

Follow the children

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Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong. When I began speaking about climate change to students in 2014, there was widespread disbelief that this was a serious problem for Bengaluru, or India. The country had other, more serious issues to deal with – malnutrition, sanitation, unemployment, etc. Bengaluru also had more urgent, obvious challenges – pollution and traffic, for instance. Climate change projections told us what the world would be like in 2100 – a time too distant for us to care about! But in six years, so much has changed. In 2019 itself, India has been impacted by cyclones Fani and Vayu, and faced the brunt of flooding, from Kerala to Assam. The impact of climate change is not only on our grandchildren – whom we can safely ignore – but on us. Here and now, we are living through the climate crisis. And this is just the beginning! The years to come will bring change of the kind that we have never experienced, or even imagined possible.

We need climate action, more urgently than ever. But, instead of acting, policymakers are engaging in collective, willful blindness. We, the adults -- who should be in charge – seem no better.

But the children are leading the way. In August 2018, a 15-year-old Swedish student, Greta Thunberg, launched the school strikes against climate change. At first, it was a lonely protest. She sat each day outside the Swedish parliament, holding a sign, to protest against government inaction on climate change. Inspired by her commitment, other students began to join in from across the world.

Using the hashtag #FridaysforFuture, children have launched a coordinated climate strike across the world, holding up signs and campaigning for their future. Seeing that adults have abdicated their responsibility, children are stepping up to the challenge.

And they are making a difference. In a few days from now, the Bengaluru chapter of Fridays for Future will launch a week-long climate strike from September 20-27. The event begins on September 20 at 5 pm at the Puttanna Chetty Town Hall, and will continue at multiple locations across Bengaluru. How many of us will be there to support them?

We complain bitterly about the state of the environment. There's trash piled-up at every corner, the city is filled with mosquitoes, and we are sick to death of being stuck in traffic jams, bumping along on potholed roads, surrounded by dead trees and dying lakes. But dystopic as it is, it's going to get much worse. Indian cities will get hotter by 10 degrees Celsius because of a combination of climate change and concrete buildings. Air pollution will decrease the life expectancy of children born in cities like Bengaluru by 5-10 years. These are horrific statistics – and they will impact the lives of our children the most.

Most of us were fortunate to grow up in a time when we were surrounded by nature – we have nostalgic memories of climbing mango trees to snack on raw fruit, playing cricket with “cork balls” from the rain tree, and swimming in lakes, ponds and wells. But we have destroyed this world; our children will not have this privilege. And they are angry about it. As a statement by the students reads, “We have learned that if we don't start acting for our future, nobody else will make the first move. We are the ones we've been waiting for.”

Their organization, vision and thought puts us all to shame.

We cannot blame them for their anger. And we must not patronize them for their passion. If we cannot lead the way, we can join them.

Are we ready to fight for our future?