4 Youth Climate Activism in India: Global Conversations, Local Concerns and Gendered Visibility[32]

Introduction

Indian youth climate activism appears as a rather recent and mostly urban-middle-class phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is simultaneously embedded in long-standing local traditions of environmental concern and in a global conversation about climate justice. The emergence of global movements and their local franchises like FFF signifies a new phase in climate activism marked by an increased use of social media, increased youth participation, a strong emphasis of global interconnectedness and an emphasised feminised public image of the movements and their leading figures. The old oppositions between ecological planetary-scale interventions and local, situated environmental justice struggles have faded, argues Ghosh (2021), 'returning spectrally in new face-offs between "top-down" planning and participatory activism "from below"', with media as 'the new seams for these complex interfaces' and as amplifier of purposefully communicated images, such as the young female activists of the Greta Thunberg model.

Whereas the pivotal role of youth climate activism from the Global North is being acknowledged in a growing body of literature on the role of Greta Thunberg and FFF, young people's climate activism from the Global South remains surprisingly underexplored, even though scientists agree that climate change affects women, children and marginalised groups disproportionately and many regions of the Global South are directly confronted with severe impact. Except for journalistic publications, in particular around the arrest of FFF India's founder Disha Ravi; a published BA thesis by Matilda Olstedt titled 'Geopolitical or Generational Responsibility? A Framing Analysis of the Fri-

days for Future Movement in Indian Newspapers' (2019, Uppsala University); and peripheral mentioning in a few journal articles (e.g. Tuli & Danish 2021), to my knowledge, no major research comparable to the extensive research on FFF in Europe has been conducted on Indian youth climate activism. The aim of the research that supports this chapter was, thus, to explore contemporary forms of youth climate activism in India, to unravel the interlocking local and global discourses that inform these activisms and to analyse the gendered narratives that are intricately intertwined with environmental and climate discourses.

Methodology

The easing of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2023 finally allowed for in-person field research; therefore, this chapter combines a dense, multi-layered collection of oral, visual and experiential sources, complemented by digital communication and analysis. The chapter draws on existing research about Fridays For Future globally and on a preliminary analysis of social media discourse, predominantly Instagram[33], by Indian youth climate organisations and individual activists. The focus on social media is interrelated with the supposed class/caste matrix that undergirds youth-led climate movements in contemporary India. According to the Lokniti Report (2019, 19) by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) on Social Media & Political Behaviour, young people (those aged 18–35), people of the middle and upper classes, and the upper castes (Lokniti Report 2019, 23 ff.) are more likely to own a smartphone and access social networks through it.

The research is further based on fieldwork that included participant observation and ten interviews conducted with climate and environmental activists in India in February and March 2023. The interviews were coded and analysed using the MAXQDA software program. My case study focuses on two contemporary youth climate organisations: Fridays For Future India (Delhi and Mumbai chapters) and Youth for Climate India (YFCI), a Delhi-based group. Both will be introduced in more detail later in this chapter. Initial contact with representatives was established either via the organisation's website (YFCI) or through

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33 The Lokniti Report (2019) covers the years 2014–2019. Instagram grew exponentially after this period, and for many young people, it replaced Facebook as the most popular platform. Similar to the other social networks included in the study (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, YouTube), Instagram continues to be dominated by upper- and middle-class, educated, urban users in the Indian context.

Instagram (FFF Mumbai and Delhi), then taken to an individual level of communication via WhatsApp, Zoom and email and, finally, through several meetings in person[34], visits to the Climate Justice Library in New Delhi and participation in FFF Mumbai's Global Climate Strike action in March 2023, where walk-along interviews with almost all present participations were carried out. Some of the activists who are a part of these groups maintain very active and visible social media profiles using their real names, such as Srijani Datta of YFCI, who publishes regularly about climate and environmental issues. When referring to her official publications, I use her real name; otherwise, all interviewees remain anonymous to protect their identities.

The process of fieldwork also involves the researcher's cultural biography, and it requires an examination of the power relations between the researcher and the people she encounters in the field (Parameswaran 2001, 69). Many researchers have written about the limitations of the research process within existing boundaries of nation, race, gender and class (Parameswaran 2001, 71). In this case, I clearly positioned myself as a feminist media scholar with a political affinity towards the researched groups' goals and ideologies. This part of my positionality opened doors to conversation and exchange and helped to build trust between interview partners and me. Additionally, I share an urban middle-class background with most of the people involved in this study, and many of the problems discussed with activists are universal and prevalent in discourses in my home country of Germany, too (changing weather, questions of responsibility, improving urban infrastructure, etc.). On the other hand, I inhabit a clearly differentiated position due to my location as a white female academic at a German university and due to a difference in age, education and life experience compared to the informants, who were predominantly in their early or mid-twenties. A reflection of the implications of my identity as both an ally and an outsider for field research with young Indian activists reveals the possible risk of inherent power imbalances based on the aforementioned hierarchical differences in age, education, etc. Despite, or precisely because of, this constellation, I tried to co-produce knowledge and meaning with my interlocutors by keeping in touch beyond the research period, by asking their feedback on research results and the drafts for this chapter and an earlier, shorter version, and by exchanging further knowledge and research literature. Nonetheless, my own positionality influences knowledge production insofar as I bring

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[34]   Despite several attempts and (cancelled) appointments, I was not able to meet members of FFF Delhi in person. The insights are, thus, solely based on digitally mediated communication and media analysis. Therefore, the group does not feature as central in my case study.

in a theoretical framework related to my academic background, and despite my endeavours towards ethical knowledge co-production, the analysis is still limited to a particular epistemic horizon that I bring to this work.

Young People's Climate Politics

My conceptual understanding draws on Benjamin Bowman's (2019) suggestion that climate action is more than a response to a perceived crisis: it is a 'world-building project' or what Monika Arnez (2022) describes as 'decolonial world-ding'. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has significantly influenced the discourse on the concept of worlding, as discussed in Spivak (1985). Drawing inspiration from Heidegger, she defines worlding as the process of the colonial powers' assertion of authority, operating under the assumption that the 'Third World' represents an 'uninscribed earth' to be cultivated and moulded. According to Spivak (1985, 253), the coloniser is actively 'worlding his own world', often at the expense of the indigenous populations inhabiting the affected lands. This colonial worlding is characterised by the establishment and perpetuation of imbalanced power structures, the manipulation and exploitation of labour, and the excessive depletion of natural resources. Drawing on Spivak's research on worlding, Arnez's case study of environmental protest aesthetics in Malaysia analyses how different local groups shape processes of 'decolonial worlding', i.e. re-appropriating their environment.

The dynamics that Spivak frame as 'colonisers versus indigenous populations' have become more complicated today, with the new Asian superpowers India and China also pursuing neo-imperial policies in Africa, Southeast Asia and South America in the name of decoloniality. A more recent form of (neo)colonial worlding can be observed in the adoption of iconic infrastructure brands. In the study conducted by Roy and Ong (2011) on the dynamics of worlding in Asian cities, Haines (2011, 173; 177) demonstrates how cities world-wide seek to embrace the 'Dubai brand' as a form of (neo)colonial worlding.

Bowman (2019, 302) recommends exploring the 'imaginations of future worlds' of young climate activists. He further stresses that young people's politics is different and does not function within traditional binary approaches of political engagement and political disengagement or private and public. With the term 'Do-It-Ourselves (DIO) citizens', Bowman (2019, 299) theorises young people's expanded toolbox for political action, which includes lifestyle politics, political consumerism, boycotting, issue-based politics and local and global networking. From this, it follows that relevant analysis has to include different forms of politics that go beyond typical action strategies and appear apolitical at first sight.

In a big data analysis on FFF's first global school strike in 2019, Spaiser et al. (2022) describe the movement as 'norm entrepreneurs' capable of changing the discourse of climate delay and denial, particularly in that it is a movement of children and young people appealing to intergenerational justice and intersectionality. Therefore, 'youth' not only relates to participants' age statistics but is also used as a discursive category to foreground the relevance of the struggle for future generations. The report stresses that it is precisely the intergenerational framing that makes the movement salient to the Global North. Although solidarity with the Global South continues to be a key factor, the impact of the climate crisis in the Global North has been denied for a long time, and only since devastating floods, wildfires and other environmental catastrophes have reoccurred in recent years have people in the Global North begun to feel directly affected (Spaiser et al. 2022). Starting in 2018, FFF gained great mobilisation success worldwide within a very short period of time. Its signature protest form the school strike – a mild form of civil disobedience – is a collective norm violation that references the societal norm violation of inaction regarding the climate crisis and, therewith, children's rights violations (Bleh 2021). It is this powerful normative discourse that provides emotional and argumentative legitimacy for their protest.

> What gave Fridays for Future its great mobilisation power is the perception of a moral wrong, of an injustice against young people in the world. (Spaiser et al. 2022, 2)

The roots of these narratives have been advanced by international, often indigenous, climate change protest movements. The occurring normative shift from environmental issues to human rights and global justice can be largely attributed to these earlier movements' influences, according to Spaiser et al. (2022).

Returning to contemporary youth climate groups, the media plays a crucial role here in promoting the visibility and mobilisation effectiveness of these movements. To be successful as 'norm entrepreneurs', activists need to be particularly skilled in their communication practices. Thanks to Clifford Bob's research on 'The marketing of Rebellion' (Bob 2005), we understand that NGOs have a history of adapting their messages to suit the market. Social-media-savvy activists, too, have recognised the importance of converting their concerns into emotionally resonant and shareable content to harness the network effects of social media. This aspect was, thus, of particular interest for the following case studies.[35]

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35   I thank my colleague Max Kramer for this important observation and his many other helpful comments that have contributed to the improvement of this chapter.

Youth Climate Activism in India

In India, as elsewhere, older approaches to environmentalism and ecofeminism have made way for a global and increasingly mediatised conversation about climate justice. Nevertheless, local and national concerns still dominate Indian activism. In 2019 and early 2020, the Indian government faced nationwide protests through mass flooding with emails raising objections against the notification that intended exemptions of a long list of industries from Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) (Tuli & Danish 2021, 161). This instance not only brought environmental concerns to the forefront but also rendered activists more visible and, consequently, put them at a higher risk of being perceived as threatening. Disha Ravi, the founder of FFF India, coordinated and co-organised the email protest along with other organisations. Critical voices allege that her arrest in February 2021 over a digital protest toolkit in the context of the Farmers' Movement was just a pretend and that her role in the campaign against the EIA Notification was the real reason why the government suddenly perceived her as dangerous (Ranjan 2021). The arrest of Disha Ravi, in turn, changed the perception of Indian youth climate activism as serious political engagement.

Like everywhere across the globe, online activism gained major importance during the pandemic in India, given its long and strict lockdown. 2020 seems to have been a crucial year, since several hitherto-active organisations ended their activities, while others started off with an initial focus on digital campaigning. Wilson (2020) documents the shift in online activism across the world. One of the earliest groups with international connections and participation in international events like COP[36], the Delhi-based Indian Youth Climate Network, appears to have been inactive since 2020. Extinction Rebellion India (XR India), with 17 regional groups discontinued their social media channels in 2020/2021 as well. At the same time, FFF began to gain momentum on the subcontinent. From the inception of the Indian branch in 2019, they managed to increase their active membership through digital activism during 2020 and 2021.[37] Another Delhi-based organisation, YFCI was founded in 2020, and, after an initial digital stage, they now run a climate justice library in South Delhi and many campus campaigns across the city; conduct skill training; are very vocal on social media; and feature a website in Hindi and English. They plan to expand their offline activities. In November 2023, the second climate justice

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[36] COP: Conference of the Parties of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate change. COP events take place annually in different member countries. The 27th COP took place in November 2022 in Egypt.

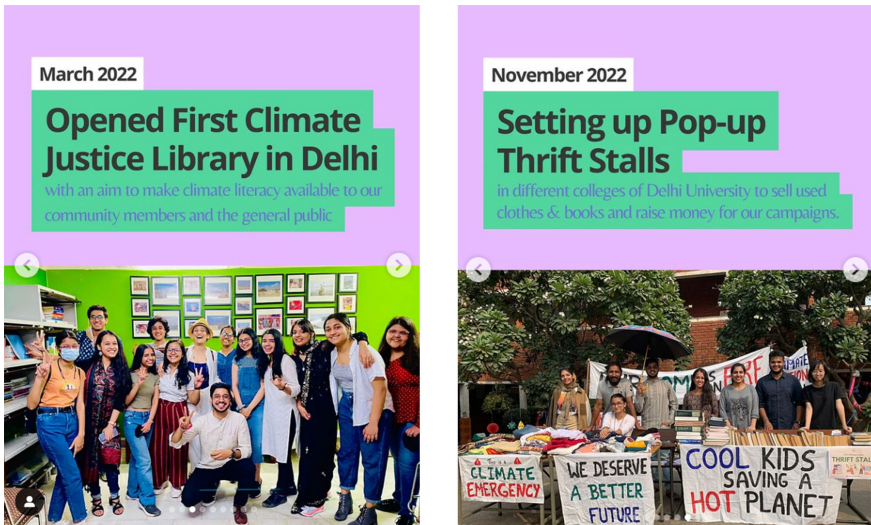[37] Personal interview with FFF Mumbai activist, 06/03/2023, Mumbai.

Figure 32. Instagram posts by @youthforclimateindia about their activities in 2022 (Screenshots taken by author in December 2022).

library was opened in Ambikapur, Chattisgarh, and more libraries are planned in different regions of India (Fig. 32 & 33).[38]

Besides organised, mostly youth-orientated groups, all major cities feature local groups, NGOs or neighbourhood organisations that address environmental issues within their localities. For instance, in urban areas, local communities often organise clean-up drives of beaches, parks and other public areas (Fig. 34).

> Clean-up drives have become one of the most important and common community actions people take to address growing environmental concerns in India. Millions of corporate social responsibility (CSR) funds are being diverted towards the beautification and cleanliness of parks, beaches and roads every year. (Datta 2023)

YFCI activist Srijani Datta criticises these clean-ups as 'short-term fixes' that do not address the real problems of waste production and management, of unequal power relations and consumption, or of awareness. Instead, she claims it is 'time to cover the entire cycle of waste generation, collection and dumping, and also question excessive consumerism by the affluent' (Datta 2023).

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38 Instagram post by @climatejusticelibrary and @youthforclimateinida, 16/11/2023.

Figure 33. YFCI Climate Justice Library in New Delhi. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

Figure 34. Clean-up initiative in Bandra, Mumbai. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

Local Repertoires of Environmental Activism and Thought

As mentioned above, climate activism includes local chapters of large global movements like FFF as well as regional and local organisations. In many rural areas, tribal and Dalit communities have long faced the consequences of environmental disasters and climate change and have organised against the destruction of their livelihoods, against eviction and against resettlement for grand development projects such as dams (Parameswaran, 2022; Omvedt, 1993). Along with *Narmada Bachao Andolan* (Save Narmada Movement)[39] and its leader Medha Patkar, the *Chipko Andolan* of the 1970s and 1980s has been a leading example of a non-violent social and ecological movement by rural villagers. *Chipko Andolan* emerged in the sub-Himalayan region, aimed at protecting trees and forests slated for government-backed logging, and is considered a women-led movement. Young activists particularly cite these two movements as inspirational models for their contemporary activism.

Interviewees also mentioned the existence of religious environmental approaches and bio-divinity as well as Gandhian environmental thought but emphasised that their organisations do not work with these approaches. This might possibly be explained by the desire to distance themselves from religion as a factor of exclusion and conflict in opposition to the dominant ideology of Hindu nationalism and to assert the secular character of their activism. Tomalin (2004) has written comprehensively about cases of co-opting of environmental campaigns by Hindu nationalist forces in India. Many religious traditions (including Hinduism) teach that the earth is sacred, and this should lead to people treating the earth better. This understanding of bio-divinity differs from religious environmentalism, which 'involves the conscious application of religious ideas to modern concerns about the global environment' (Tomalin 2004, 265). Using the example of sacred grove preservation in India, Tomalin examines the extent to which the claim that Hinduism is environmentally friendly is the product of an elitist environmental ideology of the middle class and, therefore, of little relevance to the majority of Hindus. She argues that environmental concerns are used by Hindu nationalist groups and that parallels can be seen between the historicist strategies of Hindu nationalists and religious environmentalism. Narayan (2018) discusses cow protection as casteist speciecism in a similarly critical way. She argues that religious environmentalism in India perpetuates speciesism and hierarchical oppres-

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39 *Narmada Bachao Andolan* is an Indian social movement spearheaded by tribals, farmers, environmentalists and human rights activists against a number of large dam projects across the Narmada River that runs through western and central India.

sive tendencies, not only impacting humans associated with specific animals and landscapes but also undermining the broader environmental discourse rooted in scientific understanding and community-driven initiatives. In their comparative analysis of virtual environmental activism on Instagram, Tuli & Danish (2021) found remarkable differences in the construction environmentalism between the viral case of the death of a pregnant elephant through firecrackers in Kerala and the oil and gas leak in Baghjan, Assam. In the elephant case, the sacredness of the animal (in Hinduism) was central, and the ensuing discourse upheld the human/non-human dichotomy and vilified humans' fight for livelihoods (Tuli & Danish 2021, 177), whereas, in the virtual discourse that evolved around the Baghjan oil leak, the responsible corporation was criticised for causing dual destruction of wildlife and human livelihoods, so humans were seen as part of the ecosystem. The Hindu religious overtone was, thus, much stronger with regard to the elephant case and decisively shaped the social media debate (Tuli & Danish 2021, 160).
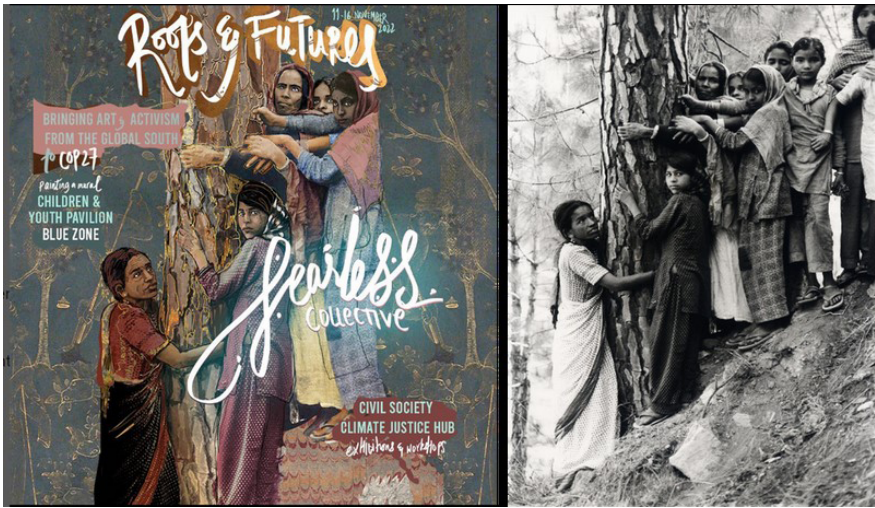

Figure 35. Left: Instagram post by @fearlesscollective, 04/11/2022 (screenshot); Right: Chipko Movement in North India (1970s), date and photographer unknown. Source: https://rightlivelihood.org/the-change-makers/find-a-laureate/the-chipko-movement/ (accessed 10/01/2024).

Despite their ambiguities, contemporary activists revive local environmental repertoires. Fearless Collective, an India-based collective with a gender-specific

agenda of artivism,[40] announced their planned activities at COP 27 in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt with the Instagram post above (see Figure 35). The imagery creates a direct link to the *Chipko Andolan* by refashioning one of the iconic photographs that captures their signature protest strategy of tree-hugging, from which the term *chipko* (Hindi: 'to hug', 'to cling') was derived. Following this inspiration, urban groups like YFCI increasingly attempt to join hands with tribal and/or rural movements such as the youth organisation Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sanghatan (@van_gujjar) of the Van Gujjar Community in Uttarakhand, which is advocating for forest rights and the protection of their livelihood as nomadic buffalo herders.[41]

Mediating the Climate Crisis: Mobilisation and Communication

In terms of social media work, Instagram and X (formerly Twitter) are the most-used channels, with Instagram being the most popular due to the combination of images and text. The Lokniti Report (2019), among others, has documented that WhatsApp is instrumental for coordination and electoral mobilisation among already existing groups or communities of interest. The popularity of Instagram and X/Twitter is representative of a general popularity in the class and age groups that dominate media-intensive climate activism in India (and globally).

FFF India consists of a nationwide umbrella group and 47 local chapters; some represent entire states or regions, but most are city-based. FFF India's website in 2022 simply featured links to Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube and leads to the Instagram pages of the local chapters. When I revisited the site in January 2024, a dynamic 'map of actions' had replaced the map of regional chapters shown in Figure 36.

FFF India usually shares images of activities and calls for action by the local chapters as well as general information about climate change and global events like the Global Climate Strike that took place worldwide on 3rd March 2023 (FFF Mumbai held its event on Saturday, 4 March). Mumbai, Delhi and Karnataka are the most active local chapters, which is reflected in the convergence of activities organised in the physical urban sphere and digital mediation. YFCI entertains a very active website and social media channels on X (formerly Twitter), Facebook

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40   A combination of art and activism, or artistic activism, artivism involves employing imaginative and artistic means of communication to protest, foster consciousness and inspire societal transformation.

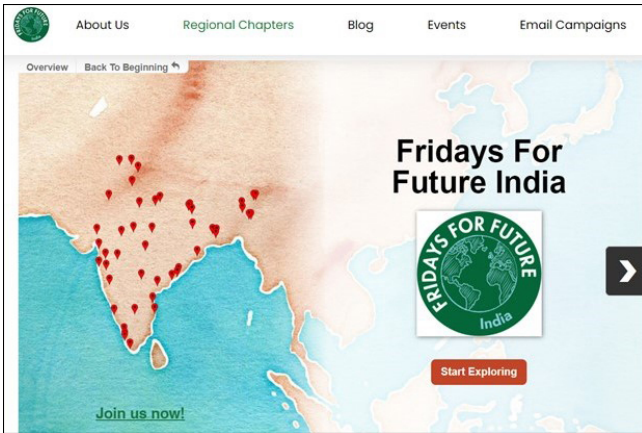41   Personal interview with YFCI activist, 02/03/2023, New Delhi.

Figure 36. FFF India's local chapters (Screenshot from fridaysforfuture.org, 2022).

and Instagram (@youthforclimateindia) (Fig. 37). The Instagram account in particular is very active, with well-curated content and around 15,000 followers.

Instagram Activity
@fridaysforfuture.india: 736 posts, 45,500 followers + regular 'Stories'
@fridaysforfuturemumbai: 632 posts, 8,430 followers + regular 'Stories'
@fridaysforfuture.delhi: 304 posts, 4,407 followers + regular 'Stories'
@fridaysforfuture.karnataka: 228 posts, 4,301 followers
@youthforclimateindia: 962 posts, 153,000 followers + regular 'Stories'
(All data derived on 11/01/2024.)

Nevertheless, the groups are rather small and, even during larger events such as the Global Climate Strike, attract less than hundred participants. The reasons are manifold. Activists have claimed people are too lazy, too busy or too scared to come out for physical protest. The latter may be due in part to the lingering effects of three years of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic but is more likely due to a general atmosphere of repression. The FFF Mumbai chapter was originally born out of the struggle to preserve the Aarey forest (Aarey Conversation Group). The Save Aarey Movement did mobilise huge crowds for regular protests and several artists published songs and videos in solidarity.[42] Since the movement did not, in the end, succeed, many

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[42] See Aarey Colony's Rap Revolution; The Warli Revolt ft. Prakahs Bhoir / Swadesi / Azadi Records; Save Aarey – ProfeSIR-J.

Figure 37. YFCI on X (accessed 12/01/2024).

activists now face legal charges and are intimidated by further participating in physical action.[43]

In her detailed social media frame analysis of 12 active Indian climate actions groups on Instagram, Srijani Datta (Datta 2024) used three major collective frames, as laid out by Benford and Snow (2000): (1) diagnostic framing identifies societal issues and assigns responsibility; (2) prognostic framing proposes solutions and alternative perspectives; (3) motivational framing aims to inspire action by providing reasons for engagement, emphasising efficacy and invoking duty, urgency and severity. These frames help mobilise support and drive social change within movements. Her study found that most youth-led climate action groups effectively communicate the climate issue but lack emphasis on 'problem attribution' and 'injustice frames', which diminishes their political dimension. They struggle to highlight the impact on vulnerable groups, such as young people and minorities, as noted in FFF's discourse. Additionally, the limited use of motivational framing suggests that collective actions outside the social media sphere occur primarily during Global Climate Strikes, reducing the need for content promoting ongoing engagement.

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43 These narratives were shared during walk-along interviews by several activists at the Global Climate Strike organised by FFF Mumbai, 04/03/2023.

Figure 38. Interaction with local school children. FFF Mumbai Global Climate Strike, 04/03/2023. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

Her findings partly contradict key results of the Lokniti Report (2019, 62) that document a strong link between social media usage and political participation, in particular because social media usage might make people more enthused or disaffected towards political parties. This indicates a difference in mediatised youth-led climate activism in comparison to broader party-driven and electoral political participation.

For instance, FFF Mumbai has around eight to ten active members but more than 8,000 followers on Instagram. Under these circumstances, the organisers feel that documenting and sharing their activities via social media is an integral part of their activism to ultimately mobilise more people. The Global Climate Strike organised by FFF in Mumbai that I attended as an observing participant began with a collective poster-making session that also involved local school children in Ambedkar Garden in Powai, Mumbai (Fig. 38). Once the walk started along Powai Lake, it seemed as if it was ostensibly about producing good content for social media (Fig. 39). To foster reciprocation, I shared all my videos and photographs with the group as well, and several of them were then circulated through Instagram to reach a larger audience.

Figure 39. Filming and photographing during FFF Mumbai Global Climate Strike, 04/03/2023. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

The group consisted of only 17 people, but they chose a strategic spot for their final agitation at Powai Lake Selfie Point, right next to the heavily trafficked Jogeshwari–Vikhroli Link Road during evening rush hour, where many people passing by in buses, auto-rickshaws and cars would notice them (Fig. 40).

Apart from the documentation of local activities and calls for action (strikes, digital strikes during the pandemic, cycle rallies, clean-up drives), the social media content consists of shares (or retweets) of posts by Greta Thunberg, other international climate activists, or Disha Ravi and Sriranjini Raman – both Indian spearhead figures from FFF Karnataka who are very vocal on social media as well as visible representatives for FFF India on a global stage.

The range of issues is wide and includes protest against local development projects or sharing of local grassroots initiatives such as the Save Aarey Movement in Mumbai and Save Aravali Initiative (@savearavali) in Delhi, national concerns such as the environmental damage at Joshimath (Uttarakhand), national environmental and climate policies, and broader global issues such as discourses of climate justice, eco-sisterhood and international political debates on climate change. Overall, the social media content as well as the concerns

Figure 40. Selfie Point, Powai Lake. FFF Mumbai Global Climate Strike, 04/03/2023. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

that activists shared with me during interviews were rather localised and very specific to the cities or regions they lived in. The umbrella group FFF India mostly shared and re-tweeted content from FFF's local chapters and rarely produced original content. In Delhi, activists emphasised air pollution, urban infrastructure, cycling and awareness-raising as their main concerns. In Mumbai, urban infrastructure, especially public transport, air pollution and the coastal road project currently under construction, were cited by climate and environmental activists as the main issues. In the context of the coastal road project and the Aarey forest campaign, they expressed concern about the destruction of indigenous livelihoods that depend on the exploited resources, such as the forest-dwelling tribal community in Aarey or the Koli fishing community, whose fishing grounds are threatened by the coastal road.[44]

Following Bowman's proposition to explore activists' future visions, social media provides a rich digital archive to draw from. A digital discussion conducted by FFF Delhi on the occasion of Earth Day in April 2021 illustrates how

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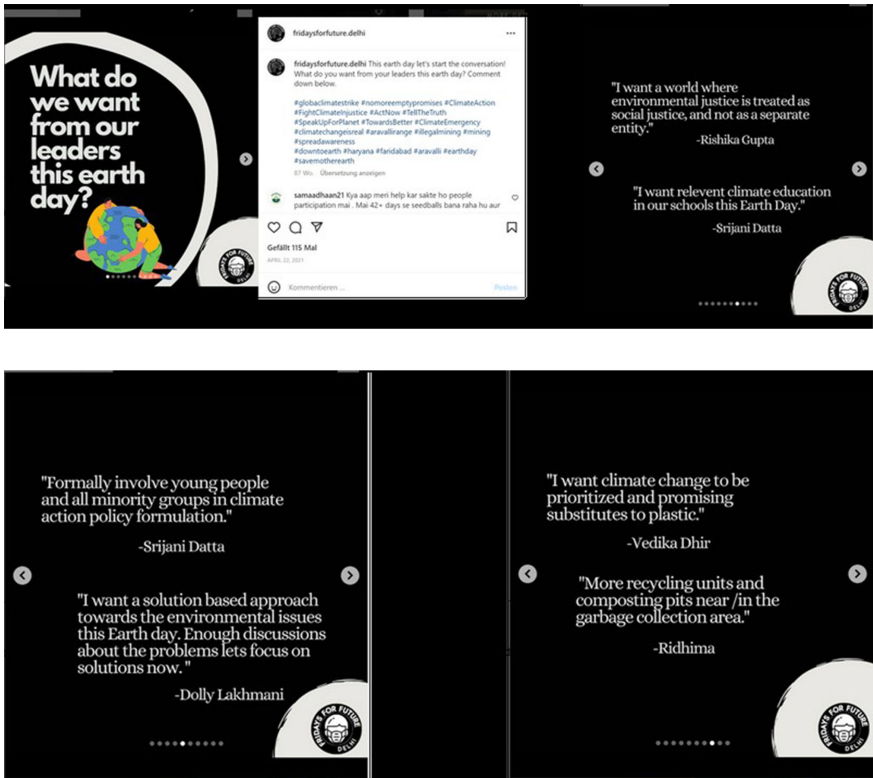[44] Personal interview with FFF Mumbai activist, 06/03/2023.

Figure 41. Screenshots from @fridaysforfuture.india (2022).

specific local demands and visions are always intertwined with greater planetary concerns (Fig. 41).

The following quote from a speech given by a high school environmental activist during FFF Mumbai's Climate Action Day exemplifies the interwoven concern for the local, the national and the global and illustrates youth activists' future imaginations:

> *We want to secure our future and why not nurture our future from right now itself?* So many people will tell you many things. They will say, what is climate change? Well, can't you see the change happening around you. Can't you see the temperatures rising? What are you doing about it? And before I like to say that awareness and actually doing climate action is the only way forward that we can continue. I, as a high school student, I hope to start from now so we can prevent any big crisis. We have seen what's been happening in *Joshimath*. We've been seeing what's been happening *all around the world*, all around India, all around *Mumbai*. We saw what's happening in *Aarey*. We saw what's happening everywhere. We've had enough. We've

Figure 42. FFF Mumbai Global Climate Strike, 04/03/2023. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

had enough of all people making promises to us. But can we promise our-
selves? (FFF activist, Mumbai, 04/03/2023, my emphasis)

Concern for the future is the central theme of his speech. He combines his call
for activism with references to the environmental disaster in Joshimath, Uttar-
akhand, where torrents of water gushed out of its lower slope in January 2023.
Parts of the town subsided; cracks appeared on buildings and roads. Multiple
factors, including unplanned construction, over-population, obstruction of the
natural flow of water and hydropower activities are being cited as reasons for
subsidence in Joshimath, according to news reports (The Hindu Business Line
2023). Joshimath served as a national wake-up call to the ongoing environmen-
tal destruction and its climate impact that rapid unplanned development causes
across the country. The youth activist does not single out India but embeds his
call within broader global developments of rising temperatures and a vague ref-
erence to 'what's happening all around the world' but ends again by localising
his claims with pointing to the events in Mumbai, in particular in Aarey
(Fig. 42).

Negi & Werner (2023) provide a very illustrative account of the 'No
Means No' artivist campaign in Kinnaur, a region in the western Indian

Himalayas. Similar to the Mumbai activist's speech, the campaign draws on global repertoires to make local demands. In the Kinnaur context, the artistic representations clearly reflect indigenous ways of understanding the world, but how they are utilised by the youthful activists showcases a creative, or perhaps one might say 'hybrid', perspective on 'cultural identity'. The power of this artivism appears to be rooted in the dynamic fusion of 'traditional' (poetry, songs) and 'contemporary' (rap, graffiti, social media) art forms – a vitality that challenges the very notion of such a division. The pursuit for influence, accessibility and connection thrives on utilising methods inherently 'global'. However, the global stakes are distinctly tied to local concerns (Negi & Werner 2023, 72).

Gendered Visibility in Climate Activism

European studies on FFF emphasise two factors (Wahlström et al., 2019; Moor et al., 2020): first, that the majority of the activists are very young, with little experience in institutional politics or even being below voting age; second, its specific gendered nature, with a relative dominance of young women activists and protest participants. Furthermore, the actual slightly disproportionate participation of young women is reinforced by recurring media images. Previous research has addressed the feminised public image and leadership role of FFF resulting from the hyper-visibility of girls and young women in media coverage (Hayes & O'Neill, 2021; Sorce, 2022). International media coverage foregrounds gendered images of the global climate movement with an extensive focus on female role models, from the iconic Greta Thunberg to other female representatives in different countries, including Disha Ravi as the founder of FFF India. This type of representation is part of a current trend of staging women as icons of a (new) protest culture, but as Günther (2023) notes, this is not without its pitfalls:

> Certain exclusionary narratives along the binary gender logic have persisted to this day. This is reflected in the reporting and particularisation of "female" protest as well as in the marginalisation of certain historical women's movements as a whole. Although feminist activism has recently become en vogue again and is finding its way into debates in the feuilleton, official party politics and everyday life practices, the authoritarian "anti-feminism" backlash – especially in times of crisis – is all the fiercer. This is evident in the media and digital discourse when it comes to activists of the Fridays for Future protests as well as the #metoo movement. (Günther 2023, 201)

Figure 43. Shilo Shiv Suleman, founder and creative director of Fearless, painted the mural that depicts three young women from the Global South who are vocal in the struggle against climate change. From left to right: **Puyr Tembe**, a campaigner from the Amazon for indigenous tribes; Ugandan climate justice activist **Vanessa Nakate**; Pakistani environmentalist **Ayisha Siddiqa.** Source: @fearlesscollective (November 2022).

The mainstream media framing symbolises Thunberg's key role for the movement, also known as the 'Greta Effect'. Drawing on interviews with young German activists, Giuliana Sorce (2022) finds that gender and age are overemphasised by media reporting and as the two key factors in Thunberg's mobilisation effect, ignoring other aspects of Thunberg's identity – such as class – that youth activists might actually identify with more. Through Thunberg's framing as a young, female, middle-class person with Asperger's syndrome, she emerges as an intersectionally branded leader in the media. Her being middle-class is an important part of the narrative and offers identification in the sense of 'she is one of us'.

Sorce's findings are largely consistent with my findings in the Indian context, both in terms of the overemphasis on age and gender and the patterns of media coverage. As shown above, Google search results reinforce the dominant representation of young female participants and leadership. Prominent youth activists are mostly female, middle-class and relatively privileged in terms of religion, caste and education, as well. The two FFF India representatives at COP 27, Disha Ravi and Sriranjini Raman, in their Instagram accounts regularly share everyday experiences related to their activism but also to friendship, travel and leisure activities. In this way, they similarly appear as 'normal' young people of the middle class and establish an emotional closeness to their followers on social media channels. Against this background, it does not seem

coincidental that FFF India's representatives at the 2022 COP 27 in Egypt were both female.

Keeping with the trend of foregrounding female climate activism, Fearless Collective, as their major project at COP 27, created a mural at the children and youth pavilion in Sharm el-Sheikh. It depicts female leaders from the Global South from three continents, thereby emphasising the intersection of gender and marginalised communities and their disproportionate share of being affected by climate change (see Fig. 43).

Ecofeminism and Political Agency

The basic argument of ecofeminism states that 'in modern capitalist societies, humans is equated with men and nature with woman. Thus, both nature and women are stripped of their creative and life-giving power and treated as objects from which value can be extracted' (Parameswaran 2022: 3). Ecofeminism, as a framework for understanding and responding to the crisis of the Anthropocene, since its beginnings as part of the radical traditions for justice in the United States in the 1970s, aims to repair the 'divide' by stopping the exploitation of nature (and women). Radical ecofeminists of the early movement went so far as to argue that women have always had a more intimate relationship with nature compared to men, calling for a strengthening of these intrinsic bonds and rejecting science and reason as useful tools to combat ecological destruction (Parameswaran 2022: 3). In the Global South, the eco-socialist current has become more popular, and India – with prominent activists such as Vandana Shiva – is at the forefront of a decolonial version of ecofeminism, partially distancing itself from its counterparts in the Global North. Shiva has become known worldwide for her critical writings on biotechnology, in which she rejects Western science because of its inherent violence (Parameswaran 2022, 7). Her recourse to traditional Indian texts to historicise the significance of the current environmental struggle for the long tradition of Indian nature worship has not been spared from criticism by ecofeminist socialists, as it ignores historical, social and economic inequalities (Parameswaran 2002, 7). Nevertheless, few scholars reflect in similar depth on the struggles for knowledge production in comparison to the struggles for material resources. Often, this debate is limited to a form of cultural determinism that reduces epistemic struggles to indigenous/local/traditional knowledge versus Eurocentric/modern/scientific knowledge (Dwivedi 2011, 24).

In a recent publication on ecofeminism and climate change, North American ecofeminist Greta Gaard recounts how environmental and climate activism, from its inception, has often been associated in a culturalist way with essential-

ly 'feminine' characteristics and reproductive capacities, i.e. motherhood and caregiving (Gaard 2015). Even young activists partly reproduced this discourse. These ideas are reinforced through terms such as 'Mother Earth' or 'Mother Nature'. Given the radical ecofeminist standpoint that women have a deeper connection with nature through these traits and abilities per se, a feminised conceptualisation of nature in this simplistic line of thought would lead to feminised protest for nature.

This essentialist view is questioned by contemporary young female activists, who attempt to combine an interest in gender and climate politics. Srijani Datta from YFCI critically engages with the patriarchal interpretation of the woman–nature nexus in a blogpost. She neither completely neglects the ecofeminist framework nor its Indian pioneers. She rather emphasises the need to recognise women's ability to organise, lead and sustain movements:

> The issue here is that we tend to focus so much on the feminine qualities of women which make them apparently closer to nature, we fail to take into account their intimate knowledge of the environment around them. This knowledge ranges from sustainable conservation/ agricultural practices to water management systems or even their ingenious methods of resource conservation. These stereotypes also underplay their ability to be key stakeholders in affecting sustainable practices at the community level. [...] While ecofeminism and its various forms are critiqued for a variety of reasons, it's important to acknowledge how increasingly important this movement is. Ecofeminism highlights the differential vulnerability of men and women to climate change. Additionally, it contributes to the rise of ecofeminists who are not just survivors of patriarchy or silent bystanders to ecological exploitation. Women such as Medha Patkar, Archana Soreng, Vandana Shiva, Gaura Devi, Aruna Roy have paved the way for greater involvement of women in the climate change dialogue. (Datta 2020)

Research on other recent women-led protests, such as the 100-day-long sit-in in Shaheen Bagh (see Chapter 2 in this book), emphasises an 'ethics of care' (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020) that appears to be analogous to the 'feminine qualities' espoused by radical ecofeminism. A critical assessment might lead to the conclusion that these female 'ethics of care' speak to the above-discussed, essentialised notion of femininity and romanticise care without reflecting on the problematic linking of (unpaid) care work and femininity. It is a precursor for the contemporary 'female turn' in protest imagery, but ecofeminist theorists such as Gaard (2015) strongly criticise this approach as a re-inscription of gendered labour roles. Furthermore, it does not allow for queer activism to be included, and it forecloses eco-masculinities (Hultman 2017). It can, therefore, be concluded that a certain tension persists between an ecofeminist view that naturalises women's activism for nature and a more encompassing, inclusive

agenda of social and climate justice that most youth-led groups in India embrace today. Nevertheless, early ecofeminist work advanced questions of inclusive ecological justice by foregrounding gender as a central category. This is still acknowledged by contemporary activists, and Vandana Shiva continues to serve as an inspiring 'local' (i.e. Indian) pioneer.

Feminised Protest and Gendered Political Mobilities

Without doubt, climate activism includes a significantly high and visible number of female activists, and the intersection of climate change, gender and power relations is integral to global and local struggles for climate justice. Nevertheless, the feminised and overly young public image of the climate movement does not always do justice to reality. In the limited context of my field research in India, the feminised image of climate activism was not confirmed. For example, the local FFF group in Mumbai was dominated by male participants and truly diverse in terms of the age of participants (ranging from 14 to 78 years). It included college students, young professionals and senior activists with decades of movement experience and political affiliation to the India Greens Party. A young rural activist who cycles around the central hinterland of Maharashtra and conducts workshops in local schools on climate change and its impact on agrarian life, as well as a 14-year-old high school activist with a very active social media profile who recently started his own NGO, also joined the group. In view of this heterogeneous group composition, it seems rather inappropriate to categorise it simply as urban youth activism. Negi and Werner (2023, 65) remarked on the category of 'youth' in the context of their research on the 'No Means No' campaign in Kinnaur, saying that they used the term because the campaign originated from the local youth clubs and the networking of their (male) members, but they observed that age played a lesser role than status (e.g. being a bachelor), and 'youth' extended well into people's thirties. 'Youth', in the context of the intergenerational framework used by contemporary global climate movements, is, therefore, rather a discursive category that emphasises the aspects of responsibility towards future generations and reinforces the accountability of previous generations.

The FFF group in Delhi was similarly male-dominated, and the spokespeople who got in touch with me also identified as male but consisted of mostly young people, from teenagers to twentysomethings. YFCI, with an equally young average membership, has a more even gender split and also focuses explicitly on queer, trans and non-binary identities. A female activist from YFCI correlated the relative underrepresentation of female activists with structural barriers:

> There are, of course, so many barriers to women's participation in social movements specifically. One, because it's seen as a political space. Even in climate strikes, even for our events, […] our parents don't let young girls go to strikes because they're like, oh, it's a political space or it's an unsafe space. […] Sometimes they lie at home and they'll just go for a protest or some event. A lot of my team members lie at their home to come. (YFCI activist, Delhi, personal interview, 02/03/2023)

She further narrated that she left FFF India and later joined YFCI, which pays more attention to intersectional movement building (i.e. a majority of people in the core team identifies as female, and there is an emphasis on collaboration with non-urban groups and stakeholders). She perceived it as a major problem that the male members dominated the group and made sexist jokes, among other things. As a result, female members did not feel that they were in a safe space, and after complaints and conflicts, several left the group. Research on social movements in various South Asian contexts confirms my interlocutor's experience. Even when women do participate in movements, gendered power inequalities can be concealed through what Agarwal (2001) terms 'participatory exclusions'. These dynamics then make necessary what Nayak (1990: 147) describes as 'the struggle within the struggle' of women within the Kerala fishworker movement. The limited mobility that young women in particular experience alters the participatory patterns decisively in comparison to the research findings from European contexts. This reminds us, again, that a locally specific analysis is extremely important despite dealing with a global phenomenon such as youth climate activism.

The YFCI activist stressed that one way to overcome these barriers is forms of gendered solidarity: 'I especially highlight women's work [in my social media engagement], other young women that I really find good' (personal interview, YFCI activist, Delhi, 02/03/2023). In her inventory of Indian ecofeminist struggles, Parameswaran provides a rather hopeful assessment of recent developments in the form and participation patterns of environmental activism:

> There has been a tectonic shift in the strength and assertiveness of the new feminist environmental movements in South Asia. Participants are increasingly from diverse backgrounds and represent diverse interests. The leaders of these movements are often digital natives and use the tools of technology to communicate their desires and goals to a wider audience with ease. (Parameswaran 2022, 10)

After the initial euphoria over the democratic and egalitarian affordances of the internet, the ever-increasing capitalisation of media has been strongly criticised. Jodi Dean describes the current scenario as 'communicative capitalism' (Dean 2021) as communication increasingly transforms into a tool for capitalist accumulation. Parameswaran's assessment still adheres to the inter-

net-euphoria of Castells (2015) and others but disregards the platform capital-ism, market mechanisms and pitfalls of self-marketing that determine the logic of social media interaction.

Towards Conclusions

Generally, Indian climate activists primarily address specific local concerns, such as the loss of urban nature or resistance to large infrastructure projects. They also mention indigenous and historical models, such as the *Chipko Ando-lan* or *Narmada Bachao Andolan*. Furthermore, urban activists increasingly attempt to create links to marginalised communities and advocate for Dalit cli-mate justice and in support of tribal movements such as the *Van Gujjar Tribal Yuva Sanghatan.*
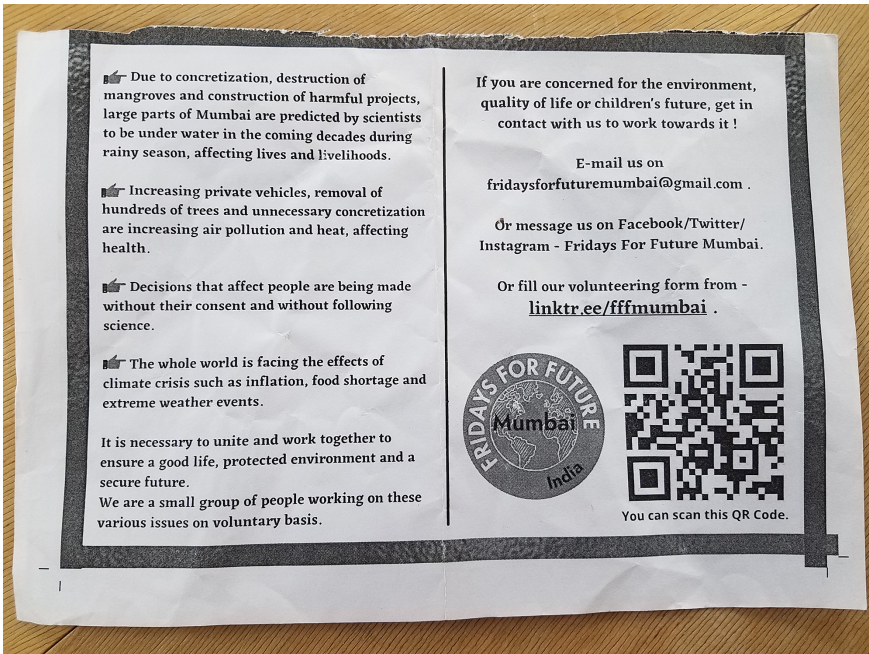

Figure 44. Leaflet by FFF Mumbai, distributed during Global Climate Strike, 04/03/2023. The reverse side contains the same text in Hindi. © Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

They do embed their localised claims within larger frameworks of climate jus-tice and globally shared concerns such as inflation, food shortage and extreme weather events, as stated by FFF Mumbai's leaflet (see Fig. 44), and call for uni-ty and solidarity. Interestingly, the last appeal on the leaflet uses three different

ethical–moral framings to reach people: their concern for the environment, concern for a good quality of life and concern for future generations. The latter plays into the framework of intergenerational justice and the strong normative discourse on a moral injustice put forward by Bleh (2021) and Spaiser et al. (2022). The 'concern for a good quality of life' is quite general, but also appeals to individualistic desires. It could mean a good life for all, but it could also speak to a limited understanding of securing one's own good life. Even from the latter, individualistic understanding emerges a fundamentally universalist appeal. It is precisely this universalism of climate activism that distinguishes it from many other forms of political engagement that are primarily identitarian and address certain groups' needs or aim at particular vote banks. So far, the climate activism discussed in this chapter is still limited by strongly class-based mobilisation, but its 'norm entrepreneurship' (Spaiser et al. 2022) may have the potential to actually function in the sense of a solidarity-based bridging concept (as discussed by Rakopoulos 2016).

In the discourses analysed in this chapter, including those found on social media channels, religious narratives are completely absent, even though earlier ecofeminist movements often activated religious metaphors and discourses (Parameswaran 2022). Other research on Indian social media discourse about environmental issues has emphasised recurring religious references made to the overall reverence in Hinduism for nature elements and certain animals. Tuli & Danish (2021, 160) show how 'unilinear models of economic development and progress, as well as hierarchical and casteist notions in Hinduism continue to shape environmental debates in India'. They further illustrate, with their two case studies on the death of an elephant and the oil and gas leak in Assam, how virality limits Instagram activism by sidelining local voices and privileging short-lived consumer action over systemic change.

While some older Indian activists dismiss youth climate activism as a mere imitation of the European model, Indian youth activists have for years been engaging in a global discussion on climate justice by participating in events such as COP, building and maintaining international networks while advocating for local concerns. Local concerns – like the Save Aarey Movement in Mumbai – in particular have facilitated an alliance of activists that transcends age and gender and has brought together very diverse people. This complicates the understanding and theorisation of climate activism as a 'youth movement' to some extent. Nevertheless, the movement as such understands itself as advocates for the young generation and their future. Pramod Ranjan (2021) writes very enthusiastically about Disha Ravi and youth climate activism in India: 'the new tech-savvy generation, which has broken free from the shackles of religion and caste and which is unwilling to compromise with its civil rights and personal freedoms, can give birth to a new kind of politics'. Interestingly, it is not

ecological or social justice activism but the Hindu Right in India that has gained prominence for being meticulously 'tech-savvy' and entertaining a social media cell.[45] In the same article, Ranjan (2021) questions the Indian perception of environment-related issues as 'harmless', as 'they have nothing to do with religion or caste (though that is not true), do not affect the vote banks of the political parties'. He further states that the Indian middle classes do not fear that participation in such movements might 'hurt the career of their children' and, thus, do not mind them 'getting photographed wearing a T-Shirt emblazoned with slogans or holding placards'. It was only Disha Ravi's arrest in February 2021 that led to a change in perception and a stronger linkage of environment and climate with politics in the Indian public perception. This simultaneously led to greater risk for activists, which, in turn, is reflected in hesitant participation in street protests.

Not only do sceptics criticise youth activism as apolitical but, with the dominance of middle-class activism in the public sphere, criticism of 'full-belly environmentalism' is also growing louder, as are calls for a return to socialist-inspired environmentalism for the poor from prominent actors such as Sunita Narain, Director of the Centre for Science and Environment (Parameswaran 2022, 10). This is partly in line with research on environmental movements in the Global South that sees them primarily as activism by marginalised poor people who want to preserve their environmental resources as a livelihood. It is usually portrayed as a struggle of the poor against the exploitative rich and the capitalism of the Global North (Dwivedi 2001, 15).

Finally, I would like to return to Bowman (2019), who states that young people's politics are different and do not function within traditional binary approaches. All interviewees in my limited sample stressed that they feel the need to depoliticise climate activism and make it fun in order to mobilise more young people to join them. They use a depolitical framing to make protest appear attractive and safe. This is strongly reflected in rhetorical choices by talking about clean-ups instead of protests, announcing poster-making, T-shirt-printing or a Conscious Culture festival in an upper-class shopping mall – activities that feel harmless and apolitical at first sight but can nevertheless provide spaces for experimentation, activism and learning. Similar to FFF activism in Europe, these Indian groups address potential participants both through the language of politics (saving the Earth, saving the future) and the language of lifestyle, for instance exemplified by YFCI's slogan 'Cool kids saving a hot planet' (see Fig. 32). The findings discussed above are related to the

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45 The ruling party runs the Bharatiya Janata Party Information Technology Cell. See also Nisaruddin (2021) and Udupa (2018).

current political climate in India, in which people are increasingly afraid to come out into the streets for physical protest.

Furthermore, the promotion of seemingly apolitical activities is closely connected to gendered mobilities. Despite a feminised public image of global youth climate activism, the Indian reality presents barriers to women's participation due to mobility limitations and gendered power hierarchies within the movements. The FFF and YFCI case studies illustrate obstacles as well as strategies for women's inclusion and participation in youth climate movements. In response to this, organisations like YFCI focus on intersectional movement-building and strengthening female leadership. They attempt to focus on bridging the identified gaps in the climate movement and pursue a more inclusionist agenda that stresses gender and alliances with indigenous and marginalised groups and movements and hence, to speak with Nayak's words, reduce the 'struggles within the struggle'.

Youth climate activism in India is still a relatively young phenomenon, and it will be interesting to see its development and impact in the near future. So far, it is still largely limited to being an urban, middle-class phenomenon that often addresses specific urban environmental questions. In terms of expanding the movement, YFCI is involved in an initiative called the Haiyya Youth Climate Resilience Network, which seeks to advance climate activism beyond urban geographies in India, particularly into non-urban regions and small towns. In the future, we will potentially see more synergies between the activities of the urban and rural populations, as well as the middle class and marginalised groups.