Turning up the heat

Winter is around the corner but a powerful El Nino threatens to addle the run-up to it. In the meantime, activists are lobbying for the NHRC to recognise heat as a human rights issue. **Moumita Chaudhuri** reports

In May, when the temperature in Delhi shot to over 42°Celsius and surface temperatures in some locations recorded 55°Celsius, we decided to involve the community in creating evidence of how heat was impacting them," says Avinash Chanchal, who is the deputy programme director (campaigns) at Greenpeace, South Asia. He continues, "This is a pilot project. Journaling-based research has happened before in social science research but not in heat studies."

The idea was to record community experiences instead of clinical reports of heat study. Says Chanchal, "There are thousands of reports but no stories, no first-hand accounts of how people living in informal settlements cope. We are talking about places with no proper ventilation or those with tin roofs, or where four or more people live in one room..."

This initiative gave birth to the Garmi Khata project.

Chanchal and his team selected 40 households — 30 from informal settlements and the rest from middle-class neighbourhoods of Delhi. Participants were street vendors, waste pickers, gig workers, home-based workers, domestic helpers, students and elderly persons. They were given registers with questions written in Hindi and asked to write about their days and nights in these.

The entries followed a diary-based template. Accounts of disturbed sleep, skipped meals, income lost to heat, children kept home from school and health symptoms that never make it into a hospital record. They also recorded how many women do not drink water at night even in extreme heat only because they do not have access to secure washrooms. The period recorded was May to July.





PHOTOS COURTESY GREENPEACE INDIA

CODE YELLOW: (Top) Garmi khatas; **thermal image of a vegetable vendor in Delhi taken this summer. The yellow and orange areas indicate thermal stress points, while the purple indicates relatively cooler areas**

Chanchal shares with **The Telegraph** some of the entries. One of them by a 16-year-old student from Sunder Nagri reads, "My father works in a textile factory as a tailor. When I visited his factory to pick up some raw materials, I was shocked. The entire room was as hot as a furnace. There was an unbearable smell of clothes in the air. I covered my nose with a dupatta. My Abbu and other workers were at work at their sewing machines and drenched in sweat."

On another day she wrote, "We live on the fourth floor. My mother comes up with her own solutions to cool the room. At night, she fetches cold water from the freezer, mops the floor with it and then she lies down on it without any bedding."

Arshi Quereshi, 19, lives with her parents and three siblings in a two-storey house in northeast Delhi. She is a college student. Her jottings read thus, "We have only one room filled with things and the kitchen is in the same space. When my sister starts cooking, she switches the fan off. The moment it is turned off, everyone in the house runs out, like ants."

Raja, 22, a vegetable seller by day and an undergraduate student at night, puts up his tomato cart at Shani Bazar in northeast Delhi. Heat notwithstanding, he studies for two to three hours at night. He manages the tomato cart his brother sets up at 8am. They are at work all day. He writes, "Despite the exhaustion, sleep does not come easily in Delhi heat."

He likes to go to the terrace and turn on the cooler. But the physical discomfort is not the hardest part of surviving extreme heat. The biggest loss is economic. Raja explains, "Tomatoes soften and spoil much faster in summer." So he and his brother buy 40 to 50 kilos less stock than usual.

"The sufferings these residents document are not merely climate impacts. They highlight the violation of a fundamental right," says Chanchal.

Once the NGO had collected 40 *garmi khatas*, they submitted them to the National Human Rights Commission of India or NHRC along with a formal letter. Says Chanchal, "The government must legally mandate 'heat action plans' and strengthen social protection for informal workers through heat risk insurance and compensation for heat-related income loss. We also need greater investment in community cooling infrastructure," he adds.

The *khatas* were backed by supporting documents like electricity and medical bills, medical records, income records, basically evidence of both the cost of coping with heat and the health and financial harm it causes.

This August, the ministry of home affairs added heatwaves and lightning to the existing list of 12 natural disasters, following recommendations from the 16th Finance Commission. "Recognising heatwaves as a national disaster means heat action plans will now have access to disaster management funding," says Chanchal.

Now that the *khatas* are with the NHRC, the stories from them are being used for storytelling and performances in programmes organised by the Greenpeace. Says Chanchal, "This initiative is called Garmi Nama."