



# Community Charter on Climate Crisis

A charter from indigenous communities across India

## Prologue

We the people of India from the mountains, coasts, forests, deserts, plains and plateaus of this vast and rich country, who have lived with nature for millennia, whose farming, fishing, forestry and pastoralism have been seen as iconic by the world, have today decided to articulate our issues, concerns and solutions to the climate crisis. We represent the *Chakhesang Naga* tribes from Nagaland in the Northeast of India, *Jele* the fisher-farmers, *Chashi* and *Moule*, the forest communities on the coast from Sundarbans in Bengal, *Kaunta*, *Khatia*, *Pandra* and *Lolia* from Chilka in Orissa, *Parava* and *Muthurayar* the Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu, *Dongria Kondhis* from Niyamgiri in Orissa, *Santhals* from Jharkhand, *Bhils* and *Bhilalas* from Madhya Pradesh in Central India, *Baigas* from Chhattisgarh, *Maldharis* in Gujarat in the West, *Nadars* and *dalit* women from the Western Ghats of Tamil Nadu, and the *dalit* farmers from Medak District of Andhra Pradesh as well as from Sivakasi in Tamil Nadu. We have come together from East and West, North and South, Centre and the North East to understand and deliberate on the challenges of climate crisis, and have used participatory methods to revisit our relationship with farming, forests, coasts, pastures and other aspects of our living.

At the end of these exercises we are of the firm view that our bonding with nature, our respect for it and the way we have learnt from our forefathers to live in harmony with it, show us many ways of dealing with the projected problems of climate change such as higher temperature, scanty and erratic rainfall, ill health and malnutrition.

Through these deliberations we have rediscovered our strengths and are asserting that the world needs to recognise these as the foundation of our capacity to combat climate crisis.

## Our Strengths

1. The huge plant and animal biodiversity, including edible, medicinal, domesticated and wild varieties which we have inherited and protected for millenia on our farms, in our forests and our seas, and with whom we have a relationship of mutual care and respect.

As a community, we have been able to bond together to face the threats posed to the environment by the current climate change. We have the understanding that we the 'Children of the Soil' cannot survive without our land and our seas, our good mother, because she is an integral part of our life, livelihood and dignity. Our forests, coral reefs, sand dunes protect us from natural calamities, give us food-fodder and other livelihood options, and offer shelter to a large number of species with whom we share the earth. We have been living with the problems of cyclones, water-logging and salinisation for ages, and we have the knowledge to predict and adapt to their adverse impact. Our Community cohesiveness and social bonding are still alive with us and can help us to take collective actions to confront the climate crisis.

2. It is our profound belief that this rich ancestral knowledge we have been bequeathed, can guides us to combat the current climate crisis This millenial old community knowledge has enabled us to nurture living species and natural resources and protect our farms and farmland from modern,





mechanized and water-intensive agriculture practices. Our age-old systems, such as the shifting cultivation provides for the regeneration of forest resources, flora and fauna. As fishers, we are unswerving in our obedience and respect towards the heritage given by our forefathers through the practice of complete ecological harvesting, which does not contaminate the balance of coastal flora and fauna.

3. Our heritage of seed saving, exchange, and the knowledge associated with it is an invaluable asset in our engagement with climatic factors. Our traditional seeds can withstand the climate crisis and our cultural practices for preservation of seeds and flowers, forever adaptive to the needs of the hour, nourish them even in adverse circumstances. We are the proud conservers of valuable genetic and ecological varieties of aquatic flora and fauna, which provides us food and means of survival and dignity as fisher-folk.
4. Our agriculture is nonpolluting, self-regenerating, and least energy demanding, and is based on ecological principles. Our cropping system, in its pristine diversity, not only feeds us with diverse foods but also comforts us with its capacity to retain the richness and fertility of our soils. The organic system which has been the hallmark of our farming for millennia provides us with safe and nutritionally rich food. The practice of shifting cultivation such as *Bewar* enables us to grow and harvest 12 crops, 16 vegetables, 21 leafy eatable items and more than 17 grasses for our food and seeds. The bewildering array of traditional crops we still grow on our hills, flood plains and semi arid tracts, can withstand the vagaries of climate and also fix carbon in the soil, helping us combat the climate crisis. The wide range of saline tolerant paddy varieties and other local crops/trees for various ranges of salinity are our shield against the projected climate threats.'
5. We used to have diverse agricultural crops and had our own control over the seeds until the late twentieth century, but the advent of science and agricultural universities has displaced our traditional seeds with hybrid varieties.

Our traditional water management keeps our springs clean and clear and our wise use of this resource does not put any pressure on ground water. These techniques equip us to survive during drought and water scarcity. For instance, we dig Jhiria (sand caves in dry rivers for drinking water) for human beings, birds and animals. The practices such as *Sottu neeru odai* retain soil moisture efficiently. Our knowledge protects and regenerates mangrove forests as a shield against cyclones and other calamities. We still possess and practise the ancestral safe and ecological ways of catching fish without damaging the balance of nature. Our commitment to follow venerable practices such as the use of Bamboo nets for Prawn farming allows for the survival of small species. We are committed to protecting and regenerating mangrove forests, coral reefs and sand dunes. These shield us from natural disasters like cyclones, and are the home of a wide variety of flora and fauna.

6. The abundance of medicinal plants and trees in our ecosystem about which most of us have full knowledge is used by us for safe healthcare systems and to combat the need for expensive external healthcare systems. Traditional practices incorporate the use of herbs and medicinal plants for health care. Our nutritious, local crop/fish based food pattern with a plentiful diversity keeps us healthy and prevents diseases. Our trees, medicinal plants, herbs and diverse crops also contribute enormously in facing the climate change.





7. Our forests protect us from natural calamities, give us food-fodder and other livelihood options, and offer shelter to a large number of species with whom we share the earth.

### **Demands**

We demand that the national government of India and the global communities recognize these great community assets of ours and initiate actions. The actions we demand from all concerned, particularly the government and other developmental agencies, locally, nationally and globally are the following:

- 1 Recognize the diversity and integrity on our farms, livestock, forests and seas as civilisational assets and do not do anything to disturb them. Declare officially that these are fundamental in our fight against the Climate Crisis.
- 2 Endorse the multifunctional, ecological and diverse agriculture we practice as the greatest defense against the climate change. Our kind of agriculture which incorporates a large number of legumes with great leaf fall has the attribute to fix the carbon in earth. Considering such rich practices and knowledge we bring into agriculture, declare our communities as ecological communities and by law, prohibit chemical fertilizers and pesticides from our region. In order to further promote this form of agriculture, calculate and provide carbon credit to our form of agriculture and let our communities benefit from them. Accept that the ecological and diversified agriculture we practice as the greatest strategy to adapt to and mitigate climate crises. Initiate policy measures to prevent mono-culturalisation and protect & promote these multi-level diversities in our crop, livelihood, food and culture.
- 3 Promote the traditional seeds which we have been planting for millennia since they demand very little water to grow and can withstand high heat. This quality of our seeds stands as the savior of our communities in the coming years and decades of climate crisis. Therefore evolve policies to recognize and award incentives to the farmers and communities who preserve local plants and promote local seed varieties.
- 4 Focus the afforestation policy of the government on ecological restoration instead of plantations, encouraging local plant species that best suit the local soils, local culture and ecosystems. The policy should not attempt to bring about monoculture plantations alien to our land, our culture and our people. The diversity in our forests and the native varieties that populate them has been the backbone of their richness. These must be protected at all costs with control, rights and trusteeship being held by us, the communities.
- 5 Respect pastoralism and mobility as distinctive sources of cultural identity, integrity and rights; Empower Pastorals in the management of existing protected areas and, recognise their customary territories as community conserved areas (CCAs) when so demanded by the Pastoral peoples. Recognise the crucial role of indigenous knowledge and the capacity of pastoralists and all other indigenous communities to conserve biodiversity in full compatibility with pastoral livelihoods; Adopt measures to reverse negative environmental impacts of development schemes, and seek prior and informed consent before all private and public initiatives that may affect the integrity of pastoral peoples' customary territories, resource management systems and nature;





- 6 Make government's policies people-centric. Support small farmers through measures such as eco - insurance of crops which is crucial in the current erratic climate condition. Give priority to marginalized farmers such as single women, widows, women-headed households in accessing support services and accord them safe spaces for active participation in the decision making process at all levels.
- 7 Honour each one of our community members as Frontline Warriors against Climate Change and enact policy measures to provide them incentives to practice and promote this diversity.

## Epilogue

We have always led Life-affirming lives. We love nature and Mother Earth. She has never let us down. She has always provided us enough for our daily needs. Even after we take what we need the forests and seas still survive and the streams and waves continue to flow. Our forefathers have taught us to revere the earth, hills, seas and forests. Our farming has not been predatory. It does not mine crops from the earth. Our fishing is in tune with the seasons, breeding habits of fish species. Our pastoralism is in harmony with natural rhythms and never destroys our environment.

We raise several varieties of crops, vegetables and greens most of which withstand climatic challenges. Our forests and the local animals adapt well to any changes. Especially, crops like millets, traditional paddy, yam, sweet potato, banana and others grow well in dry and drought like conditions. Our jhums, Bewars and Podus have foundations of knowledge systems that are millennial old.

It is in the backdrop of these strengths that we can categorically say that left to us we can deal with Climate Crisis positively. It is only when policies that do not understand our knowledge or Nature are forced on us, climate strikes back. If you seriously want to prevent this crisis, give primacy to our knowledge, our harmonious understanding of Nature and our capacity to deal with all things in Nature.

### Signed by:

- *Baigas*, Baigachak, Kavardha District, Chhattisgarh
- *Bhils* and *Bhilalas*, Nimar, Dhar District, Madhya Pradesh
- *Chakhesang Nagas*, Chizami, Phek District, Nagaland
- *Dalit* farmers, Shenbaganur, Dindigal District, Tamil Nadu
- *Dalit* farmers, Sivaksi, Virudhunagar District, Tamil Nadu
- *Dongria Kondhis*, Niyamgiri hills, District Rayagada, Orissa
- *Jele*, *Chashi* and *Moule*, Sundharban, N&S 24 Parganas District, West Bengal
- *Kaunta*, *Khatia*, *Pandra*, and *Lolia*, Lake Chilka, Puri District, Orissa
- *Maldharis*, Bhimora, Surendranagar District, Gujarat
- *Parava*, *Muthurayar* and *Nadar*, Gulf of Mannar, Ramnad District, Tamil Nadu
- *Santhals*, Devipur, Deoghar District, Jharkhand
- Women *Dalit* farmers, Zaheerabad, Medak District, Andhra Pradesh

