

# Young eco-crusaders across the country lend a refreshing rigour to the climate movement

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**On September 24, Pandey was among 16 young climate change activists from around the world who attended the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York.**

*Young warriors: Students and activists hold placards during a campaign to raise awareness on climate change in New Delhi on September 27. (Source: Praveen Khanna)*

Haridwar resident Ridhima Pandey was just nine when she sued the Indian government for disregarding environmental laws in 2017. Though her complaint with the National Green Tribunal (NGT) against the government's inaction on climate change was dismissed in January this year, she has escalated the case and taken it to the Supreme Court. On September 24, Pandey was among 16 young climate change activists from around the world who attended the United Nations Climate Action Summit in New York. Led by 16-year-old Swedish activist Greta Thunberg, they filed a complaint against five countries — Germany, France, Brazil, Argentina and Turkey — for not making adequate efforts to address the climate crisis.

For Pandey, filing the second petition for climate change felt different. Two years ago, she had found that a few of her peers were interested in climate issues. Today, however, there is a sharp shift in how her generation engages with issues directly affecting their future, says the 11-year-old, who sports a fuss-free bob and wears Harry Potter spectacles, nursing a cold a day after she returned to the pollution in her city. Over the last year, children across India seem to be getting involved in the climate movement. During the global climate strike from September 20 to 27, children took the lead in India, too, either skipping school or making it to protest marches after school, holding up banners that declared: "Time is running out", "The climate is changing. Why aren't we?" and "Don't be trashy".

Six-year-old Delhi resident Ayan Mukherjee was one of them, along with Vihaan Agarwal, 15, and Nav Agarwal, 12. On his birthday this year, Mukherjee donated his cash presents, about Rs 10,000, to the Agarwal brothers who run the waste management charity, One Step Greener. The NGO, based in Vasant Vihar, operates in seven colonies in south Delhi and so far has saved over 330 cubic metres of landfill, about the size of a small hill.

*Young warriors: Vihaan and Nav Agarwal at the mini forest site at a public park in Delhi. (Praveen Khanna)*

The centre is spread over two levels of a building provided by a well-wisher. Below the reception area, where framed certificates of awards won by the duo line the walls, a large basement houses a month's solid waste from roughly 500 homes, micro-segregated neatly in tall metal racks and wide blue containers. "I have suffered breathing issues and allergies that are aggravated by Delhi's pollution, so when I heard the news about a fire at the Ghazipur landfill which killed two people two years ago, it triggered something in me," says Vihaan. Since about 30 per cent of pollution is contributed by waste, the brothers decided to minimise what goes into landfills. For a small subscription fee, One Step Greener offers regular pick-up of segregated solid waste — plastic, paper, tin, e-waste, etc. — and offers market rate price in return for the trash. It is further segregated at the centre and sold to different recyclers.

The NGO now works as a self-sustaining unit, with a little help from the duo's mother Priyanka and a few employees. A team of volunteers, comprising classmates from their school, also pitch in. An "eco-friendly" lifestyle is increasingly becoming an aspirational choice for the urban crowd, and it is filtering down to the young. While on one level, the engagement may seem limited to attending protest marches for various environmental causes, there are many others who take the green cause seriously.

Gurugram-based brothers Taksheel, 13, and Jaysheel Buddhadeo, 9, winners of a national award for their contribution to environment and social work, are not your usual protest-goers. "They are into gardening and composting. After school, they experiment with solar cooking and organic farming, canvass against single-use plastic and mobilise shopkeepers and RWAs to reuse, recycle and reduce waste," says their mother Bhavisha, who set up Rootskills, a skill learning platform for children through eco-friendly activities, inspired by her sons. In August this year, 15-year-old Diya Siddha was inspired to set up a "3R Bazaar" to promote recycling. The market, set up in the basement of her home at Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, encourages the local community to buy and sell used stuff in a zero-profit model. Her next stop is recreating the 3R model in Pune and Indore.

An ecosystem to support this rising interest among children is cropping up. Eco-friendly festival paraphernalia, seed rakhis, notebooks made from recycled paper, toys made from natural materials and eco-themed return gifts are easy to find online. Neha Saharan of Just For Kix, a party planner who handcrafts products, says green gifting has become so popular that she recently started a separate unit for it, Sow and Grow, which offers gifts such as seed balls (a ball of mud with seeds packed in a jute potli), terrariums, and planters in animal shapes.

A crop of children's books allows a deeper dive into environmental themes: Water Stories From Across the World (2010), So You Want To Know About The Environment (2017), This Book is Not Rubbish: 50 Ways to Ditch Plastic, Reduce, Rubbish and Save the World! (2019) or books dedicated to nature from publishers such as Tulika and Pratham, for children across age groups. Writer and editor Bijal Vachharajani's new book, A Cloud Called Bhura: Climate Champions to the Rescue (2019), is the story of a dark, angry brown cloud full of noxious gases that takes over the sky, causing the temperature to rise dangerously. When the toxic haze makes Mumbai's residents ill and gloomy, it's the kids who take charge as grown-ups remain clueless about what to do.

The story is inspired by voices of real children, says Vachharajani. "It's amazing that young ones are leading the climate movement now," she adds. The catalyst for this change, she says, is more schools interested in hands-on environmental education. Prerna Mannan, head of middle school at Heritage Xperiential School in Gurugram, says children are primed to become "change agents". Last year, a new initiative at the school took students to a farm in Jhajjar, Haryana, where they practised farming during the crop cycle of October-March.

Many young eco-crusaders are aware the task goes beyond attending protest marches and signing petitions. Nav says his peers know that it is their future that's at stake. "We want to do something about it," he says. In August, the two brothers had organised a plantation drive at an abandoned park in the neighbourhood, where over 200 volunteers, including children, helped plant 200 saplings. As Vihaan and Nav walk us through what's now a mini forest, designed in the Miyawaki method (growing dense plantations in a short time), the plants have grown taller than us. Due to water scarcity in the area, the brothers have to arrange for a

water tanker for the plants. The day after the sapling planting drive, it had rained generously. It was a sign, says Vihaan, of a silver lining to a dark cloud.

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