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Primus Report

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Neglecting Mental Health in Climate Strategy Could Cost India 0.35% of GDP Each Year, Says Report

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Article Content:

A new report warns that India's climate strategy may be overlooking a critical and costly factor. Primus Partners has released The Cost of Climate Change: Young Voices in a Warming World, which estimates that mental health issues driven by climate stress among young people could potentially cost the country approximately $13.7 billion each year. That number translates to about 0.35 percent of India's GDP. And it represents only a slice of the wider 6 percent GDP loss tied to health-related complications from climate change.

In an interview with Arunima Rajan, Nilaya Varma, Co-founder and Group CEO of Primus Partners, talks through the research findings, the growing role of mental health in climate discussions, and the action India needs to take now.

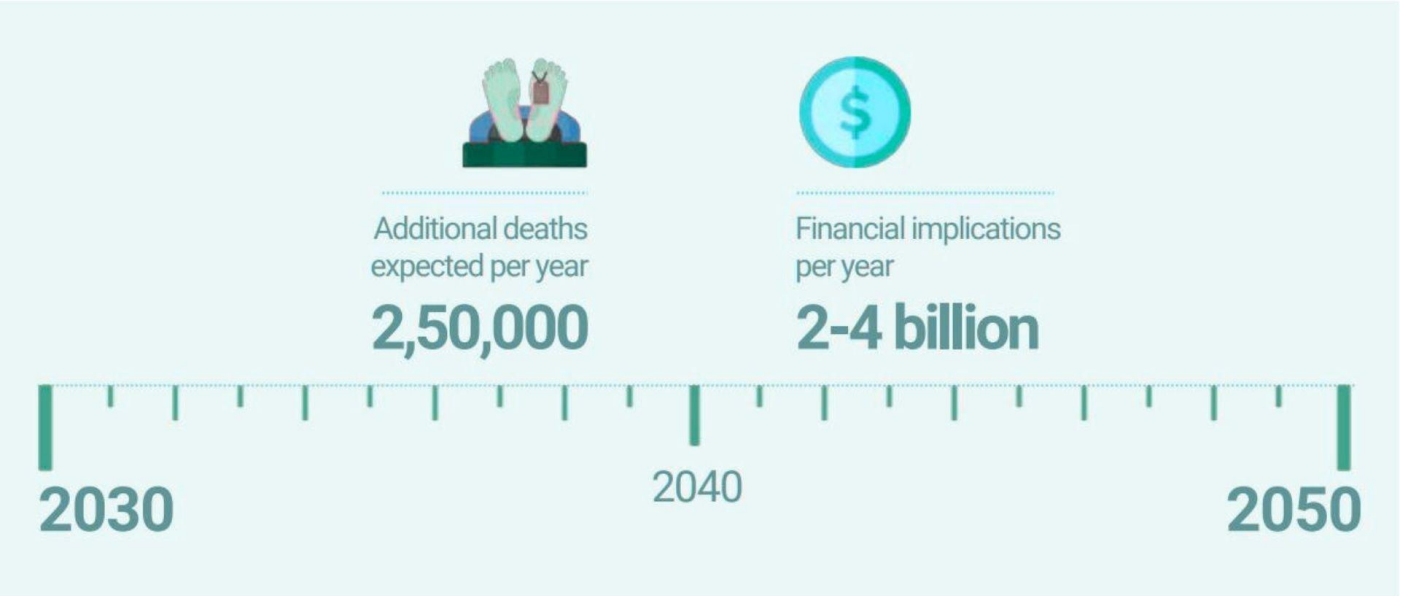
What sparked Primus Partners' interest in exploring the link between climate change and mental health?

Our interest began with our involvement in global policy forums on climate and health, including the G20, the Climate Health Initiative, and COP28. These spaces often focus on physical threats like heat waves, food insecurity, and disease outbreaks. Mental health rarely makes it onto the agenda. We saw that omission as a major gap. While policymakers work hard to respond to the visible impacts of climate change, the mental toll is building quietly and receiving little funding or attention. We wanted to shift that. Our report aims to go beyond raising awareness. It offers concrete recommendations, including reforms, policy changes, and community-led efforts to build mental health resilience.

How does eco-anxiety differ from other forms of anxiety, particularly for young adults?

Eco-anxiety comes from a unique source. It is shaped by large-scale environmental stressors and by the

belief that the systems meant to protect us are failing. Unlike anxiety tied to personal loss or social pressure, this form is rooted in the fear of long-term planetary harm. Young people feel it more acutely because they expect to inherit the future we are shaping now. When disasters strike—floods, air pollution, heatwaves—the psychological effects follow. These include PTSD, depression, and in some cases, addictive behaviours. It is not just a feeling. It is a real and growing concern.



How did you quantify the economic fallout from climate-driven mental health issues?

India has about 252 million people aged 15 to 24. That is roughly 17.5 percent of the total population. According to the International Labour Organization, 30 percent of them are currently part of the workforce.

Our research estimates that 34.9 million young workers experience mental health challenges. Given an average GDP contribution per worker of $3,915, this group collectively generates around $136.6 billion per year. A 10 percent productivity loss, which is supported by existing global research, leads to an annual impact of $13.7 billion. This translates to about 0.35 percent of India's GDP.

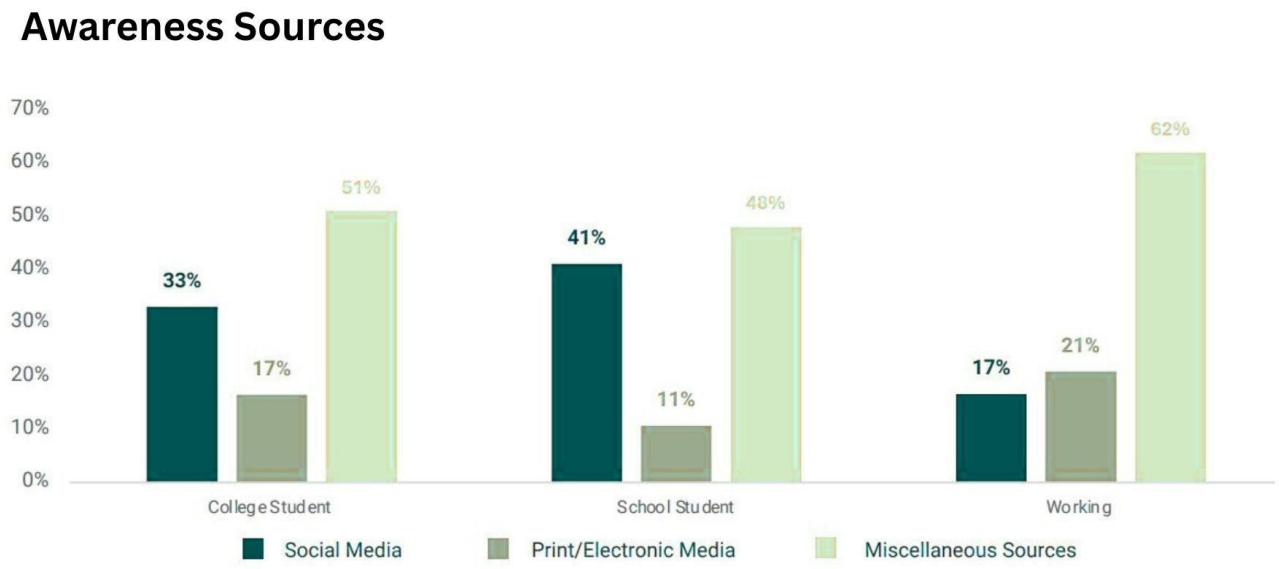
What major barriers prevent young people in India from accessing mental health services?

There are several. The first is stigma. Many young people are discouraged from talking about mental health or seeking help. The second is low awareness. A lot of symptoms go unrecognized or are misunderstood. And third, the infrastructure is weak. India has just 0.75 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. Most primary healthcare facilities are not equipped to handle mental health concerns. Schools and colleges rarely employ trained counsellors. Even where counsellors exist, many are not prepared to address climate-linked psychological distress. As a result, millions of young people are navigating anxiety, fear, and burnout without access to professional support.

Your report notes gender differences in climate-linked mental health symptoms. What is driving that gap?

We ensured that our survey responses were balanced by gender. What we found confirmed the need for deeper gender-specific research. The gap arises from several overlapping factors—biological, social, and economic. For instance, women in rural and low-income communities are more vulnerable to climate impacts because

they are often responsible for farming, collecting water, and caregiving. These roles put them in close contact with environmental stress. Displacement, food scarcity, and economic insecurity raise their psychological risk. At the same time, social stigma and limited autonomy restrict their ability to seek care.



How is social media influencing young people's perception of climate change and its mental toll?

Our study found that social media is the main source of information about climate change for young people. Among school students, 41 percent rely on it. For college students, the number is 33 percent. This constant engagement with online content increases climate awareness, but it also raises anxiety. Many young people are seeing an unfiltered stream of posts about disaster, collapse, and fear. The tone and quality of this content have a direct effect on how they feel. Without more thoughtful and evidence-based messaging, the emotional impact can become overwhelming.

From a scientific lens, how does air pollution affect mental health? Are mechanisms like neuroinflammation or oxidative stress involved?

Yes, they are. Although our report does not dive into clinical science, we are building on well-established findings in this space. Research shows that air pollutants, particularly fine particulate matter, can lead to neuroinflammation and oxidative stress. These conditions interfere with neurotransmitter activity and may damage brain tissue. The outcome is a higher likelihood of mental health disorders, including anxiety, depression, and cognitive decline. We are now working with the Institute of Human Behaviour and Allied Sciences in Delhi to explore these connections further and understand how climate stress interacts with brain health.

What should schools and universities do to support students dealing with climate-related mental stress?

They need to start with trained professionals. Every school and college should have at least one full-time counsellor with specific expertise in identifying and managing climate-linked stress. Institutions also need to establish clear referral pathways for more advanced care when needed. At the policy level, we recommend updating the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights' training manual for Child Welfare

Committees. Climate-specific mental health guidance should be included. Children designated as in need of care and protection must undergo screening for climate-related anxiety. Wellness programs also help. Initiatives like yoga, mental health awareness campaigns, and green campus projects can build a supportive environment that improves both emotional well-being and climate resilience.

Are there any international models India could look to?

Yes, and there is a lot to learn. The World Health Organization has supported several community-based approaches around the world. Argentina, for example, expanded access to mental health care for more than 5 million people by decentralizing its system and focusing on local delivery. In the Philippines, mental health policy is built around the voices of those with lived experience. Many countries have adopted national mental health strategies that extend through 2030, with detailed action plans and performance targets. These models provide valuable direction for what India can do next.

Looking ahead, how will progress on climate-linked mental health be measured in India?

Our report outlines a clear set of indicators. These include the number of trained counsellors in schools, the yearly increase in government mental health budgets, and the number of psychiatry seats available for training. We also recommend tracking data from Tele-MANAS, India's national mental health helpline. The volume and quality of calls provide insight into public need. Beyond this, awareness campaigns, partnerships with academic institutions, and new commissioned research projects are all important metrics. In time, we hope that schools and universities will begin reporting mental health case data as part of their accreditation process.

The real goal is not just activity but outcomes. India must measure the difference it is making in young people's lives.