

It's 2020, we have not a minute to waste!

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DH



DECCAN HERALD



Harini Nagendra,

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Harini Nagendra prides herself on barking up all trees, right and wrong

The last decade was a disaster for the environment. At the start of 2010, the public was largely skeptical about climate change. At the end of 2019, we know that climate change is real, and we are in the middle of the crisis. The Himalayan glaciers, which feed us with water, are melting at an alarming rate, at twice the rate they were at the end of the 20th century. New estimates suggest that cities like Mumbai could be largely underwater by 2050.

Yet, over nine million trees were cut for environmental projects between 2015-19. India now contains 22 of the world's 30 most polluted cities. We knew that air pollution reduces our life expectancy and impacts our wellbeing – new evidence now tells us that air pollution also impacts the brain, reducing IQ and affecting our capacity to think.

Waste disposal plagues India. The trash that clogs our cities and waterways creates fertile breeding grounds for mosquitoes. We reel under the impact of epidemics like dengue and swine flu, which claim thousands of lives each year. Industrial and chemical pollution poisons the vegetables and meat we eat, and the milk and water we consume.

Environmental problems are everybody's problems. Rich or poor, young or old, religious or atheist, male, female or trans – none of us can stay insulated from the effects. The new decade needs us all to advocate on behalf of the environment, for it cannot mend on its own. We have broken it, so we must fix it.

In such a time of crisis, where do we find hope? How can we look towards the new decade with a mirror of optimism, and a positive engagement with our future, rather than retreating into a shell of indifference, cynicism or depression?

A sense of hope is contagious. It comes from those who find reason to hope. And those who hope, get their optimism and energy from action.

Action can be of all kinds. The most common kind of environmental action that we see talked about today is that of individual action. Ride a bicycle, not a car. Plant a tree. Take a shopping bag with you to the market. Compost your trash. All of these are important, even essential as part of the individual introspection that we must each do to transform our own lives.

But individual action is a drop in the bucket when we are dealing with large, transformative forces. The problem of air pollution cannot be solved if each of us resolve to walk, cycle or take public transport to work. The roads need to be safe enough to cycle or walk, and safe, affordable last-mile public transport needs to be available to all locations in the city. It is only because of the sustained work of citizen groups in the past decades that Bengaluru now has a set of dedicated bus lanes, has announced the much-delayed suburban rail system, and other innovations to promote public transport.

If citizens had not hit the streets in peaceful protest against the steel flyover in 2017, the ill-conceived project would have become a reality, and we would have lost thousands of trees. If Greta Thunberg had not started her lonely vigil outside the Swedish parliament in 2018, millions of students striking around the world to draw our attention to climate change would not be a reality today. Polluting industries will not change their ways, and banks and big insurance will not stop funding destructive energy projects, unless public attention compels them to.

Mobilise, organise, collectivise. Crowd-source ideas and harness the power of the public. With love, imagination and peaceful determination, we can transform the next decade.

Pollution
environment
Climate Change

NEXT STORY



S Natarajan,

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