

Sweltering Struggles: Navigating India's Heatwave Health Risks

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Commentaries

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Every summer, news of people dying due to the scorching rays of the unforgiving sun circulates in popular media. Though the size of the published articles keeps decreasing in width and breadth as the season goes by, do not mistake its miniature manifestations as a sign of reduced importance. Instead, it is a sign of India's growing complacency with the extreme climatic conditions, also more fondly known as 'Summer.'

This analysis seeks to unravel India's heat and health crisis by providing data and presenting the stark reality behind the much-loved season of mangoes, pools, and ice creams. It will identify the classes of people most affected by extreme heat and then examine the government's action plan to combat the heat and safeguard public health, a fundamental right.

Data of Despair and Death

The Union Health Ministry reported that as of June 20 (2024), 143 people have succumbed to death by heat, with a suspected addition of at least 70 more deaths to culminate by the end of the month (Economic Times, June 20). However, data collected by the Times of India (ToI) suggests otherwise by reporting that the death toll could be higher than 209 confirmed heat-related deaths, in addition to 239 suspected deaths, totalling 448 confirmed and suspected fatalities this season. These statistics are still pending their completion due to the late arrival of the monsoon; therefore, the number of casualties will only be on the rise. The Health Ministry's data suggests that Uttar Pradesh, followed by Delhi, then Rajasthan and Odisha, top charts in heat surrenders. But TOI figures paint the National Capital to hold the mantle for the highest number of deaths, totalling 76 so far. (Economic Times, June 22).

Every year, the annual collection of deaths due to heat is presented by government agencies, but it is only met with scepticism. Public health experts state that heat-associated deaths can easily be tallied in thousands if heat is factored in as the leading cause of demises. As detailed by Srinath Reddy, the founder of the Public Health Foundation of India, the immediate cause of death is recorded as non-exertional in most health facilities, especially those characterized as understaffed and overcrowded. He further stated that reported deaths are just 0.3% of the total heatstroke cases recorded. Therefore, state governments must better classify deaths so that the problem can be tackled with the vigour it demands (The Hindu, July 4). The core concept that must be taken away from the stated premise is the statement by the India Meteorological Department (under the Ministry of Earth Sciences) that the number of deaths caused by heatwaves is higher than any other natural hazard in different parts of the world.

Also, heatwaves are not only a catalyst to untimely and painful deaths but also cause other grave health-related grievances like heat syncope. A study published by the Indian Institute of Public Health, Bhubaneshwar, titled the 'Management of Heat and Stress Related Illnesses' stated that citizens from the city also suffer from the following of heat generated symptoms - sweating (95%), excessive thirst (53%), dizziness (52%), headache (41%), heat rash (41%), dehydration (29%), and heat cramp/muscle cramp (17%). Such fatal symptoms are perpetrators of barriers put on mobility and unrestrained movement, which then affect the monitory and mental circumstances of inhabitants. Therefore, heat waves are silent killers and one of the most dangerous triggers for mental health problems for people of all age groups in the summer months. Mitigative strategies are becoming a necessity rather than a welfare choice.

Who is most affected?

A detailed analysis of any article on heatwave-induced fatalities reveals a troubling pattern: the most vulnerable are often low-income individuals and outdoor workers. These populations typically have minimal bargaining power with their employers and are rarely excused from labouring in extreme conditions. It is, therefore, unsurprising that on June 18,

seven people who tragically succumbed to the intense heat on the dusty streets of metropolitan Noida were ragpickers, a watchman, and manual labourers. These deaths highlight the dire need for better protection and support for those most at risk during extreme weather events (The Indian Express, June 25). A scrutiny of heatwave impacts reveals that marginalized groups are disproportionately affected. Individuals with chronic illnesses are particularly vulnerable, especially when they lack access to adequate healthcare systems that could prevent their conditions from worsening or becoming fatal. Additionally, children and older people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds suffer greatly during heat waves. Their living conditions often include areas with little to no shade, insufficient drinking water, and a lack of cooling and nutritious meals.

Plagued by air pollution, high population density, and limited resources, urban areas experience higher temperatures. Migrants working in the informal sector, who have left their ancestral villages for better opportunities, often find their living standards decline further. The increased sales of ice creams and air conditioners should not be seen as a universal experience for all Indians; these figures reflect the reality of a minor, privileged segment of society. Meanwhile, the actual sufferers—those living in poverty with minimal resources—continue to endure extreme heat with little to no relief in sight.

India's Action Plan

By now, it must have become crystal clear that combating the heat in a world where global warming shows no signs of immediate fatigue must become a high-priority project for any government. India faces grave infrastructural challenges in accommodating rising temperatures, as evident by the record-breaking demand for electricity in the past month (The Indian Express, June 26). Therefore, policy and legislation dealing with creating resilient houses characterized by heat-resistant materials and natural ventilation must be formulated. Additionally, water management should be made more efficient, and the tussle for water by landlocked states like Delhi, with no sources of water, should be promptly solved, isolating political ego from the discussions. Increased expenditure on research to cultivate climate-friendly vegetation should commence as soon as possible, and urban planning, like planting trees and shrubbery, making green spaces, and buildings with green rooftops, must be prioritized. Stringent control over industrial emissions through taxes must be followed through, and sustainable development goals should be achieved instead of pushing deadlines. Also, well-detailed government initiatives such as the 2017 Guidelines for mitigating heatwaves in India should be studied and executed. While 11 states, including Delhi, have been prompt in developing tailor-made Heat Action Plans to tackle their individualistic and common climatic obstacles, implementation gaps and resource limitations must be mended so that government aspiration can match administrative conduct.

Similarly, short-term action plans can be considered successful if Early Warning Systems, awareness campaigns, hydration systems, and medical emergency centres are successfully functioning. Additionally, local support must be encouraged, and the power of social media can be harnessed to motivate the privileged to step out of their air-conditioned cocoons to help their fellow citizens. Therefore, videos of individuals altruistically distributing cool drinks on Instagram are heartwarming and not in the wrong way!

Conclusion

While India is on its quest to become a developed economy by 2047, it must keep in mind that the richness of a few does not solely define development. Instead, a developed state is considered one that can offer a high standard of living to every citizen. In today's age of the Anthropocene, that includes protection against adverse climatic circumstances. Therefore, 'beating the heat' is not a catchy jingle to sell summery products or an inspirational slogan for environmental activists; rather, it is a war cry that must be adhered to with the utmost dedication and inspiration.

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