷ even when diversity is enshrined as a value.⁸ Scholars point to technocratic and de-historicised framing of campaign goals by mainstream organisations as factors⁹ underpinning why ethnic minority and racialised migrant community members are largely absent from mainstream climate activism¹⁰ and why their 'everyday sustainability' practices don't find representation in environmentalism.¹¹

Youth movements on the other hand more explicitly foreground climate justice. They frame the issue not only in terms of the science of climate change, but also the social world, in which race, class and gender intersect to form a system of interlocking oppressions.¹²

Globally, in both developed and developing countries, youth activism is seen as bringing awareness about the colonial and racist underpinnings of the current climate crisis amongst young people,¹³ and being human focussed in their justice. Youth climate movements in the Global North are more likely to be racially diverse than mainstream climate movements, possibly even led by Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) activists.

Seed is a national network of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island youth in Australia that talks about climate change from the perspective that Indigenous people are already experiencing its impacts and are also worst affected by its cause – fossil-fuel mining – on their lands. For First Nations people, 'everything is wrapped up in colonisation'.¹⁴ The Indigenous climate justice narrative recognises past, present and future injustices towards First Nations people.

The Pacific Climate Warriors is a grassroots network of Pacific Island youth whose island homes are already threatened by climate change. The network creates a collective identity by 're-envisioning islanders as warriors defending rights to homeland and culture'.¹⁵

The advocacy of Seed and Pacific Climate Warriors demonstrates the salience of cultural identity and cultural narratives in youth climate activism of historically marginalised peoples. Infact these identities and stories assume a critical relevance under the unfolding climate crisis. Their advocacy also draws attention to 'intra-generational' climate injustice, described by climate justice activists as disproportionate impacts of climate change on people around the world, and that those most impacted have contributed the least to the problem.¹⁶

Emergence of Gen Z POC climate activists and the making of this study

Research that brings migrant perspectives from communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change is seen as essential for broadening the climate story in western society.¹⁷ In particular, how families with generations born in different countries interpret experiences of climate change and tell an intergenerational climate story needs attention in research.¹⁸ Second generation POC migrant youth whose families come from climate impacted countries are seen as ‘uniquely positioned’ between cultural and generational climate experiences, and likely to enact an intergenerational climate story.¹⁹

This project began with the need to understand what a climate movement story that is inclusive of racial and cultural diversity can look like in Australia’s highly multicultural society.²⁰ As a South Asian in the Australian climate movement since 2008, experiencing the absence of ‘others like me’ within movement organisations and at protests posed a contradiction to the multi-ethnic reality of Australia’s largest cities.²¹ The possibility for the participation of POCs in climate activism through youth movements made it possible to undertake this research agenda. So I talked to youth in my own community.

I interviewed two sets of second-generation South Asian youth who have grown up in Australia, and were aged between 17 and 23, on their perceptions of climate change and climate activism in Australia, and the role their identities play in shaping these perceptions. I conducted the first set of 10 interviews in 2012, and the second set of 12 interviews, which forms the primary basis of this report, nearly ten years later in 2021.

In 2012, even though Australia’s first youth activist network AYCC was already established, I could not identify any young South Asians actively involved in climate activism. This hinted at the need for relevant pathways even in youth movements to attract migrant youth of colour. Instead, I spoke to ten Melbourne-based university students for ‘A pilot study of South Asian youth perceptions on climate change and climate activism in Australia’.²²



I found that despite being aware of climate change, they did not prioritise climate change for action, compared to certain social justice issues. This was largely owing to a sense of non-identification with an issue framed and dominated by white activists. I found that interconnected perceptions and influences including family values, exposure to South Asia, feeling unrepresented in the Australian mainstream, and a pervasive lack of understanding in Australian society of the Global South where their families come from, acted as underlying factors in their reluctance to participate in climate activism.

These findings were consistent with existing research. Second-generation immigrant youth who have grown up with a global environmental education and vocabulary may be better versed than first generation migrants in the language of ‘climate crisis’.²³ They are likely to be more comfortable in participating in public activism compared to their parents who are constrained by a range of factors including priorities that come with navigating a foreign country.²⁴ But, gender, class, race, ethnicity and dis/ability impact on youth activist engagement; they could be reluctant to identify with the role of an activist despite political engagement on the issue.²⁵

However, despite differences in political and global outlooks from their parents, their concerns and understandings around the environment – including value-based perceptions of whether to prioritise climate or social justice issues – are likely to be intergenerationally influenced.²⁶

Both the climate crisis and youth activism have grown exponentially since the 2012 interviews. The latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report released in 2021 indicates that permanent and irreversible changes such as sea level rise have already been set in motion.²⁷ ‘Climate anxiety’ is argued to be one of the defining features of ‘Generation Z’ born up to five years before or after the year 2000, currently aged 15 to 25.²⁸ Since 2018, Gen Z climate activists have ‘revitalised’ climate action by striking from school.²⁹

In Australia, programs such as AYCC’s ‘Student Climate Leadership’ and SS4C that recruit school students in climate activism appear to have proven effective in attracting racially diverse youth. South Asians are now visible in climate activism. In 2021, I spoke to 12 South Asians based in Melbourne and Sydney who were either high school or university students and had entered climate activism through a combination of AYCC and SS4C between 2016 and 2019.

The 2012 pilot study had generated an indicative set of concerns of social justice-minded South Asian youth related to how mainstream Australian climate activism was framed and how those who dominated it were disconnected from human justice needs in South Asia. Some respondents were also influenced by their migrant parents’ apprehensions about political activism and expectations from them to ‘study well and get a good job’, corroborating existing research on behaviours of South Asian diasporas around aspirations to be seen as the model minority.³⁰ Further, unlike issues directly involving global South peoples’ justice such as for refugees, where some participated, identity-based values had made nearly everyone decide against actively participating in climate activism despite awareness and concern.

Larissa Baldwin, former co-director at Seed, articulated a similar sentiment to what the 2012 respondents felt about the mismatch of climate activism’s narratives to their cultural values and the need to tell the climate story in a culturally relevant manner³¹:

“

It was a deliberate decision not to use the existing climate language...what we’ve seen in mainstream media is whether climate change is real or not, which party has best policies. It means nothing to black fellas! To black fellas, we talk about Country. When we talk about Country, we talk about the environment, about our communities, about culture!”

Aims and Questions

I wanted to understand whether groups like Seed and PCW South Asian youth could also socially reframe climate change to make it inclusive of their justice concerns. So I turned to the 2021 interviews with South Asian youth who are climate activists with these overarching questions in mind:



Could South Asian Australian youth build their own climate leadership through prioritising their social and cultural imperatives and telling their own climate stories as South Asians? If so, what language and narratives might they adopt?

I sought to understand whether, like in the 2012 study, the intersectional identities of these 12 respondents – race, class, gender, religion, where they live, and where their families come from – shaped their perceptions of what climate justice is and what a climate story should be. Being of a generation that suffers ‘climate anxiety’, how do they interpret the climate crisis through their own lived experiences and that of their families in Australia and South Asia? How they negotiate a white-dominated climate movement space, and how they negotiate family expectations and apprehensions, could, in combination, tell a story of South Asian Australian youths’ foray into climate activism on their own terms. Such a story could highlight what constitutes justice, representation and cultural relevance for them.

This study can bring North-South intersectionality to the climate story

Not only do second generation migrants whose families come from climate-impacted places hold diversified understandings of climate change; they also bridge the two worlds through intergenerational and experiential knowledge of the climate crisis.³² Western Sydney, with a high migrant demographic (including a large South Asian population) and experience of climate change through extreme heat, is essentially a melting pot of migrant families’ intergenerational experiences, tying together where they come from and where they live, through the climate crisis.

Sharing South Asian climate activist experiences from this study could generate vital cross-cultural learning to decolonise and diversify climate activism. It could help to connect the climate crisis to multi-generational South Asian communities through telling the climate story in culturally relevant ways. This study is therefore designed as an interview-based qualitative research with implications for future action and practical learning in these above-mentioned directions.

Based on findings from the 2021 interviews, it proposes what constitutes a South Asian Australian climate story, and what such a story signifies for strengthening intra-generational justice, especially one that takes an intersectional global North-South view in light of the climate crisis already unfolding in South Asia. Complimenting narratives from Seed and the Pacific Climate Warriors, a South Asian climate story can strengthen the intra-generational climate justice imperative for Australia, an affluent fossil fuel economy where settler colonialism still persists, to take climate action. Effectively, a South Asian climate story can further push Australia to fulfil its local and global climate responsibility.



METHODS

This qualitative study recommends actions and generates insights for cultural literacy in youth climate activism in Australia, to make this space conducive for South Asian and more broadly migrant POC leadership. For this project, I interviewed 12 youth South Asian activists aged between 17 and 23 who had started in the Australian Youth Climate Coalition and School Strikes 4 Climate between 2017 and 2019. Through an initial set of 6 South Asian youth activists already known to me, I approached six others in their peer network. Everyone I approached with the research proposal was willing to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in November 2021.

Respondents

Ten of the respondents identify as she/her, and two as he/him. Countries of origin of their families span Bangladesh (3), Botswana (1) with South Indian heritage, India (5), Pakistan (1), and Sri Lanka (2). All respondents were raised in Australia. Seven respondents are based in New South Wales and five in Victoria. In New South Wales, participants live in Western Sydney on Dharug land (5), North Sydney on Dharug and Guringai land (1), and the inner west on Gadigal land (1, who relocated to Sydney from a country town for higher studies). In Victoria, participants live in Naarm/Melbourne's inner north on Wurundgeri land (1), inner city (1, who relocated from Meanjin/Brisbane for higher studies), southeast (1) and south (1), all on Wurundjeri and Bunurong land, and outer west on Bunurong and Wadawurung land (1).



Interview approach and questions

The aim of the interviews was to unpack details across three areas:

- How backgrounds and identities shaped their notion of climate justice
- Experiences within AYCC and SS4C, particularly whether they felt framed in or out of the story and activism and how they responded to possible marginalisation of their stories and experiences
- How their families responded, and how they reconciled any difference between activism and their families' perceptions

The interviews were designed so that respondents could reflect on their activist experience over time, in order to trace their journeys across these three areas. Starting questions for each section were therefore very broad and interspersed with prompts to probe deeper:

- Tell us about where you grew up and about your family
- When and how did you join climate activism?
- What were the highlights and challenges of your experience?
- What and how did you tell your climate story?
- What does your family think? Are they proud or cautious?

Interviews were conducted online on zoom. They were in-depth in nature and ran for approximately one hour each. All participants were willing to be recorded. I transcribed the recorded interviews and analysed them into themes.

To enable maximum agency over the representation of their voices, interviewees were given the opportunity to read, edit and correct their transcripts. An early draft of the report was sent to interviewees in June 2022 and interviewees were invited to give feedback on the report.

Identifying themes

Interview responses were thematically organised on the basis of the three major areas for this study – backgrounds and how this informs the idea of justice, experience in climate activism, and family responses. A theme that recurred across all three areas is that of the role of place. Western Sydney, including its demography and climate, emerged as a dominant factor in shaping identities and notions of justice, of experiences in climate activism, and negotiating family expectations. For those located there, Western Sydney added another thick layer of social context beyond their intergenerational identities and relations to South Asia, which shaped their perceptions and actions towards climate activism. As a dominant factor in shaping identities and notions of justice, of experiences in climate activism, and negotiating family expectations. For those located there, Western Sydney added another thick layer beyond their intergenerational identities and relations to South Asia, which shaped their perceptions and actions.



11 Photo: March 15, 2019, School Strike at Town Hall, Sydney. Photo credit: School Strike 4 Climate.

Analysing findings

Conceptual approaches from intersecting literatures in three areas proved useful in discussing the findings. Studies on the uneven playing field of climate activism between the high profile actions of School Strikers and youth who experience climate change everyday³³ helped to locate respondents along a spectrum of privilege from a global perspective, to make sense of their discursive and embodied understanding of climate justice, and explain why their narratives should be centred. Studies on representation of School Strikes combined with studies on race and representation in the Australian media helped to analyse respondents' inter-related experiences around tokenisation within the movement and as its media spokespersons. Studies on political identities of second generation South Asian migrants,³⁴ combined with studies of behaviours of South Asian first generation migrants in Australia,³⁵ helped to make sense of the families' responses to activism. Their activist journeys in the movement and with their families offer new understandings for respective literatures.

Presenting findings

Findings are presented as journeys in order to trace how experiences and exposures over time – to where they live, to South Asia, to activism – generated new understandings and actions on their part. This temporal approach helped to distinguish between two phases in activist journeys; first when they experienced challenges and next when they negotiated these challenges. This helped to draw inferences about relevant actions to create pathways for South Asians and POCs more broadly in youth climate activism. Attending to temporality helped to draw out the social complexity implicit in their negotiation of family expectations. It helped to trace how they acquired layers of identity and understanding of justice in their growing up years that they brought to activism. The process generated insights towards building intercultural understanding in youth climate activism. Finally, presenting activist journeys 'at home and in the world' lent a fuller context to their understandings and actions through including both social and political spheres.

Discussion and Recommendations for Action

At a broader level, the discussion and recommendations provide pointers on cultural literacy for youth climate activism in Australia, to make climate activist spaces conducive for POC migrant youth's participation and leadership. More specifically, the recommendations set out provisional actions for Sapna South Asian Climate Solidarity towards building South Asian youth's climate leadership in Australia. This section proposes a social reframing of the Australian climate movement narrative from a South Asian perspective.



PROFILES

Participants' profiles provide a first level of insight into their cultural contexts, worldviews, and climate activism. Participants consented to the following profile information being included in the study. All names have been changed in the report to protect respondents' identities as per ethics guidelines.

ARATI



Arati joined AYCC in 2018, and organised School Strikes events in 2018 and 2019. Her family comes from South India. She went to a public school. She studies at University of Sydney. She lives in North Sydney.

GURDEEP



Gurdeep moved to Sydney for higher studies in 2018 and joined the AYCC Schools Leadership Program. She organised Strikes events in 2018 and 2019. Her family comes from Punjab, India. She went to a private school. She studies at University of Sydney and works as an organiser in the climate movement. She lives in Sydney's inner-west.

HOPE



Hope joined AYCC as a volunteer organiser in 2017 and is now a national campaigner there. She has grown the AYCC network in Western Sydney and trained activists of colour in School Strikes to tell their stories. Her family comes from Botswana and are of South Indian heritage. She went to a public school. She studies at Macquarie University and lives in Western Sydney.

JAGJIT



Jagjit joined SS4C in 2018. Since 2019 he has worked on various projects and campaigns for economic and social justice. His family comes from Mumbai, Maharashtra, India. He migrated to Australia at the age of twelve with his family. He went to a public school. He studies at Monash University and lives in Melbourne's outer-west.

JAHIN



Jahin joined SS4C in 2019. He organised School Strikes events in Brisbane and later Melbourne, where he moved for higher studies in 2021. He was the face of a campaign to push Australia's largest energy company to divest from fossil fuels. His family comes from Dhaka, Bangladesh. He went to a selective public school. He studies at University of Melbourne and works for the Australian Greens. He lives in Melbourne.

JOY



Joy joined AYCC in 2019. She has organised with SS4C since 2020, largely playing a mentoring role. Her family comes from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She went to a private school. She studies at University of Melbourne and works as an organiser in the climate movement. She lives in Melbourne's inner-north.

NAMRATA



Namrata has organised in School Strikes since 2019. She has also been involved in climate litigation against the Australian Federal Government. Her family comes from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India. She is in Year 12 and goes to a private school. She lives in Melbourne's southeast.

NAZIA



Nazia joined SS4C in 2018. Her family comes from Bangladesh. Nazia moved to Australia with her family at the age of ten from New Zealand. She went to a public school. She studies at University of New South Wales and works with a multicultural youth association. She lives in Western Sydney.

RENE



Rene joined SS4C in 2018. Her family comes from Colombo, Sri Lanka. She went to a private school. She studies at University of Sydney and works with an international human rights organisation. She lives in Western Sydney.

RIDA



Rida joined SS4C in 2018. She also worked on an anti-racism campaign around the 2019 federal elections. Her family comes from Pakistan. Rida moved to Australia with her family at the age of fifteen from the Middle East. She went to a public school. She studies at Monash University and works in an organisation against cyber-bullying and for online safety. She lives in Melbourne's south.

SAMIA



Samia joined the AYCC Schools Leadership Program in 2018 and organised School Strikes events in 2018 and 2019. Her family comes from Dhaka, Bangladesh. She went to a selective public school. She studies at University of New South Wales and works with a union. She lives in Western Sydney.

TARA



Tara joined SS4C in 2019 at a time when bushfires were burning in Western Sydney; she has been organising in School Strikes since then. Her family comes from Sri Lanka. She is in Year 12 and goes to a private school. She lives in Western Sydney.

FINDINGS

Why I became a climate activist?

This section discusses how participants' identities and places – where they live and where their families come from – inform their idea of climate justice, and how their climate justice inspires them to join youth climate activism. It aims to understand how backgrounds and identities define their climate stories and what their expectations from climate activism are.

Western Sydney: So called 'others' and lived experiences of climate change

Drawing on lived experience, the accounts of Western Sydney respondents demonstrate a very strong understanding of how a place-based identity shapes a distinct sense of social justice that in turn extends to understanding climate justice. Nazia's account of floods in Bangladesh tells a story of intra-generational climate injustice, of communities who have contributed the least but are facing the worst effects of climate change, that connects South Asia and Australia. Nazia's family comes from Munshiganj on the banks of the Padma River in Bangladesh, where the floods get worse every year:

“

In one generation the house has been destroyed three times! My father does not know it is climate change. He thinks the water goes up and down! I told him it will only keep going up! I have the privilege to learn about environmental issues. But what is the point of my privilege if I cannot do anything? Many families in the gram (village) lose their homes and jobs each year during the monsoons. I read UNICEF data of people missing out on education from climate impacts...and then Penrith in Western Sydney was the hottest place, hotter than (the) Sahara. These communities are so vulnerable to climate change. That is the story of so many Bangladeshis in Western Sydney. Yet we don't talk about climate change to them! I wanted to do that.”

Samia is aware that being a Bangladeshi Muslim woman in Western Sydney comes wrapped in an intersectional experience of race, gender, religion and place:

“

Western Sydney means migrants, religious diversity, ethnic diversity, if you think multicultural Australia it exists in Western Sydney. The so-called 'others' are there! And the truth of being from Bangladesh is that those places are going to drown. So, climate change and social justice are fundamentally related. I signed up for the AYCC leadership program because the conversations were about us, where we come from, our justice; not just polar bears and melting ice.”

Hope brings a third experience to 'glocal' (global + local) climate justice stories connecting second generation migrant experiences in Western Sydney to places their families come from:

“

I was born in Botswana, in a rural mining town near a coalmine. There would be days of toxic pollution and we could not go fishing. I came here as a three year old. Culturally, Blacktown, where I live, is the most multicultural suburb in Australia. Economically, living in Western Sydney you know that there is a socio-economic divide. My experiences make me community focussed. After graduating from school I wanted to do work in the community. My grandparents used to be community organisers, although they would not have been called that back in South India. I have those values.”



Hope touches on an experience that other respondents also raised, about grappling with a complex set of emotions on hearing white activists talk about the Global South and climate change:

“

I went to a climate science workshop within the AYCC training after HSC. They were talking about climate refugees and climate migration. It struck a nerve and I wanted to talk about my community and my people. My grandmother died with mining dust in her lungs. First Nations people in Botswana were experiencing it; water drying up, animals and tribes migrating. This is not abstract for me. But I also got very upset. They talked so casually about something that was so real for me! White people run the workshops, but have no lived experience! I went back and enrolled as a volunteer coordinator for Western Sydney.”

For Tara, meeting youth from other places through School Strikes brought the realisation that her Western Sydney upbringing was a unique rather than an average experience of growing up in Australia. She became aware of intersectional vulnerabilities in Western Sydney through experiencing overlapping crises of the bushfire and pandemic:

“

My suburb is surrounded by the bush. We could see the smoke and fires. Those few months in 2019 were very scary for me as a 15 year old. Being scared my house is going to burn down and crying every night. Having those experiences reflects in how I talk about climate change. I joined school strikes around this time. Not long after this Covid struck. It highlighted the systemic problems of Western Sydney. I can now see how both climate change and Covid impact the underprivileged.”

Diversity is justice!

A common first experience in climate activism for several respondents was meeting ‘others who look like me’. Gurdeep had seen climate marches on the television and wanted to be part of them. She moved to Sydney in year 11 from a regional town, and found out AYCC’s student climate leadership program through a Google search:

“

They were looking for POCs, people from regional Australia and Western Sydney. That’s me! Almost all the volunteers and students were women of colour. I have always been people-focused in my justice; I am Sikh and Punjabi, so intrinsically justice minded. I felt I was part of the story, they were talking about my world, and they were talking about regional areas as well! An instant sense of belonging!”

For Arati, justice is about ‘representation and diversity and wealth and the class divide’. She joined through the AYCC student climate leadership program and found it to a ‘nice experience, because it was a diverse space’. It made her realise that ‘diverse spaces are possible, that justice is possible’.





Section Conclusion

What emerges from this section is that who they are, where they come from, and where they live have a bearing on their notion of climate change and racial and social justice being fundamentally linked. Whether through drawing connections across their local and global climate experiences, reflecting on intersectional identities and vulnerabilities, or feeling at home amongst diversity in movement spaces and stories, representation and relevance, of themselves, and their 'glocal' stories, hold a central place in their notion of climate activism.

Our stories and places matter! South Asian experiences in Australian youth climate activism

Nearly all the respondents entered and trained in climate justice activism at the Australian Climate Youth Coalition and then went on to become School Strikers. The interviews made it obvious that SS4C proved a pivotal experience in shaping their activist journeys. The following subsections discuss the challenges experienced by the 12 South Asian youth in climate activism, and how they responded to these challenges. They delve into issues of belonging in activism, of representation in the media, and of being able to tell South Asian focussed climate justice stories, that they faced as challenges in School Strikes and how they negotiated these challenges. The section touches on transformations that were subsequently brought to make SS4C more conducive for strikers of colour. However, several respondents said they got 'burnt out' and 'left the space' before these changes came in. Through a discussion of these challenges the section attempts to understand how South Asian youth activists are thinking and acting towards a climate leadership that they consider just, relevant and representative.

Trying to belong in the movement

With the exception of Hope, all other participants had been at SS4C. In their interviews these 11 participants spoke about challenges with belonging in the movement. They discussed challenges both in terms of representation and power (and who held it), and their own doubts about being qualified to be climate activists in comparison to their white peers.

Jagjit, who went to a public school in outer Melbourne, where the school 'did not even have money to change the carpets, so forget about putting up solar panels' was aware of a socio-economic divide, where most students in the organising team were 'inner city private school kids; and only 1-2 of us from public schools'. To him, this difference reflected even in the way the school establishment, and society, treated these two groups:

“

They were getting recognised, getting trophies from their college for skipping school for strikes, and we were being penalised by our schools - you miss out on an assignment, you get a zero. The difference was quite stark.”

Tara felt that inner city white Strikers who dominated the movement defined who is a climate activist:

“

Their parents are progressive. They have gone to protests when they were young. They feel the space naturally belongs to them! And I come from a conservative immigrant household!”

Perceptions of not fitting into a movement defined by their white peers 'whose parents were activists, who 'loved hiking and tree planting' led to feelings of illegitimacy as a climate activist for Gurdeep. She felt she had 'not done anything of value' because she had not come through 'the legitimate pathway to be an activist'. Namrata used to feel 'unqualified' to talk about climate change in front of her white peers, and would keep her camera turned off in meetings. Feeling unqualified, she left School Strikes at one point, but returned out of a sense of urgency when the bushfires began in 2019.

Initiatives by an adult POC activist to create safe spaces such as the BIPOC caucus helped participants to start experiencing the movement as their own by bringing strikers of colour together and giving them a shared identity: For Joy, it created the space to think about 'where she sees herself in the movement':

“

Being raised here, we are assimilated to this culture, and white culture is the norm. But through the BIPOC caucus I met other POCs from around the country I realised how important my voice and perspective was for justice. An older woman of colour organiser helped to set up this space. She helped us to understand these issues and the need for safe space for POCs.”

And finally, Jahin challenges the perception of their own illegitimacy that many respondents shared, by arguing that POCs have a stronger imperative for climate justice activism:

“

For us Bangladeshi POCs, our people are drowning now and that is what we are fighting for! Climate activism is so vital for us. I find it more meaningful to be a POC activist on climate! Infact, I am grateful to be a South Asian climate activist.”

Why our stories matter

All school strikers I interviewed spoke about not being able to tell a South Asian climate impacts story in the media and at School Strike events in the earlier period (2018-2019). The emotional challenge for these young South Asians lay not only in not feeling represented within the movement through culturally relevant stories that connect with South Asia, but also in negotiating the climate anxiety they feel for South Asia that is already reeling under the effects of climate change.

Rene felt 'it was not (her) place' to talk about the Maldives, which 'we only know as a gentrified holiday destination but not as one severely affected by climate change', at School Strikes. Her parents had experienced a lot of natural disasters growing up in Sri Lanka, and she had heard a lot of stories growing up. But she could not talk about any of them because 'there wasn't room to create our own narrative'. There were set talking points for media interviews such as lobbying the government. She felt conditioned into the pointers and did not feel 'right' to diverge from them.

Samia reflected that she felt guilty to 'take up the space' to talk about Bangladesh drowning in the next few decades during a Radio National Interview, because her story did not been given legitimacy in the Australian frame:

“

Amongst the speaking points, the room made was for specifically for Indigenous Australian people as it should be 100% and for Pacific Islanders. The sort of narrative was that these groups are at the forefront of climate injustice in and around Australia. It was not said, but it was made obvious that your box is not applicable to us. I felt guilty to take up the space because my story did not have legitimacy.”

For Nazia, the framing out of the South Asian climate justice story meant that 'we (the youth climate movement) reached a lot of people, but we did not reach our people'. Finally, Jahin challenges the framing out of stories from South Asia and other Global South places, by arguing that in a multicultural society we should be telling many stories and making the movement culturally representative:

“

We unfortunately talk only about how Australia's future is at risk. It is a privilege actually to still be able to talk about the future. In the Indian subcontinent, flooding happens every year. It is now! Australia is made up of so many communities. If we talked about all the countries represented in Australia, so many POCs could get into the climate space.”

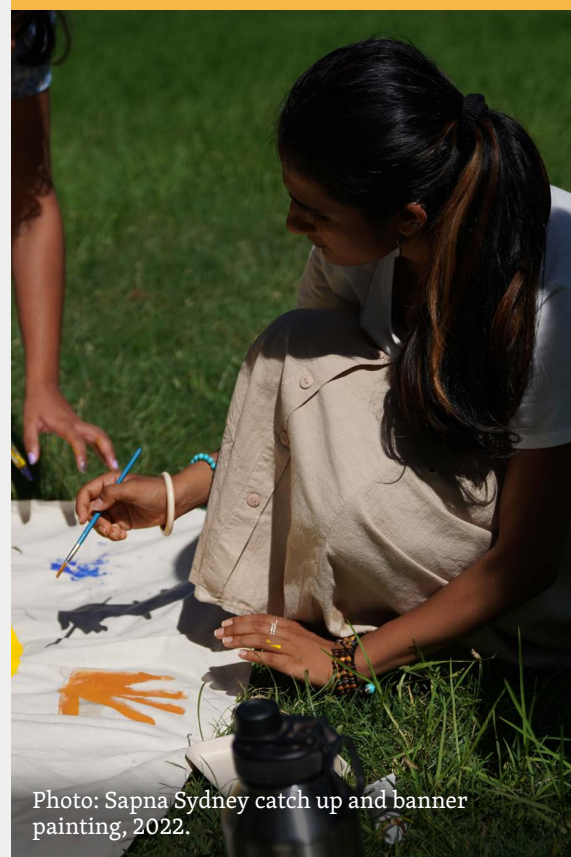


Photo: Sapna Sydney catch up and banner painting, 2022.



Photo credit: School Strike 4 Climate.

Hard to tell a ‘brown person’s climate story’ in Australian media

As school strikers, the participants have been profiled in local, national and even international media. Their reflections on representation and opportunities for ‘doing media’ and telling their South Asian stories in the media, revealed issues in relation to how the media frames the school strike protests, and who the media prefers to profile as a striker protester. These factors finally made it challenging for them to genuinely tell a South Asian climate impacts story.

Jahin found it difficult to discuss that ‘my people are dealing with climate change already’ because the media wanted to ‘only paint a picture of diversity’ but not tell a diverse story:

“The problem with the media is that if there is a brown person, it is like ‘here is a brown person’, the story is about that. In my news articles, there is barely any mention of a Bangladeshi activist. I was not racialised, which in a way is good...also no media attacked me as an immigrant taking jobs away, which is also great... but I wish there was a focus in media on identity. We need brown people’s stories.”

Many participants felt that mainstream media’s very surface level questions – what do your parents think? Is your school supportive? How long will you strike for? – did not allow them to tell their story or discuss their identity. Gurdeep went well prepared to talk about India in a Sky News interview, but they asked her ‘the same questions as white strikers’:

“

No Nuance! They asked do you fly anywhere? I was like I fly to India to see my family; there is no other way to see them.”

In terms of the media’s preference, Arati observed that the ‘media wants to create a narrative around young white women’:

“

Because women have not been leading movements, more than white men, the media wants white women. Knowing that, it makes sense now! Mostly white women strikers from inner Sydney private schools were getting media opportunities.”

Arati further reflected that this media preference boiled down to an issue of ‘representational injustice’ in intra-movement politics within School Strikes. She wondered whether overemphasising media profiling as activism served the purpose of youth climate activism well:

“

At one point I was getting a bit of media. And it came down to you are getting so much media, and they (white strikers) are not. A lot of inner city Sydney kids get media, and I know I fall into that category. I don’t live in inner Sydney but I live in Sydney, and we get a lot more media than QLD and regional NSW. I am conscious of that. But still, I am a POC. What does it mean that I am getting media and white people are not? Once I stepped out of School Strikes I realised it is about much more than my media moment.”

Western Sydney Matters!

Several respondents, even those not from the region, said they were conscious of a class-based demographic divide between those who were seen as dominating school strikes in Sydney – mostly inner city and inner west white strikers who went to private schools – and their Western Sydney counterparts.

In Jagjit's experience, which part of the city you come from and whether you go to a private school or public school, effectively class, can reflect in the way you approach the issue (of sustainability and climate action); it can create the feeling of an 'us-versus them' divide in the movement. The demographic divide between inner and Western Sydney strikers was seen as reflected in several issues around a lack of inclusion and an underlying lack of understanding as to why Western Sydney mattered for climate justice.

To Western Sydney participants who entered climate activism with an awareness of the intersectional vulnerabilities associated with their place and identity, these issues, and how they negotiated with their white peers on these issues, mattered strongly. To them, these issues centred on Western Sydney reflected who held power in the movement and whom the movement tokenised. Although this subsection highlights interlocking constraints experienced by Western Sydney participants, the interviews revealed a shared understanding and solidarity amongst all 12 South Asians on these challenges. I found that the 'us versus them' feeling was shared in solidarity amongst participants, even those who went to private schools and lived in inner city areas, despite their being differently situated across intersection axes.

Most Western Sydney participants, and those from other places but who attended a public school, recounted the stress of being a striker who was unsupported by their institution, of feeling the pressure of being academically penalised for protesting. For Samia, who had the daunting experience of being summoned to the principal's office, the experience of negotiating the everyday as an activist could not have been more different between her and her white peers:

“

She (the principal) was stern faced; 'do you have any comprehension of what you are about to do? 'You are a silly little girl who is being used by adults for an agenda they have to fulfil'; she told me. I was very bound by my South Asian academic expectations and that there would be implications if I said anything in response! White kids go to schools in the inner city that get so much support from school and family. They get support from the media too!”

Nearly all respondents raised the issue of accessibility within the climate movement space, highlighting that Western Sydney activists had to travel long hours to attend meetings, which were mostly organised in inner city areas. Tara had to:

“

Drive to the metro station, to catch a train to get to the city, an extra one-hour one-way. And staying late means parents get worried about me coming back. These are small things but they add up.”

Their feeling of the 'us versus them' divide grew when a proposal to hold meetings in Western Sydney was rejected. Rene felt that:

“

We really over-exert ourselves to participate in this organisation. They do not do the same for us.”

They think that 'small things' like these add up to make it difficult for migrant youth to join climate activism. Samia feels:

“

The reason so many POCs cannot commit to this movement is because so many of us have to travel so long, two hours, just not to be listened to!”



Another incident of marginalisation of Western Sydney that nearly all respondents mentioned, related to white strikers not willing to focus on Western Sydney as a climate hotspot in storytelling and organising. To respondents, it demonstrated a lack of awareness for which they had to 'bear the burden' of educating while keeping 'white fragility' in mind. Nazia felt this exclusion was unacceptable when it came from a young activist:

“

My teammate said in a large meeting that Western Sydney should not be a priority. We expect that from older white Australians who do not know better. But she was my teammate. She should know better! Are only white people worth it? Northern beaches? Inner suburbs? Greater portions of people in Western Sydney come from countries ravaged by climate change. They might not know the technicalities. They might not know about the connection between fossil fuels and climate change. But they have lived experience, much more than a white man from Cronulla. It felt like an exclusive space whereas it should not have been, because it was an activist space with kids our age!”

Issues around inclusion and representation in the movement took their time and course to be resolved. In 2020, a tangible change brought within School Strikes to address the concern of POCs through the setting up of 'safe spaces'. According to Tara, during the lockdown the movement had the opportunity to slow down and reflect and change some old habits:

“

It used to be like all these white kids dominating the space; there was no initiative to get educated about race, privilege, class. There's a BIPOC caucus now to decolonise the space. Also a white caucus to educate white school strikers. We are talking about intersectionality and race! There is an effort to do climate justice training. "This year, a book, *Me and White Supremacy*, is being read. We would not have had that in 2019."

However, these changes came too late for some respondents who had joined the movement years earlier. A feeling that 'white voices were taking up the space' and that 'we were not seen' caused 'stress and burnout' and some respondents left SS4C. Feeling tokenised, on top of other challenges that came with being a Western Sydney school striker, made Samia decide to leave:

“

I am still very passionate about climate justice. But our peers only gave us tokenistic power. This was one of my breaking points in the movement. I am overcoming accessibility issues. I am fighting my imposter syndrome. You are not trying to educate yourself at all. My school does not support me. My parents are wary. And I have to focus on my HSC. So I left the space.”

Hope, who helped to build a network of POC volunteers in the movement in 2018, saw many activists she had supported feeling pushed out:

“

They (strikers of colour) used to come to me but I could not help them, I felt so burnt out myself! It made me really sad to think that a whole generation of POC school strikers that could have been in leadership don't exist because whiteness eroded the space. There was a POC leadership vacuum till 2019.”

But she stays focussed on supporting the POC network and recollects experiences where her work made a difference, such as:

“

At a climate justice boot camp in 2018 I trained an Indonesian volunteer to tell his story, of climate impacts in Indonesia, and now living in Western Sydney, near the Blue Mountains, experiencing heat and fire. And he was able to tell his story in the December strike. This was a highlight of my work in supporting young POCs.”



Section Conclusion

Through a discussion of the challenges participants encountered in youth climate activism and how they negotiated or resolved these challenges, this section highlights their thinking and actions on climate leadership that is just, relevant and representative. By bringing intra-generational climate impacts already being experienced by communities in South Asia and the Global South, their understanding of climate justice can reframe Australia's dominant climate movement story that is focussed on intergenerational climate hazards in the future, towards a racial and cultural inclusivity.

Although not a primary focus of interviews, their challenges within School Strikes points to the need for reflexivity on this youth climate activist model. There needs to be reflexivity about whether this model entrenches dominant power relations, i.e. that of whites, in Australian society, and consideration of what further structures and practices are necessary to decolonise and diversify School Strikes. In comparison, participants felt a relative inclusivity within AYCC that uses an educational approach to the organisational structure and is concerned to tackle inequality and intersectionality in order to achieve climate justice.³⁶

Their responses offer insights for how spaces and pathways to build South Asian (and more broadly POC) youth climate leadership in Australia can be established, through safe spaces, broadening the climate story to climate impacts from the Global South broadly, building movement understanding on intersectional vulnerability to climate change, and movement awareness about intergenerational climate experience and knowledge of migrant POC youth. Finally, there is a possibility to build an activism based on their understanding of climate justice that can argue for global responsibility and just climate actions by Australia.

Bringing the family along

This section discusses the challenges respondents experienced in negotiating family expectations and concerns around their activism. The young South Asians activists' journeys exposed their families to new political experiences and led to unfamiliar conversations within family spaces. Through a discussion of these challenges and how they are overcoming them, this section attempts to understand how the first and second generation (their parents and them) are together 'making sense' of their climate activism.

Three respondents mentioned that at least one parent came to a school strike where she spoke, and consequently became favourably disposed towards the significance of young people's climate protests. Most respondents mentioned that parents first responded in a 'typically South Asian way', with a mix of concern about public activism and a tension whether 'this will interfere with studies and getting a job'. What invariably came through in reflections on their challenge of negotiating with family on activism is how their experience contrasted that of their white activist peers who were supported by their families. When Jagjit spoke at a Stop Adani rally, his parents asked 'is this the right thing to do?' While he acknowledged that his parents 'fears about political activities are rational' since 'politics in India can be corrupted', he also reflected on the contrast, that, while he has to 'deal with their worries that I might be arrested, white strikers families are like 'you go'. Their schools are like 'you go'.

Respondents discussed the emotional pressures they withstood, to balance the 'round the clock demands of organising and doing media at school strikes', the demands they placed on themselves as activists 'to use my voice, because people on the frontlines do not have the privilege to speak for themselves', with their families expectations. Samia felt that she 'will crumble and also let down the parents'.

Despite misgivings, the first generation can 'make sense' and 'find relevance' in the second generation's political activism when it is made culturally relevant. Rida's parents felt it (climate change) was very important when she 'finally' told the story of climate impacts in Pakistan. Despite misgivings, the interviews also revealed 'a sense of pride' amongst the parents in what the young activists do. When Rida's parents heard her talking on the radio and on podcasts about the strikes, they saw these as achievements, and 'it gave them pride, also because no other Pakistani student was doing it!' Hope's family is politically conservative. They do not support the School Strikes and do not think that her role as an organiser is a 'real job', but still feel a sense of pride:

“

They tell friends that I am working to make the world a better place, and then come and ask 'when are you going to quit your job?'

Finally, Gurdeep's experience of negotiating family expectations around her activism, while touching on all the elements above, also highlights that a complex emotional terrain is navigated between the first and second generation in the process. Her journey of reconciling the 'two worlds' of her activism and her family can offer insights for building cross-cultural understanding in a diverse youth climate movement and is discussed below.



Building a bridge across climate science and lived experience

Having internalised her parents' expectations from her, and also recognising 'where they are coming from, they have worked so hard for me!', Gurdeep experienced conflicting emotions about her activism:

“

You have to fight politicians, media, regime; and your own parents to do this. On one side you have to manage your parents' feelings, on the other side your own climate burden. I have privilege. It is such a cop out for me to think I can disconnect when people on the frontlines can't. Strikers of colour have to do more work to get to the same place.”

Gurdeep's testimonies qualify what most respondents felt about 'missing out of all those things I could be learning, I could be doing' in comparison to white strikers who were seen as having an advantage in climate activism because of their parents' backgrounds:

“

So many white strikers had journalist and activist parents who help them write articles. How their parents shaped their understanding of the climate problem was a big part of their identity. You have to be the bridge between their lived experiences and the gate-kept scientific world of climate change! It is difficult to navigate both these truths and bring your parents on that journey. I remember feeling ashamed of them.”

Gurdeep reflected that recognition on her part about their lived experience of environmental change and making activism culturally relevant eventually bridged the two worlds:

“

I have been on a journey of understanding what I care about. I don't think I necessarily educated them or that they were ignorant. Visiting the village in Punjab I used to hear how they were hurt by environmental damage. Where my dad used to swim and wash the buffaloes in the stream was getting polluted. But only during the Indian farmers' protests in 2020 I realised that no wonder they were connecting with the stories I was saying before. I was saying stories that were being put in my mouth. After a climate movement protest at the Sydney Cricket Ground in solidarity with Indian farmers that I was in, they sent the photo to everyone they knew. That protest merged both my worlds and finally connected my family.”

But she knows a cultural gap still remains that she must live with:

“

But still there is a level of disconnect between the family and this world of climate activism. And this is a common reality of South Asians. And I have to live with knowing what I can or cannot share.”





Section Conclusion

Participants' journeys of reconciling the 'two worlds' of their activism and families speaks to the challenges of building a bridge across the mainstream framings of climate activism and the lived experiences of migrants, and points to the need for culturally relevant stories and movement approaches. Instances of when and how families connected with the youth activists' stories and actions hold insights for future work in this direction.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Building young South Asian Australians' climate leadership

This study differed from the previous study in 2012 in that current respondents were situated within climate activism. Present findings show that, like in the previous case, respondent's backgrounds, where they live, and where they come from, still shape their conception of justice, and how they relate to the issue of climate change. This study began by asking whether South Asian Australian youth could build their own climate leadership based on their social and cultural imperatives, and what language and narratives would frame this leadership?

The complex significance of the assertions made by the participants, and the way they expressed their climate-political identities, can be understood in light of recent research in the UK that attempts to make sense of the climate activism of POC Gen Z migrant youth and put their actions in a global perspective.³⁷ Through influence of backgrounds, identities and places on conceptions of justice, by being aware of intersectional vulnerabilities and linking social and racial justice to climate justice, the 12 young South Asians are bringing the 'everyday' into climate activism. They are practising a 'phenomenological' or lived form of climate activism 'motivated by their relationships of concern in both public and private places'.³⁸

They are bringing this lived activism to School Strikes and other forms of mainstream (as opposed to the everyday) climate actions, which are, by nature one-time high profile activities.³⁹ Their assertion of the need for space and legitimacy and their articulation of the stories they want to tell, are effectively based on an assertion of their 'everyday', which they are politicising, in a way, as they see it, that their white peers cannot (since the latter lack this everyday experience). As Jahin put it, they find it more meaningful to be POC climate activists. Through this approach of politicising their and their families' everyday, they are building their climate leadership on their own terms in the following ways:

By telling embodied climate stories:

Namrata reflects that she drew support from outspoken South Asians who could say in meetings that 'I should be able to talk about my house burning down over your love for dolphins'. Through such assertions of their embodied experiences, they are not only asking for a nuancing of the main climate story in the Australian climate movement that focuses on 'our futures at risk'; they are also arguing for a human justice approach to activism. Reminiscent of assertions about why everyday places matter in environmental justice activism by racialised and marginalised communities in the United States – places where we live work and play' – they are calling for a critical reframing of narratives adopted by Northern mainstream climate activism that can 'exclude certain people'.⁴⁰

Connecting Global North-South climate stories

Nazia tells a story that links her father's flood-prone Nazia tells a story that links her father's flood-prone Munshiganj village on the banks of River Padma in Bangladesh with Penrith in Western Sydney which records one of the worlds' hottest temperatures. Hope tells a story that links a rural town near a mine in Botswana where they had mining dust in their lungs to Blacktown where the socio-economic divide with other parts of Sydney is evident from the significantly smaller size of houses. Samia describes her social world in Western Sydney as one where all the 'others' who have come from various global South locations live. And Gurdeep remembers seeing the creek in her father's village in Punjab get more polluted with each visit to India. Through their stories, the young South Asians trace environmental impacts across two or more generations across the global North and South. They also critically reflect on their place, their identities, and how they are perceived by the society they live in, to weave a multi-layered and intersectional story. The complexity of such stories is relevant for justice and should not be reduced in an attempt to fit a monocultural climate story.



Photo: Sapna Sydney catch up and banner painting, 2022.

Foregrounding intersectional vulnerabilities

Their stories connect developed and developing parts of the world together in a common crisis of climate change. Equally strongly, participants tell stories of the ‘South’ within the ‘Global North’; of people in places and regions where marginalisations and vulnerabilities intersect. Based on that understanding,

Nazia argues that ‘Western Sydney and Bangladesh matter more than climate impacts experienced by a white man in Cronulla’, and those coming from socio-economically challenged areas and schools argue for a movement that consciously checks its privilege. Reflecting on the future of youth climate activism, Joy argues that:



We need to move away from centering our middle class lives and focus on the vulnerable such as South Asian communities...when things get worse in the future and there are climate migrations there will be a lot of ugliness like xenophobia...There is a lot of individualism in the movement now, it is a lot about personal gain, come, take photos, but we have to build kindness in the movement...also link with the refugee movement...to prepare for the future.”

With Australia already facing strong climate impacts such as devastating floods in northern New South Wales and Southern Queensland in March 2022, it will be a crucial test for a dominantly white climate movement to not forget about the even more severe impacts of climate change being felt by vulnerable communities in the Global South who do not have the means to protect themselves from extreme weather events such as heat, flood, cyclones and droughts.⁴¹ Such layered and intersectional stories therefore need foregrounding in a youth movement for climate justice, to ensure that places and people that POC migrant youth climate activists speak for are not forgotten but centred in climate solidarity.

Socially reframing climate stories for justice and representation

What they are effectively doing is reframing climate stories in ways they find just and representative of the realities of their communities. A social re-telling of the climate story needs to be seen as an important approach in youth climate activism in a multiethnic, multi-cultural society like Australia. As Jahin noted, ‘we should be able to tell climate stories from everywhere so more POCs can join’.

Their social re-telling of the climate story from a South Asian perspective turns on the crucial principle of ‘intra-generational’ justice for communities in South Asia that are already reeling under the impacts of climate change, as opposed to the ‘we are worried about our futures’ approach in the dominant narrative of youth climate activism in Australia. This re-telling can find ground for solidarity with narratives of First Nations youth climate justice in Australia, which acknowledges past, present, and future impacts on First Nations People, and that ‘it all began with colonisation’. A social retelling from a South Asian perspective can find solidarity with the narrative of Pacific Climate Warrior activists who are ‘fighting, not drowning’, highlighting their present challenge of climate change. Socially re-told climate narratives of POC migrant youth climate activists can democratise the climate narrative in the Australian youth climate movement by making it representative of their communities’ social, historical and cultural realities.



SOLIDARITY

COMMUNITY

ADVOCACY

Next steps in building leadership

Actions young South Asian climate activists are already taking give an indication of how they can build their climate leadership and what could be its narratives. The concluding part of this section lists next steps that can be considered by South Asian (and more broadly POCs) in youth climate activism to strengthen their climate activism leadership:

Through their activism, the participants are showing ‘uneven solidarity’ to young people in South Asia who are missing school because of climate impacts. Solidarity extended by climate strikers is ‘uneven solidarity’ when viewed in global and inter-generational perspectives.⁴² Research in the UK and India made a distinction between the high-profile activism of youth in Western locations and the everyday actions of youth facing climate impacts in developing worlds. It highlighted the need to consider young people’s everyday activism in contexts where the effects of climate change are felt in immediate ways, and where young people and their families have been responding to climate change.⁴³ As a next step, how can they build bridges of solidarity and representation for those South Asians whose voices are not heard but have the most experience of living with climate change?

Engaging with and acting on the basis of their families’ climate and environmental experiences implies making their activism more accessible and relevant for their communities. As Nazia said, ‘we reached a lot of people, but we did not reach our people’ through School Strikes. When Gurdeep spoke at a solidarity protest for Indian Punjabi farmers as a Stop Adani youth activist, her parents shared photos from the event with the whole community since they ‘finally connected’ with her activism. As a next step, how can they build meaningful solidarity between high profile mainstream activist actions such as strikes and lobbying governments on the one hand and local environmental concerns of South Asian communities in vulnerable places such as Western Sydney?

Australia is one of the biggest exporters of coal globally and has one of the world’s highest per capita emissions in the world. Instead of shouldering the responsibility of an industrialised country to do more to stop dangerous climate change, Australia plays a role in worsening climate change by exporting fossil fuels, while also shifting the blame for carbon emissions on to developing countries. Australia also neglects its international obligations to assist climate adaptation and energy transformation through the global green climate fund (GGCF) that was set up under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to assist the efforts of developing countries in responding to climate change.⁴⁴ Through stories that focus on climate impacts in the developing world, could the advocacy of young South Asian Australians bring moral pressure to bear on Australia’s crucial obligations towards the global South?

FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings point in multiple directions for further research related to migrant POC youth climate activists. Youth political subjectivities and theorising the political through the actions and perspectives of young people has been identified as an area that needs research attention in the space of youth climate activism.⁴⁵

Alongside this research focus there is a need to continue learning about political subjectivities that migrant POC second-generation climate activists are making, based on their intergenerational climate experiences and their accounts of overcoming challenges to be climate activists on their own terms.

In terms of representation of School Strikers in Australian media, research has highlighted the need to go beyond a superficial substantiation that 'young climate justice activists are 'mainly white, middle-classed and privileged'⁴⁶ towards exploring how youth activists articulate who they are, what they are doing, and how they conceptualise climate justice.⁴⁷ Strikers' stories in non-traditional media sources, occasionally even traditional news sources, showed that strikers are pushing back on these limited characterisations and demonstrating 'a relational multiplicity of emotions associated with climate change'.⁴⁸ While this true for the participants, they demonstrated a further complexity of emotions on account of feeling a deeper imperative (compared to their white peers) to be climate activists; at the same time, they struggled with marginalisation in being represented and telling their stories both at the strike events, and in the media.

How youth climate activists are speaking on their own terms is seen as an area that needs research attention; the study of POC migrant youth climate activists who do not feel represented through the dominant nationally focussed story can be a prime area of consideration in that direction. Such a research direction is likely to reveal a need for building intercultural understanding and media literacy amongst climate organisations and networks, and for broadening advocacy to make it universally resonant, just and representative.



Photo credit: School Strike 4 Climate.

ABOUT SAPNA AND ITS WORK

Sapna South Asian Climate Solidarity is an intergenerational collective for climate justice in the South Asian diaspora in Australia. Sapna signifies a dream in many South Asian languages. It stands for the collective's vision for climate solutions grounded in justice and the hope of a global climate movement that tells stories of South Asian communities. This section summarises Sapna's areas of work and discusses how the report findings substantiate these directions of climate justice activism.



Sapna's work

The world needs a rapid transition away from fossil fuels to prevent dangerous climate change. However this is just half the story of climate justice. The other half is about creating a just future and centering stories of communities and Indigenous peoples. Sapna tells the other half of the climate justice story with a focus on South Asian communities-Indigenous peoples, subsistence-based communities, racially and socially marginalised groups.

South Asian youth activists are already telling stories of their families and backgrounds, and of the global impacts of Australian coal including in South Asia. Sapna aims to diversify climate activism in Australia by supporting and strengthening South Asian (and POC more broadly) youth's participation and leadership in Australian climate activism.

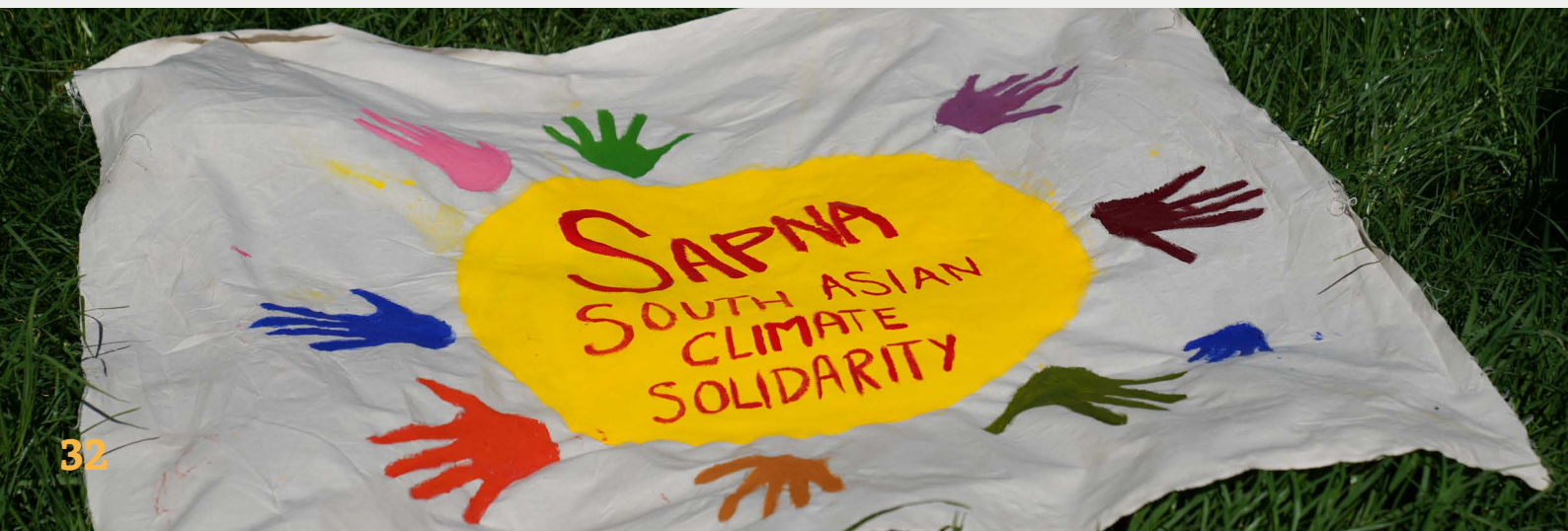
Stories around what constitutes global climate justice are largely framed and shared from mainstream climate change activist platforms in the developed world. They can exclude community struggles for justice, particularly from the developing world. Sapna works to build solidarity with the stories, struggles and visions of marginalised South Asian communities in a global climate justice movement and its narrative.

Report findings set directions for Sapna's work

The next steps outlined in the Discussion section of the report under the subheadings of Advocacy, Community and Solidarity substantiate and set out further directions for the work of Sapna South Asian Climate Solidary (and broadly migrant POC environmental and climate networks in Australia) in the future.

Australia's white-dominated climate movement and its science-based campaign narratives have largely excluded 'everyday experiences' of climate change, which migrant POC communities, coming from parts of the world that are already experiencing severing climate impacts, are likely to bring with them. Further, owing to a concentration of such communities in places like Western Sydney, a climate hotspot, migrant POC experiences of 'everyday climate change' can form a crucial human-centric link between climate-impacts in both worlds (where they come from, and where they live) and constitute a firm basis on which climate solidarity can be built by an Australian climate movement towards communities and movements for climate justice in South Asia and various other places in the Global South.

Migrant perspectives from communities that are disproportionately affected by climate change are seen as essential for broadening the climate story in western society. Even as the climate crisis worsens, Australian society is witnessing a rapid increase in multiculturalism that is driven to a significant extent by migrations from South Asia (amongst other global South locations) where climate impacts are already affecting millions of people. The reality of Australia's increasing racial diversity being shaped by immigrants from such climate-affected global South locations, whose stories can help shape a strong multicultural climate justice narrative, presents a vital opportunity to put justice and inclusivity at the centre of the climate movement in Australia. For Sapna, the first essential steps in these directions will be through extensive conversations in South Asian (and other migrant POC) communities in Western Sydney and other locations, and inclusion of intergenerational migrant POC climate narratives in Australian climate activism.



APPENDIX

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dr Ruchira Talukdar's research focuses on the comparative aspects of environmental and climate justice activism between the global North and South. Her PhD thesis compared coal conflicts and protest movements in India and Australia, with an emphasis on the intersections between grassroots and Indigenous people's movements and mainstream environmental activism. She has worked within the environment movement in India in Greenpeace, and Australia in Greenpeace, Australian Conservation Foundation, and Friends of the Earth Australia, for nearly two decades. She co-founded Sapna South Asian Climate Solidarity, an Australia-based South Asian environmental network, to link South Asian migrant experiences of climate change in Australia and South Asia, and mentor the next generation of South Asian climate activists in Australia. She regularly writes for publications in India and Australia on environmental and Indigenous resistance.

PEER REVIEWS

1. Dr Eve Mayes, Deakin University

Dr. Eve Mayes peer reviewed draft versions over two stages of this report's drafting: in early June and early July 2022. The first round of peer review commended the report's foregrounding of interviewees' voices and made early recommendations related to the following: stating the researcher's positionality, suggestions for sign posting and elaborations, and suggested connections to related literature at particular stages of the report. The second round of peer review made further minor suggestions related to the following: revisiting the research questions in the discussion section of the report, framing the study as a qualitative research study with implications for future action and practical learning, adding further details about the interviewees' opportunities to engage with their transcripts and with earlier drafts of the report, specifying that participants consented to inclusion of their profile details in the report, and minor suggestions related to endnote style and word choices/ sentence structure at particular points of the report. In summary, Eve Mayes wrote in the second round of peer review:



Thank you for the honour of reading and engaging with and learning from this well-written report that has profound significance for climate justice activism and related research. The eloquent and thoughtful accounts of the young South Asian Australian activists interviewed offer powerful insights that have the potential to prompt deep reflection within heterogeneous grassroots groups/ networks pursuing climate action and climate justice. The report is highly accessible and compelling to read, and its structure is very clear to navigate. Current research literature related to young people's climate justice activism is cited and acknowledged, but the focus of the report rightly remains on the accounts of the interviewees. The findings are structured in a way that emphasises the common themes across interviewees, with astute attention, too, to the intersectional differences and solidarities across the interviewees' experiences and accounts. The discussion and recommendations for action flow coherently and powerfully from the direct accounts of interviewees; they offer informed and practical suggestions for strengthening solidarity across difference in climate justice work."

Dr Eve Mayes is a Senior Research Fellow and Senior Lecturer (Pedagogy and Curriculum) in the School of Education (Research for Educational Impact) at Deakin University. She is currently undertaking the Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Early Career Fellowship (DECRA) project: Striking voices: Australian school-aged students' climate justice activism (2022-2025).

PEER REVIEWS

2. Dr Sukhmani Khorana, Western Sydney University

Dr Sukhmani Khorana, University of Western Sydney peer reviewed an advanced draft of this report in July 2022 and wrote:



This report is ground-breaking in considering climate justice and climate movements from the point of view of young people of colour, specifically those of South Asian descent resident in Australia who have participated in the School Strikes for Climate. The reason this is novel and timely is that the mainstream environment activist spaces across the Global North have been recognised as ‘too white’. This is with regards to who participates in these organised spaces in decision-making roles, who is seen as the ‘face’ of the movement, whose agendas are central to middle-class sustainability initiatives, and the lack of connection to both non-white migrants and people in the Global South.

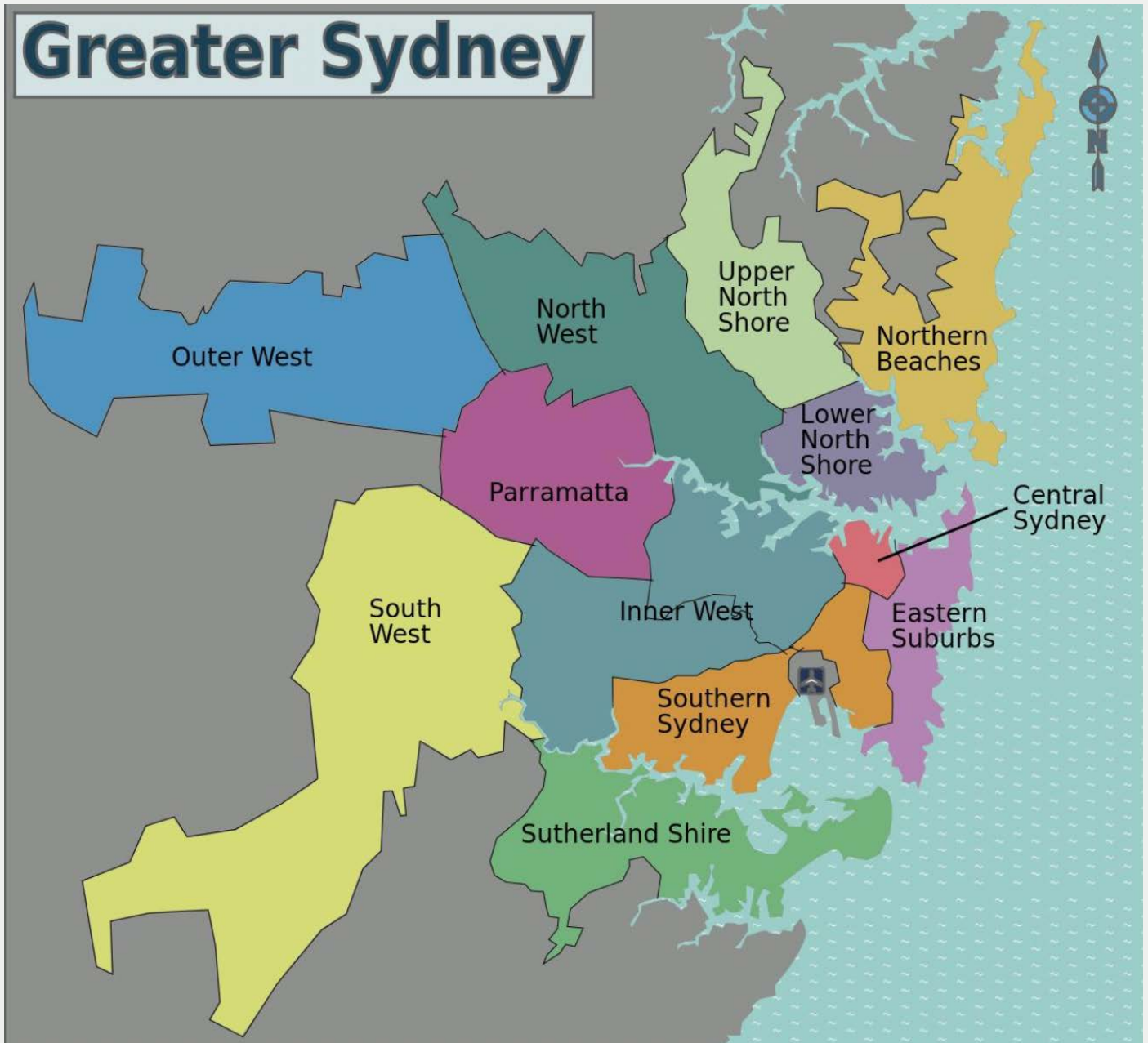
The empirical strength of this report lies in its in-depth interviews with 12 former and current School Strikers across Sydney and Melbourne. What is most powerful and poignant about these interviews is how the life narrative of the young interviewees is interwoven with their climate activism as well as emergent sense of exclusion. That the researcher was able to build a rapport with the interviewees to elicit such affective responses is testament to the importance of insider perspectives, and relatedly to decolonising both research paradigms and the climate justice space.

Given the relative absence of research about people of colour involved in climate justice movements or everyday environmental care in the Australian context, this report will make a vital contribution to this area of scholarship.

It is also hoped that it will inspire other researchers, particularly in environmental studies, cultural geography, cultural studies and related disciplines to pay more attention to the narratives of non-white first and second-generation migrants who are seldom associated with climate activism. Finally, the report also makes important recommendations regarding what is required to link climate justice struggles in the Global North with those in the Global South (where many of the respondents’ families are still situated). This link of kinship could be the missing piece in the puzzle in that it could help build genuine and long-term solidarities between the movements and ensure that Australia’s climate justice issues are globally resonant.”

Dr Sukhmani Khorana is a Vice Chancellor’s Senior Research Fellow at the Young and Resilient Research Centre at Western Sydney University. Sukhmani has published extensively on diaspora cultures, multi-platform refugee narratives, and the politics of empathy. She is the author of *Mediated Emotions of Migration: Reclaiming Affect for Agency* (2022) and *The Tastes and Politics of Inter-Cultural Food in Australia* (2018).

MAP OF WESTERN SYDNEY



The name Western Sydney refers to the Greater Western Sydney (GWS) region. It combines Western Sydney and South-Western Sydney shown in the map. It runs from Windsor in the north to Campbelltown in the south, and from Parramatta in the east to Penrith and the Blue Mountains in the west, comprising 14 local government areas, and also consisting of parklands and rivers.

GWS is a rapidly developing, culturally diverse, peri-urban region with one of Australia's fastest growing populations. The original inhabitants of GWS were the Bidjigal, Cabrogal, Darkinjung, Dharawal, Dharug, Gundungura, Gweagal and Tharawal Aboriginal people. And it is home to one-fifth of Australia's current Aboriginal population.

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- ⁴ Almost 700 million South Asians or half the region's population has been affected by at least one climate disaster in the last decade: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/south-asia-needs-act-one-fight-climate-change>
- ⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/30/climate/pakistan-floods.html>
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- ²⁰ This project first began as a research project at Melbourne University in 2012 when the first study was done. It was later extended to complete the second study in 2021. I have worked in environmental organisations in India and Australia since 2005. See page 43 of this report for my biography.
- ²¹ Census data indicates that Asian migrations to Australia doubled between 2001 and 2011, transforming the face of Australia's largest cities. Chinese-born migrants more than doubled and Indian-born trebled. Census data for the next decade, between 2011 and 2021, indicates that Indian-born migrants overtook Chinese-born to become Australia's largest Asian migrants. Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021, <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/AUS>, accessed on 20 August 2022.
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