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## Not air-conditioned

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It was five degrees below zero in Beijing and I was having trouble sleeping because the room was so overheated. In the otherwise wonderful hotel where the conference was held, one could have easily missed the fact that there was a harsh winter outside — elegant women in skirts that barely covered what in Bengali is described, with resolute illiberality, as their 'shame' (lajja nibaron), hurried across the lobby with men in beautiful summer weight jackets. Cars clogged the wide avenues outside; everybody talked about the traffic despite the fact that the city was crisscrossed by a network of eight-lane roads and highways.

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Compared to four years ago, what struck me was the absence of small cars — the cars with engines of 1.5 litres or less, the cars we mostly associate with Mumbai or even Madrid, preponderant here even a few years ago, had vanished, replaced by hordes of American-sized gas-guzzlers. All of this, both in itself and in what it presages about India — in a decade or two, if it keeps growing at the present rate, is nothing short of blood-chilling.

I am someone who finds no solace in the fact that our theories about global warming could be wrong. I do not see how one contemplates the possibility that the choices, active and passive, made by our generation, have even a 5 per cent probability of wiping out human life as we have known it, with any degree of equanimity. And it seems, from my admittedly amateurish reading of the literature, that 5 per cent is certainly much less than what people are talking about.

One of my MIT colleagues, a prominent energy economist (and no devotee of the anti-market Left), told me a year ago that he thought that a major global crisis involving much displacement and many deaths, was, in his view, inevitable, before a serious global response would be forthcoming. I asked if that would be too late. He said he did not know.

My sense, from hearing the many prominent Chinese academics and policymakers who spoke at this conference, is that they are also beginning to take this whole thing a bit more seriously. Climate change came up once or twice, whereas five years ago it would have been entirely taboo. But it is impossible to miss the ambivalence — the embrace of the green doctrine was the warmest, when we talked about the possibilities for China becoming the world leader in alternative energy. Otherwise, there are the familiar bugbears — the US ("Why should they get away with misbehaving?"), and various uncertainties. Above all, as in India, there is the fear of slowing growth: "There is so much poverty, how can we slow down?"

The trouble is, as far as I know, no one has bothered to ask the Indian poor their views and, given that, I don't know why we presume that the poor are less concerned about the future of mankind than the rest of us? In China, where higher levels of literacy mean that many more people are at least aware of the threat, the two surveys I saw (I don't know how representative they are, I have to admit) suggest that the concern with climate change is widespread,

especially among the young. Out of the 1,024 people interviewed by the Annual World Environment Survey in 2007 in China, 97 per cent said that the government should do more about climate change. Moreover, it is possible that the poor realise that they are the ones who will pay if the climate really changes drastically — after all, they are the ones who will not be able to shift to Switzerland or wherever things happen to be better.

Most importantly, it may be possible to turn this whole thing into an opportunity for the poor. Take the problem of black carbon, which are particles of carbon that are left hanging in the air when you burn, for example, cow dung (or other dirty fuels). The burning of these fuels inside the home without adequate

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protection, if my limited chemistry is right, is also one big reason why women and children living in those suffer perpetually from ailments of the respiratory tract.

One recent study in Orissa found that the lungs of a quarter of the women and a fifth of the children who live in households that use these fuels tend to look like that of people who smoke regularly, even though only 2 per cent of the women (and none of the children) smoke. If there could be a way to capture those particles before they got into the air and into people's lungs, or replacing those dirty fuels with something cleaner but equally effective (a solar stove that works just like a chulha?), the environment could be improved while protecting the health of the poor.

It is true that this will cost money. The poor use these unhealthy ways to cook, at least in part because they cannot afford better. However, it may be less money than we think. The announcement that there will be a definite market for 100 million solar stoves (if that is the solution) will no doubt stimulate innovation, and that will bring prices down. And if the government's concern for the poor is more than just an excuse, I don't see why it would not be thrilled to spend the money to make these stoves affordable.

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*The views expressed by the author are personal*

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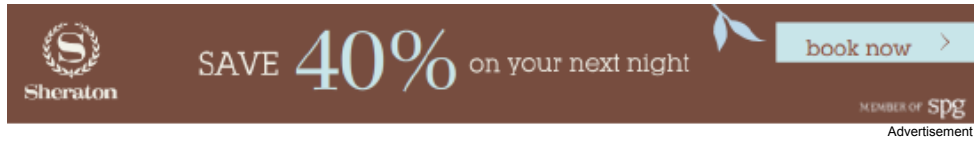
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