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## Guest Blog: Thoughts on a nation in flux (Part 2)

6th October 2018



Contemporary artist and researcher Sonia Mehra Chawla writes about the research she undertook in Aberdeen in June 2018 to inform an upcoming residency with Edinburgh Printmakers.

### **India's struggle with climate change and the battle to balance economy, energy and environment**

#### ***On the frontline of climate change***

India's climate is warming up at a very fast rate. Already one of the most disaster-prone nations in the world, India is at the frontline of nations expected to be worst affected by the adverse effects of climate change.

India will soon become the most overpopulated country in the world. Lifting hundreds of millions of people out of poverty remains the priority of India's policy. In addition, the country is embarking on one of the fastest rural-to-urban transitions in human history, and as infrastructure develops, energy demands will escalate intensely in the years to come. At the same time, there are still critical gaps in the provision of water and energy infrastructure, housing, sanitation, safety and jobs.

Detail from Sonia Mehra Chawla's work, '(Under) Currents & Crosswinds'.

Image credit: Sonia Mehra Chawla.

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When margins are slender, vulnerability to adverse climate is magnified. Sometimes this is a chronic and steadily worsening process that encourages migration with its own consequences, or even worse consequences with catastrophic climate events. Food shocks are a part of this.

The impacts of climate change and environmental degradation are already deeply and acutely felt in the country. Unchecked global warming will hit India hard, intensifying extreme weather conditions, extreme heat waves, and the floods that claim thousands of lives every year, and brutally affecting the monsoon upon which Indian farmers depend. The vulnerable and poor communities of India are worst affected.

The rising Agrarian crisis in India is a broad and complex phenomenon linked to inefficient government policies and management. Suicides of nearly 60,000 Indian farmers can be linked to climate change as crops fail. According to experts, future climate change will negatively affect crop production, increasing the risk of food insecurity for vulnerable communities and the poor.

There are still severe issues in the country related to water and air pollution, management of plastic and solid waste, felling of trees and rampant deforestation at alarming rates, along with unabated and unrestricted ground water extraction and over-exploitation. India's rivers are dying, and the National Green Tribunal is flooded with cases related to the cleansing and rejuvenation of important rivers Yamuna and Ganges.

The challenge India faces is to come up with dynamic measures to cut the nation's high carbon footprint, while not endangering its economic growth prospects. India's energy sector is a substantial contributing factor. India relies on coal for over 60 percent of its total electricity generation, and fossil fuel remains an important element in the country's energy strategy. India is the **third largest**

**carbon polluter** in the world, and emissions are likely to double as its economy grows and develops. The country therefore, needs to ensure that it generates as much of that energy as possible from renewable sources. This would be crucial to limiting catastrophic global temperature rise.

## ***The crucial question-***

### ***How can India bridge the challenges of development and climate change mitigation?***

To diversify its energy mix and reduce its reliance on coal, the Indian government has been actively promoting renewable power sources and advancing strategies, and ambitious targets have been set. India is emerging as a key player in the global renewables market. There are signs of hope driven by astounding drops in the prices of renewable energy in the past few years. In fact, last year, renewable energy became more cost competitive than conventional power.

The last two years will be remembered as a watershed period in the history of energy sector reforms in India. India is running one of the largest and most ambitious renewable capacity expansion programs in the world. The goal for India is to ultimately source forty percent of its electricity from renewables and other low-carbon sources by 2030.

The Indian solar sector has massive potential. One of the world's largest solar power park is located in the Kamuthi, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Spread over 10 sq. km, it consists of 2.5m solar panels, and is estimated to make enough power for 750,000 people.

The Solar Energy sector has got more than half of the funds allocated for centrally sponsored renewable energy schemes and projects in the 2018-19 Budget. However, it is clear that there is a temporary loss of momentum in this area, and future targets will not be met if efforts are not accelerated. According to Mercom India, 'the new budget for the coming financial year has, in most parts, turned out to be disappointing for the renewable energy sector. To the industry's dismay, no specific incentives, subsidies or grants were announced for the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE).'

In spite of these hurdles, what is clear, is that renewable energy in India has a bright future ahead of it. Short term obstacles and challenges still remain for the growing green energy sector, which needs improved and enhanced frameworks, and the government's continued and unfailing commitment. On a positive note, the Indian state of Karnataka recently became the leading Indian state in green power, overtaking leading nations like Denmark and Netherlands. What made this possible was record low bids for renewables' tenders and policy support from the State Government.

Grave economic issues make measures to reduce emissions extremely complex, and the path India takes is likely to be paved with harsh challenges, and, in spite of several compelling reasons for India to follow a green path into the future, severe hurdles remain.



Details from Sonia Mehra Chawla's work '(Under) Currents & Crosswinds'. (2018) Project collaboration & support: Khoj International Artists' Association + Wellcome Trust UK/ DBT India Alliance. (Department of Biotechnology, Government of India). Image credit: Sonia Mehra Chawla.

## ***The artistic project at Edinburgh Printmakers (2018-2020)***

I was invited to undertake the research arm of an artistic project with Edinburgh Printmakers in Aberdeen in June 2018. This research will inform an intensive print residency at Edinburgh Printmakers in spring 2019, and the outputs from this residency will be presented as part of a solo exhibition at Edinburgh Printmakers beautiful new home at Castle Mill in 2020.

Edinburgh Printmakers will transform the former North British Rubber Company HQ- Castle Mills, into a vibrant new creative hub opening to the public in 2019.

### ***Choosing focus areas***

I hope this artistic project will serve as a platform and starting point for dialogue and conversations around some of the significant and pressing issues of our time such as the future of energy, the future of our oceans and marine life, society's dependence on fossil fuels, just transitions, the global challenges of energy transitions, carbon reduction goals, as well as the human dimension of crisis.

**National Green Tribunal Act, 2010**, is an Act of the *Parliament of India* which enables creation of a special tribunal to handle the expeditious disposal of the cases pertaining to environmental issues. It draws inspiration from the India's constitutional provision of *Article 21*, which assures the citizens of India the right to a healthy environment.

**Ministry of New and Renewable Energy or MNRE** is a ministry of the *Government of India*. The Ministry is mainly responsible for *research and development, intellectual property protection, and international cooperation, promotion,*

and coordination in *renewable energy* sources such as *wind power, small hydro, biogas, and solar power*. The broad aim of the ministry is to develop and deploy new and renewable energy for supplementing the energy requirements of India.

## **End of Part II**

This is the second blog of a three part series. Read **Part I** and **Part III**.

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**Sonia Mehra Chawla** is a contemporary Indian artist and researcher. She completed a Master's Degree in Fine Arts from College of Art, New Delhi in 2004-05. Her artistic practice explores notions of selfhood, nature, ecology, sustainability and conservation. Sonia works in a variety of media including photography, printmaking, drawing, painting and video.

Sonia is a British Council India & Charles Wallace India Trust (CWIT) scholar, and was invited to the United Kingdom in 2014 for a research based project in printmaking. She is currently the recipient of an International 'Art+Science' Grant Award, instituted by Khoj International Artists' Association India & the Wellcome Trust UK/DBT Alliance for 2017-18. She has recently been awarded a Fellowship from the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Germany for the Art, Science and Business Program for 2019-20. Sonia's works have been exhibited at the Institut Fur Auslandsbeziehungen, Germany (Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, IFA), Tate Modern, London, Essl Museum of Contemporary Art, Austria, Museum of Contemporary Art, Yinchuan, China, Goethe Institut, Mumbai, India, CSMVS Museum, Mumbai, India, ET4U Contemporary Visual Art Projects, Denmark, and Today Art Museum, Beijing, China.

The artist lives and works in New Delhi, India.

## **Acknowledgements**

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I am grateful to Edinburgh Printmakers. I extend my warmest thanks to Sarah Manning Shaw, Alastair Clark, Judith Liddle, and the brilliant team of Edinburgh Printmakers for their unfailing support, and look forward to a significant and meaningful collaboration over the next two years.

Further reading and information:

The artists' official website: <http://soniamehrachawla.in/>

Edinburgh Printmakers: <https://www.edinburghprintmakers.co.uk/>

*On Turning Toward: 'Critical Membrane' by Sonia Mehra Chawla*, Heather Davis looks at the work of Sonia Mehra Chawla, as part of her look into Four Figures of Climate Change, July 2017

<http://theo-westenberger.tumblr.com/post/162458052219/on-turning-toward-critical-membrane-by-sonia>

Down To Earth, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/>

*'The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable'*, Amitav Ghosh. Published by Penguin India.

*'Everybody Loves a Good Drought'*, P.Sainath. Published by Penguin India.

*'Ecology without nature: rethinking environmental aesthetics'*, Timothy Morton. Published by Harvard University Press.

*'Soil, Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an age of Climate Crisis'*, Vandana Shiva. Published by Penguin Random House.

*'From Green to Evergreen Revolution: Indian Agriculture, Performance & Challenges'*, Prof. M S Swaminathan. Published by Academic Foundation.

*'In Search of Biohappiness: Biodiversity and food, Health and Livelihood security'*, Prof. M S Swaminathan. Published by World Scientific.

*'Oil Strike North Sea'*, Mike Shepherd. Published by Luath Press.

*'The Klondykers'*, Bill Mackie. Published by Birlinn, Edinburgh (2006)

'Old Torry and Aberdeen Harbour', Rosie Nicol & Patricia Newman. Published by Stenlake Publishing Ltd, UK.

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