

## **Newspaper Coverage of Climate Change in South Asia**

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### **Abstract**

South Asia comprises the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka. This study on climate change has been carried out by (1) analyzing the newspaper texts available online, and (2) interviewing journalists of South Asia through emails. Global climate change is now a major challenge facing the world. The UN's Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and other leading organizations have expressed their concerns over climate change being cause in terms of erratic monsoons, flash floods, crop failure, etc. The South Asian region is more vulnerable to climate change risks as it is too dependent on its natural resources and agriculture, besides its dense population and poverty. This paper focused on studying the discourses of the climate change-related news in newspapers of the South Asian countries. It was found that there is a phenomenal difference in attitudes and experiences of journalists in bringing out the information to the public domain. Some of the other findings are: The journalists mostly portray climate change as cause of anthropogenic activities and climate change as a potential crisis in near future. There needs to be more media focus at the regional or local levels. Climate change will not affect every place on the earth in the same way. Thus, specific solution strategies may need to be developed for regional areas. Although climate change effects will be felt at national and global levels, there are regional adaptations that need to be considered. For this, journalists will have to work hand in hand with grassroots civil society activists to create climate awareness at the local level. There is a possibility that journalistic behaviour could affect the way that the media presents climate change. Matters such as deadlines and lack of knowledge of the reporters could result in heavy use

of material from international and national news agency services. It might be expected that a regional newspaper would provide a greater amount of regional and local coverage, but it is not the case. Regarding methodology, it was difficult to access major newspapers over the internet for analyzing the content, though archives were available in most of the news portals. Accessing journalists and getting interviews over email was more difficult.

## **Introduction**

The terms ‘climate change’ or ‘global warming’ are used interchangeably to refer to the increase in mean temperature but ‘climate change’ is preferred by scientists as it covers a wider gamut.

Through human scales, the mass media coverage has proven to be a key contributor among a number of factors that has shaped and affected continuing interactions between science, politics and the public (Boykoff, 2008). The media is the main source of information and opinion for a vast section of the public. How stories of climate change are represented in newspapers plays a major role in shaping public opinion on the issue.

For individuals who are not engaged in climate science research, access to climate change information is typically through media reportage and interpersonal communication. Mass media communication is, therefore, hypothesized to play a key role in the public understanding of risk (Wahlberg and Sjoberg, 2000). As Liu et al. (2008) observe, the media usually has one of two functions in influencing public and policy agenda setting: influencing salience and influencing views. News media can influence the way that the public and policymakers view the issues, either negatively or positively (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Cook et al., 1983; Wanta et al., 2004).

## **Need for study**

Climate change is a big global threat. The climate of the planet has changed so drastically in the last few years. The Asia-Pacific region is more vulnerable to climate change as it is too dependent on its natural resources and agriculture, densely populated and steeped in poverty.

**Table 1: Impact of climate change in developing countries**

Change in rainfall patterns
Floods
Droughts
Tropical storms
Heat waves
Changes in growing seasons and regions
Changes in water quality and quantity
Sea level rise
Food security

Even within the Asia-Pacific region, grave consequences are being faced by the South Asian countries which are either developing or underdeveloped. South Asia comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, the Maldives, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This study looks into the involvement of environment journalists in disseminating the regional and local climate change issues. It presupposes that journalists of these countries should take upon themselves as a duty to communicate the impacts of climate change. South Asian countries being more vulnerable to climate change, there is a special need to study the media content of climate change in the region. Evaluating the newspaper journalists' reporting from the region will be helpful to identify gaps. The newspaper texts were analyzed by accessing news portals of the respective news organizations.

**Table 2: South Asian newspapers and their news portals**

S.N o.	Country	Newspaper	Website
1	Afghanistan	Pajhwok Afghan News	www.khaama.com
2	Bangladesh	Bdnews24.com	www.bdnews24.com

3	Bhutan	Kuensel Online	www.kuenselonline.com
4	India	The Times of India	timesofindia.indiatimes.com
5	The Maldives	Haveeru	www.haveeru.com.mv
6	Nepal	The Himalayan	www.thehimalayantimes.com
7	Pakistan	Dawn	www.dawn.com
8	Sri Lanka	Daily Mirror	www.dailymirror.lk

### **Aim**

The aim of the study is to analyze the climate change coverage in newspapers of South Asia.

### **Objectives of study**

- To find how various newspapers cover climate change in South Asia.
- To get to know the challenges faced by journalists in covering climate change in South Asia.

### **Review of literature**

Low income countries are characterized by reactive adaptations in response to short-term motivations, particularly changing market conditions. Most adaptations occur at the individual level with weak involvement of government stakeholders, and adaptation activities are more likely to occur in natural resource sectors such as agriculture, fisheries and forestry, or the securing of food resources (Berrang-Ford, Ford and Paterson, 2011).

Many conservatives have used the economic consequences frame to oppose action on climate change, many environmental advocates now seek to turn this interpretation in their favour by emphasizing an opportunity to revitalize the economy through investment in clean energy technology (Nisbet, 2009).

Starr (2004) found that the Associated Press, a monopoly wire service during the second half of the nineteenth century, wielded extraordinary influence. The results of this study indicated that the collective newswire/news service community was not only an essential but a dominant source of climate science news. However, the science of climate change does not appear to be a prime news topic in articles covered.

Articles that framed climate change in terms of debate, controversy, or uncertainty were plentiful. Not only were there many examples of journalistic balance that led to bias, but some of the news outlets repeatedly used climate sceptics – with known fossil fuel industry ties – as primary definers. Worse yet, in some instances, such articles originated from wire or news service providers (including newspapers that provide such services or are affiliated with news service agencies) – which caused the exponential spread of misinformation (Starr 2004; Antilla 2005).

Boykoff and Boykoff (2004) found that biased reporting often resulted when journalistic norms [such as balance] were maintained, which could lead to the inaccurate presentation of scientific information and consensus. While policy makers might receive multiple sources of information, the public often relied heavily on the media, so for the many members of the public, the media might lead the debate on climate change and influence perceptions.

## **Methodology**

This study covered the nationally read newspapers which are online as well, in each of the eight South Asian countries for climate change news for a period of one year i.e., April 1, 2012 to March 31, 2013. The methodology used to analyze the media text is discourse analysis. Key words used were ‘climate change’ and ‘global warming’.

The aim of critical discourse analysis is to uncover how language works to construct meanings that signify people, objects and events in the world in specific ways. It is concerned with the way in which discourse builds social identities, social relations and the system of knowledge or belief and how these discourses maintain power through their ideological properties (Brookes, 1995).

Additionally, in-depth interviews were used to gather ideas, information and to understand the journalists’ perspectives in communicating climate change.

## **Media discourses on climate change**

Discourse analysis was undertaken on climate change stories featured on eight South Asian countries for one year, and 174 articles were analyzed. The stories analyzed through discourse analysis range from hard news stories to soft features, all covering the

issues of regional climate change. Since the study focused on regional coverage of climate change in newspapers, the wire stories from elsewhere and the stories on climate change with a global perspective were left out.

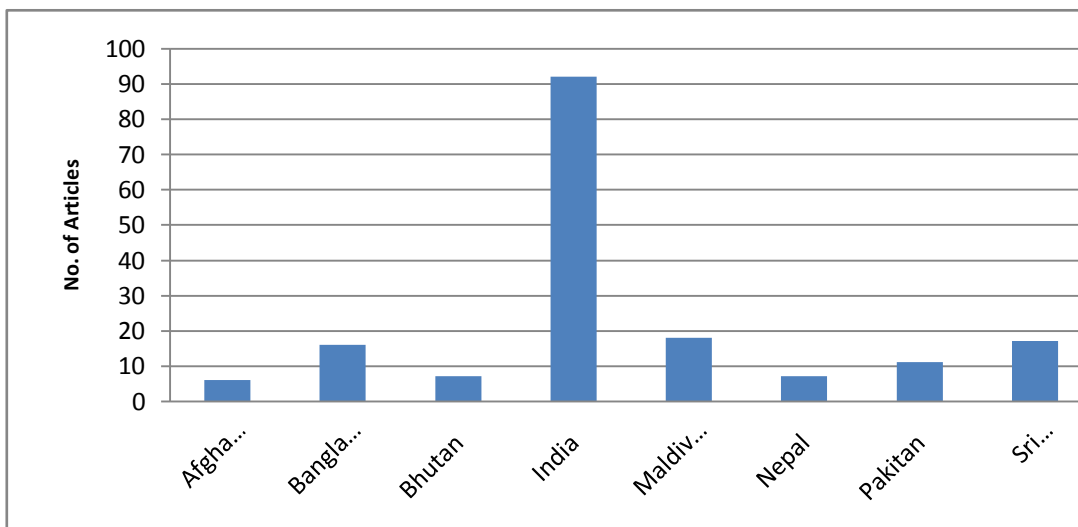


Figure 1: Climate change articles in newspapers of South Asian countries from April 2012 to March 2013

Figure 1 shows that the trend of low coverage uniformly in South Asian countries except in the case of India. A more valid reason is that the Indian newspaper – *The Times of India* in this case – is voluminous and it has thus more scope to cover news as well. This may also be because of India's robust civil society and polity being specially sensitized to the issue of climate change. Next to India, the Maldives, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka top on the chart of climate change coverage, rightly given the fact that the three countries are affected by sea level rise and sea-based disasters.

There are a few countries like Norway which lie near the north pole which think that climate change is good but in South Asia which is tropical it is not the case. Views may be articulated that there are other important things than climate change but never was any news that climate change is good.

**Afghanistan:** Afghanistan is landlocked and mountainous. Its recent history has witnessed conflicts and displacements. The country has high water resources though not properly managed. As much as 80% of the people are dependent on the scarce natural resources for their livelihoods. Droughts and flooding are likely to recur more often, and these are projected as climate change events in Afghan media.

**Bangladesh:** Bangladesh is densely populated. Thickly populated areas constitute a delta of rivers that empties into the Bay of Bengal. Much of Bangladesh is low-lying and vulnerable to flooding. Half of the population is very poor. Agriculture is the mainstay but it is not able to meet the job demands. Many Bangladeshis seek work abroad, mostly illegally. Coastal and riverine flooding and winter (dry season) drought in certain areas are reported as events induced by climate change. Both coastal flooding (from sea and river), and inland flooding (river/rain) are expected to increase. The combined effects of climate change include sea level rise, subsidence and changes of upstream discharge, cyclones and coastal erosion. Stories of how people organize themselves in managing sea ingressions also find a place in media coverage.

**Bhutan:** Bhutan is a tiny, remote kingdom in the Himalayas. A minimum of 60 per cent of the country's total land is being maintained under forest cover as per a constitutional provision. As many as 25 glacial lakes are at a risk of flooding. Less ice and snow cover the rocks in the recent winters. Recession of glaciers results in increase in the volume of these lakes. Reduced flow of snow-fed rivers has major impacts on hydropower generation, urban water supply, and agriculture. The rise in rainfall intensity increases run-off, and enhances soil erosion and sedimentation of water bodies. Temperature rise shifts the crop cultivating zone further up.

**India:** India is the second most populous country and it is the seventh largest in size. It is a fast-growing and powerful economy. The Himalayan glaciers are receding, and agricultural yields are dipping as rains are erratic. India is keen on meeting out the energy needs of its vast poor as well for providing them a better life, but at the same time it is championing the cause of climate change by cutting down on its emissions. Wheat and rice yields dropped

substantially in the recent years. Increased glacial melt due to warming may affect river flows. Increased warming might result in increased flows initially with reduced flows later as the glaciers disappear. This would lead to increased summer flows in glacier-fed river systems for a few decades, followed by a reduction in flow as the glaciers disappear. Mosquito-related diseases will spread to places which were earlier having cooler weather due to climate warming, which will create greater harm if public health infrastructure is weak in those places. The media coverage includes apple cultivation in Shimla moving to higher altitude due to temperature rise and the islands of the Sundarbans delta disappearing due to sea level rise.

**The Maldives:** The Maldives has about 1,200 islands, most of them uninhabited. None of the coral islands is more than 1.8 metres above sea level. The economy revolves around tourism in view of beautiful sandy beaches. The people of the Maldives may have to give up their country within 100 years due to rising sea level. The Maldives depends on groundwater and rainwater as sources of freshwater. Both of these sources of water are vulnerable to changes in the climate. The rise in sea levels is likely to force saltwater into the freshwater aquifers. High sea surface temperatures in 1998 had caused mass bleaching of coral reefs. The survival of the coral reefs in the Maldives faces threat. Coastal infrastructure too is highly vulnerable to the impacts of sea level rise and sea ingression.

**Nepal:** Like Bhutan, Nepal too is in the Himalayas. It is landlocked. It is one of the world's poorest countries. Climate change will severely affect the agricultural sector, which is the main source of the livelihoods to the poor. Climate change is dangerous due to threat to glacier lake outbursts. Glacial melt is expected to increase under changed climate conditions, which would lead to increased summer flows in some river systems for a few decades, followed by a reduction in flow as the glaciers disappear. The risk of malaria, kalaazar and Japanese encephalitis is there as well due to temperature increase. Civil society initiatives are on to address the agriculture and livestock in view of climate change.

**Pakistan:** Pakistan emerged from the partition of the Indian sub-continent. Climate change decreases crop yields which affects livelihoods and food security. The reduced flow of the



Indus river affects the cotton production, wherein cotton is the main cash crop. Karachi which faces Arabian Sea is vulnerable to monsoonal and tidal activity.

**Sri Lanka:** The tropical island of Sri Lanka is one of the scenic places. Water from heavy rainfall in Sri Lanka is mostly lost as run-off. Cropping activities for e.g., coarse grain, legumes, vegetables, and potato are likely to be affected adversely. The major negative impact is estimated for coarse grains and coconut production. An increase in the frequency of droughts and extreme rainfall events could result in a decline in tea yield. Since tea is a major export industry and many labourers depend on it for livelihood, the dipping tea production is of serious concern. Erosions of many beaches are attributed to sea level rise.

### **Journalists' Perspectives**

In-depth interviews were carried out to gather ideas, information and to understand the journalists' perspectives on communicating climate change.

Amantha Perera, freelancer, works for *Inter Press Service* and IRIN. He opines that the major reason why the standards of environment journalism are low is because most journalists are not aware of the basic environmental laws. This is the case both nationally and internationally. To improve their standards, journalists should be able to understand the developments with local angle. He also suggests that there should be a better network within the journalists to improve the quality.

Manoj Thakur, a journalist of *Prajasaki*, says that the organization in which he works allows environment related news to be published. But he says that the career prospect of environment journalists is not good. According to him, river pollution is the worst form of pollution that affects the most. Moreover, the space in the newspapers provided to environment news is meagre. The major reason why environment journalism takes a beating is because most journalists report in regional languages (Urdu, Telugu, etc) and they do not have a basic training in reporting climate change so they can report about it effectively to their audiences, who are beginning to feel the impacts of climate change and would like to learn more about it.

N. Vinoth Kumar, journalist with *The Hindu Tamil*, says that only the interest can drive you to file a environment story. The deadlines are there it does not mean that you

have to send the story incomplete and hurry. Environmental NGOs act as a bridge to get connected with a scientist, who can give us the clue on different studies and journal which are again authentic sources. The journalist should get new idea on the climate change linked with other problems like food security, economy and research oriented news.

Raja Gopal Sarma, another journalist from *Prajasakti*, says that his organization looks environmental issues from the commoner's point of view though it is global in nature. The issues which affect the environment is thermal projects which affect people's livelihood particularly fishermen and tribal folk. He agrees that this profession is not economically sustainable. He says that the major problem in environmental journalism is lack of official information, which misleads the journalists. They find it difficult to get information from the officials concerned.

Rina Saeed Khan, a journalist working for *Dawn* and *Reuters* who won Earth Journalism Award during the 2009 Copenhagen Summit for the best reporting on climate change from Asia, said that leading organizations devote a section to climate change and she continues to write environmental blog and an environmental column for *Dawn*. She classifies environmental journalism into following themes: climate change, water issues, disasters and loss of biodiversity. According to her, climate change is the major issue and it is only for this she believes in it strongly and always tries to cover issues that can be brought to the notice of the policy makers. When asked about environment journalism as a career, she says that it would be a struggle to get the stories published but that situation is changing and now there are more platforms to publish one's story.

Salma Yousuf, a journalist from *Daily Mirror*, said that one must love the environment and focus on it. Only if you work on local angles, the readers would be interested. It is all about grasping one's readers.

The study also adapted the categorization of climate change discourses used by Hugh Doulton and Katrina Brown (2009). Ethical mitigation is high in India, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan, as shown in Figure 2. This may be directly related to the high climate change awareness in these countries. The understanding is that mitigation and targets are needed. And stopping climate change and promoting growth can go hand in hand. This also implies that the West must lead on mitigation, fund clean development. China and India have right to develop and the West should help to make the world clean.

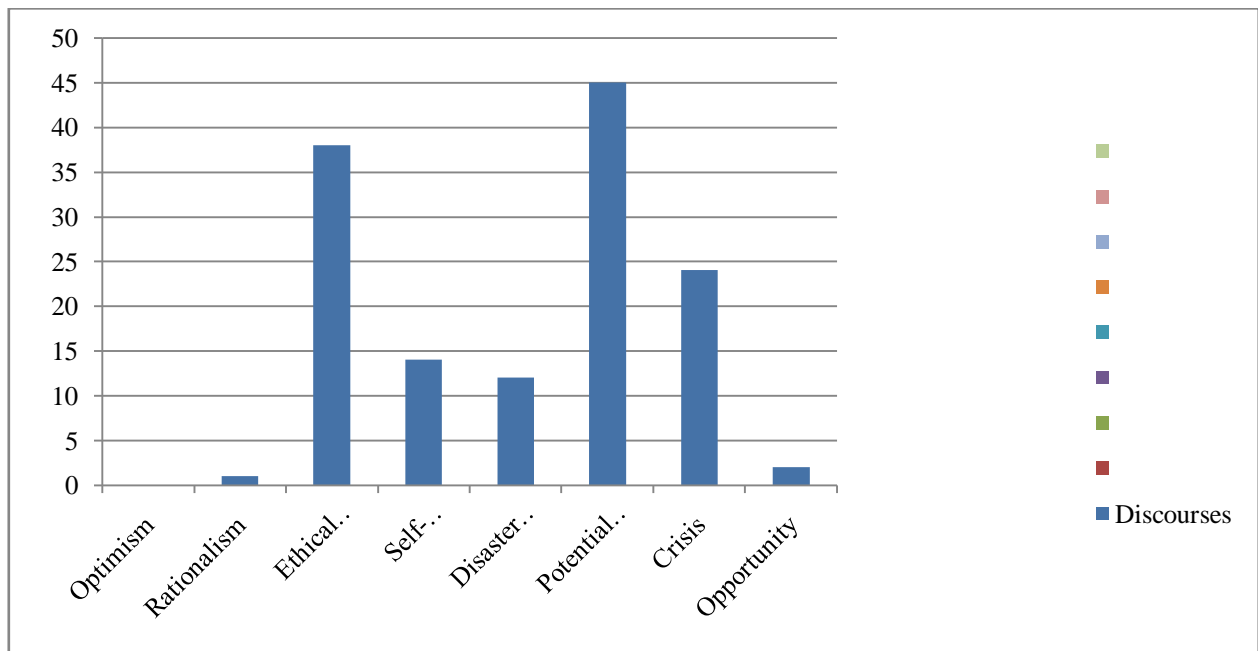


Figure 2: Countrywise discourses on climate change in South Asian newspapers

## Findings

The journalists mostly portray climate change as caused by anthropogenic activities and climate change as an impending catastrophe. There needs to be more media focus at the regional level. As the saying goes, journalists should think globally and act locally. The readers will get interested if local angles are given. If climate change discourse is linked to people's issues, policymakers will be forced to address it.

Climate change will not affect every place on the earth the same way. Thus, specific solution strategies may need to be developed for regional areas. Although climate change effects will be felt at national and global levels, there are regional adaptations that need to be considered. For this, journalists will have to work hand in hand with civil society activists at the grassroots to create climate awareness. They should also network with fellow journalists to improve the contacts and content.

Journalists get assigned to stories and it is only sometimes that they cover stories out of interest. Journalists covering environment, or climate change in particular, find it difficult to get their stories published. Journalists feel that the environment journalism is not a sustainable career as their audience is not large in number. Climate change is directly

related to the other disasters and also disaster mitigation measures, and those links should be established.

There is a possibility that journalistic behaviour could affect the way that climate change is presented in the media. Matters such as deadlines and lack of knowledge of climate change issues could result in heavy use of material from international news agencies. Journalists should generate more local stories on climate change. The countries with high climate change awareness generate more stories on ethical mitigation.

### **Limitations of study**

In most South Asian news portals, archives could not be accessed thoroughly, and the database contained only current news. The search options did not give accurate news results. The stories on climate change may not have used the key words 'climate change' and 'global warming' used for the search. International wire stories were not taken for the study though stories on the Maldives dominated in all countries. Getting interviews of journalists over email was a difficult task.

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