



# From Chipko movement to global youth climate movement: Understanding it in the Indian context

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**Abstract:** The global youth climate movement faces significant challenges, including criminalisation and lack of support from the governments, yet it remains resilient. It is worth exploring India, with the world's largest youth population, in relation to the youth climate movement at the intersection of right to participation and climate justice.

In the 1970s, Indian villagers protested by literally hugging trees to prevent them from being cut by the forest contractors while putting themselves in danger. This nonviolent movement is recognised as the [Chipko movement](#), where Chipko means 'to hug' in Hindi. The movement aimed at the protection and conservation of trees soon became a global inspiration and continues to inspire environmental activism. For example, school students in Bengaluru [initiated](#) the 'Chipko' movement in 2021 in response to the alleged cutting of trees on the school premises by the municipal authorities

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In the digital age, the global climate movement #FridaysForFuture (FFF) spread across the world including India. Despite the presence of different forms of youth climate activism, what challenges remain for the climate movement in India? According to the United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs, in the world today there are over [1.2 billion](#) young people aged 15 to 24, out of which 254 million (the world's largest) are in [India](#).

Despite calling on governments to take action on the environmental crisis, which is one of the greatest threats to human rights globally, youth interests and voices have been ignored worldwide. As Kofi Annan [said](#), 'any society that does not succeed in tapping into the energy and creativity of its youth will be left behind'. This holds true in a country like India which depends on its youth to build a stable and peaceful society and to ensure that youth is included in the policymaking processes that affect their future.

The most common strategy employed against human rights defenders, namely criminalisation, has now transcended borders, particularly evident in the [case](#) of climate activists who face charges including subversion, unlawful association, terrorism, and tax evasion all over the world. Therefore, the major challenge that is faced by the youth climate movement to thrive in India is the fear post crackdown on youth climate activists.

### **The youth climate movement in the Indian context**

In India, the current youth climate movement advocating for climate justice is very inspired by the [Fridays For Future](#) initiative. In 2019, hundreds of [Indian students](#) skipped schools while taking part in the global protest against climate change. A Delhi-based coordinator of the school strikes mentioned how the pollution in the national capital is only increasing each year citing deforestation as one of the main reasons. She also [mentioned](#) how they avoided cutting off 16,000 trees by

'climbing the trees and hugging them so that the contractors could not cut them', inspired by the Chipko movement.

A parent mentioned how the Fridays For Future climate strikes changed the perception of environmental activism, and now [even young children](#) are participating besides the environmental activists. However, many students were disappointed with how the elders are not showing enough solidarity.

While approximately half of the Indian population is under 25 years old, the active engagement of young people in climate advocacy and activism is not yet as widespread or organised as in some other parts of the world.

Air pollution is indeed cutting short lives across India with the heatwave being [45 times more](#) likely in the country. Experts suggest that **immediate livelihood concern**, which is historically the focus of political and social movements in India, is one reason why environmental issues take a [backseat](#).

For this reason, environmental issues struggle to gain proper traction and attention need to become key factors in national elections and garner solidarity for the youth climate movement. Therefore, it is important to highlight how climate change is a burning issue that drastically impacts their lives in the form of unprecedented climate disasters such as heatwaves, flash floods, agricultural loss, and landslides. Another concern is the instances of **criminalisation of the youth climate movement**, which have instilled fear among many young activists. In 2021, a Fridays for Future (21-year-old) activist was arrested in connection with the ['toolkit' case](#), alleging that her involvement in creating and collaborating on a public document aimed at 'tarnishing India's image' amidst the farmers' agitation, using tactics like 'social media strikes' and 'Twitter storms'.

This incident underscores the complex dynamics surrounding activism and [freedom of expression](#), prompting discussions about the rights of individuals to advocate for the causes they believe in, even in the face of legal scrutiny. Notably, the youth climate movement in India is slowed down because of such instances including the [blocking](#) of the FFF movement's website which is worrying for the democratic representation and future of human rights in India.

Despite the apprehensions, the youth climate movement in India remains resilient and has achieved small victories at local levels. The ['Save Mollem' campaign](#) launched in 2020 in Goa exemplifies this, successfully raising national awareness about three ecologically damaging infrastructure projects in the Western Ghats of India. These projects (including a power transmission line, a highway expansion, and a railway line doubling) threaten biodiversity and indigenous habitats. Due to the relentless efforts of 'Save Mollem' activists and legal interventions by organizations like the Goa Foundation, these projects are now under [scrutiny](#) by a Supreme Court-appointed committee, marking a significant step towards environmental protection and conservation.

## **Listening is empowering**

In a [global survey](#) of children and young people in ten countries, including India, almost 60 percent of the participants were either extremely worried or apprehensive about climate change, and more than half of them believed that the government response is inadequate. However, only few academic analyses have addressed the complex empirical reality of youth mobilisation in global climate politics through lawsuits and activism.

As Bessant has highlighted in 2021, the ignorance towards youth climate mobilisation points towards the paradox in mainstream social representation of youth as both '[politically apathetic](#)' and immature for political engagement at the same time.

For a substantial change in the context of climate justice we need to listen to the youth who are fighting for their future. Keeping this in mind, we can learn from India's Licpriya Kangujam, who [emphasises](#) how the national government and international organisations can truly 'empower' youth by listening to them.

Back in March 2020, the 9-year-old climate activist caught everyone's attention by declining an honour under the 'SheInspiredUs' campaign for Women's Day and [responding](#) to the Prime Minister of India '...please don't celebrate me if you are not going to listen to our voice'. The same climate activist was detained briefly and subsequently removed from Cop28 (2023) following her protest at the plenary stage. The video about her act, where she is seen urging countries to commit to phasing out fossil fuels, has gone viral.

This is one of the examples of many young climate activists who are pushing for climate action at the national level and on the global stage. We need to listen to them as listening is empowering. For this to happen, there should be more climate consultations including youth, ensuring that their suggestions reach the decision-makers. Increasing representation of youth in climate discourse should also be accompanied by the decriminalisation of youth climate activism and the fostering of a sustainable intergenerational dialogue to address the social injustice caused by inefficient measures to curb the climate crisis.