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Forum

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In May 2013, I traveled to the state of Uttarakhand in northern India to study the effects of climate change. I wanted to know about the lived experience of those at the frontlines of climate hardship. Meeting with scientists, government officials, and ordinary citizens, I sought to learn what it is like to live at the capillaries of global warming.

Some of the most poignant meetings were with subsistence farmers—those who grow food to feed their families and neighbors but not enough to sell commercially. Many of these people live on steep hillsides. Each morning and evening they walk down ravines to fill containers with water. Over the past few years, their lives have been especially challenging, as the summer and winter monsoons have come later in the season and been milder in intensity—an effect some associate with climate change.[1] In fact, over the past five years, many of these farmers have wrestled with dire conditions, as rains have been insufficient to grow many of their staple crops and they have been forced, against their deepest wishes, to accept government assistance of wheat, rice, and kerosene.

In one of my meetings, I spoke with fifteen farmers from different nearby villages. Sitting in a two-room house that sleeps six and in stifling heat of nearly 100 degrees, we talked about the changes in weather they've been witnessing, the extent to which these changes may be tied to climate change, and what they think about a global problem that is pushing down on them with particularly ferocity. Even though they did not know the details, all of them seemed familiar with the term climate change and all told stories of hotter temperatures and unpredictable weather patterns. Outside, the sky was clear and the soil was dusty brown. No one was optimistic about the monsoon coming anytime soon or with enough rain to nourish the newly seeded fields. They were readying for another summer of prolonged drought, wherein they would have to face a brutal reality of less food, fewer seeds, and an even more uncertain future. As we

1. *ClimateWatch Magazine* 2012; Kailasam and Rao 2010; *The Economist* 2012.

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sipped tea on the concrete floor, neither the farmers nor I could imagine a scarier prospect. Then, a few weeks after I left, the rains came.

The rains that pummeled Uttarakhand in June 2013 were widespread. Increased rainfall extended south to Delhi, over to Western Nepal and up through Western Tibet. Uttarakhand, however, received the bulk of precipitation and suffered the most damage as floods and landslides thrashed the towns of Kadernath, Guptkashi, and Ukhimath. Here punishing rains washed out roads, inundated villages, and lopped off whole swaths of land from mountainsides. Throughout the country, the deluge killed close to 6,000 people and left over 100,000 stranded and in need of rescue.[2] The Indian army lost soldiers in its attempt to evacuate trapped pilgrims (which included the downing of a helicopter returning from the pilgrimage site of Kedarnath), and tens of thousands of people's lives will never be the same.[3] Today, many of the towns have yet to be rebuilt, and there are questions if they will ever be reconstructed.[4]

Scientists believe that global warming is not simply shifting the timing and intensity of India's monsoon, but also leading to new patterns of precipitation. Higher temperatures are causing greater surface evaporation, which partially accounts for the drought the farmers in Uttarakhand have been experiencing. However, with more water vapor in the atmosphere, if and when the rains come, they pour down with greater strength and concentration. This can cause devastating floods and landslides, especially in mountainous areas.[5] This is exactly what happened in Uttarakhand.

The farmers, of course, could not have predicted any of this during the interviews. Through the translator's paraphrasing, it seemed clear that everyone assumed that the summer of 2013 would be no different than previous ones. In fact, our discussions focused mostly on the effects of heat and drought. We talked about agricultural sustainability in light of more moderate monsoons and the difficulty of farming on increasingly parched land. We discussed how they would carry on, as some of their traditional crops no longer grow in the region due to warmer conditions, and how many other crops may face a similar fate as climate change increases. We also talked about how their villages would fare as their children leave for cities seeking greater opportunity, and the challenges of being left behind by a country committed to economic might and a world that seeks affluence and comfort at all costs.

In these conversations, I heard expressions of both resignation and resilience. Many told stories of being beaten down by poverty, kicked off previously held land, and vulnerable to the whims of corporate and governmental bodies whose actions undermine their security. Others related openness to change and an ability to endure sustained hardship. Life had dealt them so many challenges that illness, misfortune, and even hunger were not events, but just part of day-

2. CBC 2013.
3. *The Guardian* 2013.
4. Reuters 2013.
5. Trenberth 2011; Trenberth 2008.

to-day experience that they could endure with their humanity intact. There was something touching and admirable in their outlook. It was both fatalistic and resilient.

These are the people on the receiving end of the global North's climate politics. They represent the face of carbon addiction. Generally, they are hidden from view. Subsistence farmers live not simply off the electric grid but also off the market, and thus are of no consequence to anyone since so much relevance these days revolves around buying and selling. Tens of millions of Indian farmers live from hand-to mouth. Hundreds of millions more live on less than $2 a day, feeding global markets that they never see and over which they have no control. Beyond the hinterlands of commodification and thus earshot yet trapped in global structures, their silence represents, what Edward Said calls, the "normalized quiet of unseen power."[6]

When the conversation turned to how agriculture could manage in these times of climate magnification—what forms of farming would be best suited to a climate age—we came back to their own practices. These farmers employ so-called "traditional organic" methods. Too poor to buy fertilizer, pesticides or genetically modified seeds, and unable to send their crops to urban markets, their practices have an infinitesimal carbon footprint. Furthermore, they engage in "fair trade," since they share and barter with each other rather than try to squeeze merchants or salespeople along the production or distribution chain. Finally, by "lowering" their sights and striving for mere *sufficiency* rather than sheer productivity,[7] they practice full-employment agriculture—the more mouths that need to be fed, the more people that need to work the land. On first reflection, this may sound like a sad story of desperation driving sustainability—as if the poor have no choice but to be ecological stewards. One can also hear it, however, as a message of wisdom to a world of 7.2 billion people, under the darkening specter of climate change.

Toward the end of our almost three-hour conversation, I had the translator ask what these farmers would like to tell America. What message would they like to relate to people of my country? They replied that they didn't want US food assistance, televisions, or even air conditioners. They didn't pine for US consumerism or the flashy lifestyles that many of us imagine all foreigners covet. Rather, they wanted US leadership. They wished the US would use its wealth to figure out how to generate energy without emissions or, as they put it, how to drive cars and run factories without pollution. They also wanted the US to figure out how to share global wealth so everyone could have education and live lives of their choosing. Most of all, they hoped that the US would model sustainability—establish ways of life that enlarged the wellbeing of everybody and everything, not simply the pocketbooks of the few, already overly fortunate. They had little faith that their own government could do such things.

6. Said 2001, quoted in Nixon 2011, 34.
7. Princen 2005.

To date, scientists, policy-makers, and environmentalists have responded to climate change in two ways. First, they have attempted to mitigate it—that is, reduce carbon emissions, plant trees, and otherwise stop the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. This has long been the focus of international treaties, domestic legislation, and citizen efforts. Second, recognizing that mitigation measures are far from adequate, countries have also begun adapting to climate change. Officials are devising plans to build higher sea walls, bury utility lines, and cultivate drought-resistant crops to adjust to a warming world. Events in Uttarakahand, however, remind us that there is a third dimension to climate change that is becoming increasingly familiar. This is, sadly, widespread suffering. Those living on the margins of the affluent, globalized world are illustrating that, no matter how much we try to mitigate or adapt to climate change, much human pain and misery is inevitable. Living at the forefront of climate hardship, the farmers with whom I spoke and many of whose lives are now in ruin reveal the full spectrum of climate consequences.

Climate suffering, like much hardship, is not simply a fact of life but a consequence of politics. It emerges from configurations of power that grant privilege and, like many structures, operate through the "soft knife of routine processes."[8] These processes are themselves hard to see. They stretch from the coal mines of China, tar sands of Canada, falling rainforests of Brazil, and oil deposits of Saudi Arabia to tailpipes, kerosene lamps, iPhones, rice paddies, and thermostats throughout the world. Furthermore, they constitute diminutive links in a long chain of greenhouse gas accumulation that reaches back in time—wherein "historical emissions" catapulted some into the developed world and left others in, what Mike Davis calls, "the global residuum"[9]—and marches forward at a pace that is at once staggering but so dispersed that it is hardly noticed. In this sense, climate suffering is the epitome of what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence"—a "violence [that] is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales."[10] To the farmers of Uttarakahand, the causal accretions may, in fact, be gradual, strewn across far-flung landscapes and temporalities, and embedded in the micro-ducts of global life, but, when they arrive, they materialize with a vengeance. Scorching drought and torrential rains may originate from everywhere and thus nowhere, but still arrive like a stiletto.

As the afternoon light grew dim, digital recorder in hand and following the pat procedures of social scientific questioning, I grew confused about scholarly inquiry. I found myself wondering who was interviewing whom, where the boundaries of climate suffering ended, and what kind of hands hold the weapons of climate violence. To be sure, my "subjects" sat around me while I asked queries with as much clarity and respect as I could. I had, of course,

8. Kleinman, Das, and Lock 1997, x.
9. Davis 1995, quoted in Nixon 2011, 34.
10. Nixon 2011, 2.

received approval of my IRB[11] and worked to be mindful of crossing ethical boundaries—I did not want my research to cause harm. And yet, as I practiced my honed research methods, distinctions started to blur. I was not simply questioning others in a disinterested or somehow politically neutered way; instead the encounter both pained and humbled me. It hurt to see those most dependent on stable weather try to scramble to adjust to a changing climate. It troubled me that, while I would soon fly home burning more fossil fuel than these farmers use in a year, they would continue moving hoes through stubborn soil and gazing up at the sky for signs of an uncertain future. I must also add that I felt honored to be welcomed by the "sustainable ones," having just flown in from the broader unsustainable world. I thought of their faces as I read about and watched videos of the torrential monsoon rains just after my visit, and today continue to imagine what it must be like for those villagers swept away by a force not of their making. There are both physical and emotional dimensions to climate suffering and, while I may be largely immune from more acute material hardship, I nevertheless feel the trauma of climate change. I now know that I was not simply gathering data to report back to my Northern colleagues, but joining the wider world of climate adversity.

As I was leaving the interview, a farmer approached me. He grabbed my translator's arm and had her relate a final message to the US. He wanted me to know that I shouldn't pity him or the others. Everyone, sooner or later, was going to be in the same boat. As he put it, if climate change had come to rural India, it will eventually come to America. He wished me luck.

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11. An Institutional Review Board is a committee within a university that reviews research methods to prevent human subjects from physical or psychological harm.

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