

Published Date:	24 May 2024	Publication:	The Hindu [Bangalore]
Journalist:	Shilpa Elizabeth	Page No:	7
Circulation:	63,270		

Aligning climate justice with disability justice

Several of the guidelines that are being suggested today for sustainable living come from a very ableist point of view and do not represent the disabled adequately, says Merry Barua at a talk by ATREE

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It was in October, 2022, that Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched Mission LIFE (abbreviation for Lifestyle for Environment), a campaign that nudges individual and community action to protect environment.

The campaign gives out a bunch of action points based on behavioural changes such as taking the stairs instead of an elevator, use of bicycles, reduction of e-waste, dietary changes like consumption of millets and nutriceals, and so on.

While it may look doable at the face of it and there is consensus that climate adaptation needs concerted action from all quarters including governments, corporates, communities and individuals, many a times, such guidelines come from a very ableist point of view causing a rift between environmental justice and disability justice, point out experts.

"Some of these guidelines are not only very ableist, but also very upper class," remarks Merry Barua, founder and director at Action-for-Autism (AFA). She was speaking at the 'Intersectionality Series' Talk conducted by Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) on 'Climate Action on the Spectrum.' Barua was in conversation with multi-disciplinary practitioner Dilip Kumar Mekala.

Unpacking neurodivergency

Typically, autism has been looked at from a very deficit-based and medical understanding which sees autistic people as those who can't communicate or socialise and are very rigid in their ways, notes Barua.

The concept of neurodiversity, on the other hand, addresses it differently and acknowledges the multiple ways in which different people's brain works.



Neurodivergent means that they experience the world differently, and hence, the way they interact with the world is different from people who are neurotypical, says Merry Barua. GETTY IMAGES

Neurotypical refers to the people whose brains function similarly to most others and hence is the majority.

"Neurodivergent means they experience the world differently, and hence, the way they interact with the world is different from people who are neurotypical. These are people with conditions like dyslexia, autism, ADHD, etc. They have very unique strengths and unique challenges," says Barua who emphasizes that neither is better or worse than the other, but simply two different ways of perceiving the world and interacting with the environment.

"It's a far more accepting and inclusive way of looking at them than see-

ing them as people who can't do the things that we the majority do. It's a more inclusive way of looking at people with a different neurological functioning."

What's on the table?

Switching to a plant-based diet is often prescribed as one of the behavioural changes for climate adaptation.

While a change in dietary habits may not seem a great deal to the neurotypical people belonging to the middle class and above, the same is not the case with neurodivergent people and those who belong to marginalised communities or indigenous populations, Barua points out.

She explains, "One of

the things about autistic people is that they perceive sensory information in a very different way from neurotypical people. Most autistic people suffer from sensory overload. When you talk about diets, one of the common things found among a lot of autistic people is that they tend to have very restrictive diets. Some of them eventually manage to move on and deal with some changes, but (for many) it's not like they can eat everything."

She cites the example of her son who could not eat vegetables until his mid-adulthood. She also points to the case of individuals at Ananda Assisted Living (run by AFA) who cannot, for instance, eat rice as

they find its texture too difficult.

According to a 2006 study by Jennifer Ledford and David L. Gast, 89% of children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) exhibit unusual patterns of food acceptance. Studies have also shown how individuals on the spectrum have been struggling with problems such as food refusal, failure to eat the usual family diet and inability to accept novel foods.

"To say that you must change what you eat and how you eat is extremely ableist, without considering what different sets of people eat, or how they manage their resources which determine their diet," says Barua.



Merry Barua, Aradhana Lal, SVP Lemontree Hotels, and Reeta Sabharwal, Director F&O, Action For Autism at AFA's annual art exhibition, Views from Planet Autism.



Merry Barua with a team from The Shri Ram School and their partners from Singapore on a visit to Action For Autism, Delhi.

Public transport is today considered as one of the most effective measures to fight climate change.

According to a United Nations report, transportation currently contributes about 15% of global greenhouse gas emissions, and demand-side interventions such as shifting transport modes to walking and public transport would be essential in mitigating climate change impact.

However, this also demands a robust public transport system in place which becomes all the more critical for disabled people. Predictability, precision and clear signage are crucial for people on the

spectrum. The public transport system in several parts of the country, however, lacks the same making it challenging for them to navigate it.

Barua, who points out that in some of the major Indian cities, even people without autism find it difficult to travel by public transport, also notes that there are still several rural areas where there is no public transport system yet. "At Ananda, there are a few who can take the metro. Some will have a meltdown if they are forced to take our chaotic public transport like the buses in Delhi. The audio and olfactory overload is way too

much for them. The metro system runs in an orderly, timely and visually structured fashion more or less, so some can travel by it. But we don't have metros everywhere in our country. So, what are people supposed to do?" she asks.

An inclusive world

So, what can be done to enable neurodivergent people to function and interact with the society at large and be better represented in the climate adaptation strategies?

To start with, make all information clear and easily available, says Barua.

"Not only has there to be clear and precise information but there also needs to be an easily accessible place to get that information from."

"Secondly, it has to be multi-pronged. Any support services that we provide the information through have to be easily and clearly available. The support services also have to be tailored to the needs of autistic people," she says citing the example of disaster preparedness drills.

"A lot of the instructions that are given at that time are not very clear. Those have to be unambiguous, taking into account the fact that autistic people have difficulties with language where the intent is not made very clear. So, any emergency preparedness has to be in a language that's open, direct and clear."

Yet another factor is preparedness and letting people know in advance of a situation whenever possible.

"Every emergency is not going to be immediate. Sometimes you do have prior information. So, getting that information out in advance in a very clear way is important," she says. "Above all, ensure that we address the root cause of climate change so that we don't have to deal with the emergencies that are brought on by our actions that lead to climate change."