

Episode 30

Tackling Climate Change:

The Blueprints and the Fountainheads

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(In this episode we discuss the Norms, Conventions and Institutions to cope with Climate Change. We shall listen to a discussion between two passengers in an intercontinental flight. One of them Neeraj is a hardened businessman. His thoughts are occupied by his immediate business requirements. Avijit, the other participant in the discussion, is on his way to join his dream job that is essentially concerned with software development but focuses on climate change as well. He takes on the responsibility of informing Neeraj about the worldwide measures to tackle climate change. In the process he shares valuable information about the concerned institutions and the conventions.)

[It's a scene inside the cabin of an international flight. Passengers are moving in and trying to locate their seats. Cabin crews helping them. Murmurs, low volume conversation being heard. One tall man, Neeraj Misra, aged about 55 is about to occupy the seat adjacent to one emergency door. He asks the passengers in from, 'Please make space gentlemen. Allow me to sit down!' As he approaches his seat one air hostess moves towards him.]

Hostess: Sir, your seat is just beside the emergence exit. Hope you understand this. We can try to alter your seat if you have problem with this seat.

Neeraj: Thank you dear lady but I do not have any problem with this seat. In fact I have lived through several emergence situations in my life.

Hostess: Thank you sir. I shall be announcing the instructions that are specific to such emergency exit after all our passengers are seated.

Neeraj: You carry on with your work. I am perfectly comfortable.

(A young man, Avijit Sen, aged around 30 moves in to take the seat just beside Neeraj as the hostess moves away.)

Avijit: (Sitting down) Ah, this is much better. More leg space in exchange of some emergency threat!

Neeraj: Well said. I always opt for such seat if it is offered to me!

Avijit: Me too! By the way, I am Avijit (extends his hand for a shake. Neeraj responds.)

Neeraj: I am Neeraj. Flying to Doha only or beyond that?

Avijit: No I have to catch a connecting flight to New York. You?

Neeraj: Doha for now (smiles).

Avijit: If you do not mind...I just overheard you saying that you have lived through several emergency situations. I feel curious. Is it your job that lands you in such situations or is it just that you suddenly found yourself in such emergencies?

Neeraj: Ha ha...young people are always inquisitive and always impatient.

Avijit: Um...I am sorry...I should not have thrust questions like this...

Neeraj: No need to be sorry Avijit. We have a long flight ahead and we can discuss so many things.

Hostess: Please fasten your seat belts sirs. We are about to take off.

(Sounds of fastening seat belts heard. Pre-flight announcement is heard.)

Announcement: Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome onboard Flight 8B771 with service from New Delhi to Doha. We are currently third in line for take-off and are expected to be in the air in approximately six minutes time. We ask you to please fasten your seatbelts and secure all baggage underneath your seats or in the overhead compartments.

Neeraj: This airline recently earned a bad name for itself.

Avijit: For what?

Neeraj: For being late on an average of half an hour. But it seems that we are lucky today.
(Sound of the engine is heard as the aircraft rolls on the runway. It takes off duly.)

Avijit: Ah...so we are airborne!

Neeraj: I can sense an element of excitement in your words. It seems that you are expecting a lot from your forthcoming assignments!

Avijit: You guessed it right. I am basically a mathematician by training but you know the job markets, I mean it's so difficult, and that is why I switched to software engineering. I had been in and out of several jobs but none of those were rewarding. Neither in terms of compensation package nor by means of keeping my brains alive. After all these years I have found one job that looks like a game changer for me.

Neeraj: Carry on. I am feeling curious.

Avijit: My firm in New York does mathematical modelling of climatic events. You know climate change, global warming and all that stuff. Our company has worked with many American national agencies. Currently it is an associate of NOAA.

Neeraj: Noah's arc! Fascinating! So you will be doing software for prehistoric times (laughs loudly. Avijit joins in the laughter.)

Avijit: I am sure that NOAA people is familiar with this piece. But anyway, jokes apart, NOAA is an abbreviation. It stands for National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. It is an American scientific agency within the United States Department of Commerce.

Neeraj: Ocean, atmosphere, mathematics, and commerce....seems pretty complicated. I understand a bit of commerce only and that too on the practical front.

Avijit: Ok it's my turn now to guess. You are a businessman?

Neeraj: On the dot buddy. I am a supplier and my work takes me to several places in the world.

Avijit: Into emergency situations as well?

Neeraj: Oh dear dear! You have not forgotten that yet! Ok then, let me tell you what I meant by that.

Avijit: I am all ears!

Neeraj: We supply building materials to very critical areas.

Avijit: Critical means?

Neeraj: By critical I mean those countries that are impacted by armed conflicts, areas that have been repeatedly bombarded and the buildings demolished. Like that...after the war stops there is need for reconstruction and we step in with our supplies. Working in those areas involve a lot of risk.

Avijit: But after the war is over what risk could be left? Why are you calling it risky?

Neeraj: No war is over if some people sign on a piece of paper my boy! Wars continue, conflicts take place albeit with much lesser intensity. So you can easily be hit by a sniper bullet even on a relatively calm day. Besides, you have unexploded mines and bombs left over by the warring factions.

Avijit: I get your point now. So which is your next place of business?

Neeraj: Syria.

Avijit: You surprise me! How do you do any business in such a place? It's all rubbles! No trace of any civilization.

Neeraj: War cannot continue indefinitely. It will stop soon. And then we shall be doing business through the Lebanon route.

Avijit: Very smart, I must say.

Neeraj: Yeah, you need to be smarter than other ordinary businessmen. But let us drop this. What use it is for a software engineer and a climate nerd to know about business in a battle field.

Avijit: Apparently useless but you know...we are linking climate change to war.

Neeraj: Really? (he picks up a couple of candies from the bowl in front and pops them in his mouth.) I love these candies. But tell me how is your climate business related to wars and conflicts?

Avijit: Scientists have recently pointed out some links between global warming and conflicts taking place in different countries. And you will be excited to know that the violence in Syria has attracted the most intense research.

Neeraj: You surprise me!

Avijit: You are bound to be surprised if you are listening to it for the first time!

(Suddenly a brawl breaks out between two passengers in the back rows. 'I told you I can't stand so much of cool air but you won't listen!'. Another shouts, 'I have all the liberty to turn this nozzle. Who are you to stop me!' Pat comes the reply, 'You can't freeze me like this!' Air hostesses rush to resolve the issue saying loudly, 'Please calm down!')

Avijit: See! A slight change in temperature can start a conflict and here we are talking about global warming!

Neeraj: (Laughing)Well, how can I ignore such a direct evidence! But tell me the war and warming story. I feel curious.

Avijit: You must have heard the name UNDP.

Neeraj: U-N-D-P? Nope. Sorry.

Avijit: The full form is United Nations Development Programme.

Neeraj: Ok. What does that fellow have to say?

Avijit: It's an organization, a branch of the United Nations. It has a lot to say about how climate change and conflicts in Arab region are getting linked.

Neeraj: Like?

Avijit: The Arab region was the birthplace of agricultural civilization and for thousands of years it has been able to cope with risks from climatic hazards. But climate change is now happening at a pace unlike anything before, stretching the ability of societies and governments to cope.

Neeraj: You speak like university lecturers!

Avijit: (Giggles) every discipline has to express its concepts in its own terms! Anyway, the evidence shows that the region may well be in the midst of a 25-year climate change-induced mega drought. This would be equal in strength only to historic droughts one thousand years ago that led to major civilizational shifts. This might make parts of the region uninhabitable by mid-century.

Neeraj: Gosh, no! What will happen to our business! You scare me buddy!

Avijit: Hold on sir! In Syria, the drought decimated the livelihoods of more than twenty percent of the rural population internally displacing up to 1 million. More importantly it exacerbated social vulnerabilities in advance of the uprisings. Climate impacts have likewise contributed to instability in Iraq, Sudan and Yemen.

Neeraj: (Sits up) Hey, we must do something about this!

Avijit: Who told you that the world is sitting idle? There is so much of activities going on to tackle this climate change. But to know that you have to confront a few more unknown terms. Have you heard about IPCC?

Neeraj: Of course yes! This one got the nobel prize. My kid was reading loudly before his exam. I remember distinctly!

Avijit: That makes my work easier. The IPCC or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was created in 1988. It was set up by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP). Its mandate is to prepare assessments on all aspects of climate change and its impacts. This is done with a view of formulating realistic response strategies.

Neeraj: If I could I would have recommended your name to your boss for a promotion right away. You are pretty knowledgeable buddy. Carry on!

Avijit: Thanks for the compliments sir! Six valuable reports have been published by this organization since its inception. The Fourth Assessment Report paid attention to the integration of climate change with sustainable development policies and relationships between mitigation and adaptation. At the end of 2007 the IPCC was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

Neeraj: I see. Great job. That's all...no?

Avijit: That is only the beginning Neeraj-ji!

(In flight announcement heard: "Ladies and gentlemen, the Captain has turned on the fasten seat belt sign. We are now crossing a zone of turbulence. Please return your seats and keep your seat belts fastened. Thank you.")

Neeraj: Oh...I was thinking of going to the washroom...anyway....are these things, I mean these dirty turbulences, the result of your warming ?

Avijit: Turbulences are routine things. But yes, what you are suggesting, global warming could have increased the frequency and the intensity of such turbulences.

Neeraj: We possibly cannot control these things Avijit?

Avijit: See, if we have contributed to the increase of global warming then we must do our bit to control the damage. And the best control is to put a cap on the production of greenhouse gas like carbon di oxide.

Neeraj: Makes sense.

Avijit: I shall go back in history a bit. The First World Climate Conference was held in 1979. It identified climate change as an urgent world problem and issued a declaration calling on governments to anticipate and guard against potential climate hazards. A World Climate Programme was set up, steered by the World Meteorological Organization (WMO), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU). Several intergovernmental conferences on climate change followed this conference.

Neeraj: I see.

Avijit: The Toronto Conference in 1988 on the Changing Atmosphere advanced public debate, when more than 340 participants from 46 countries all recommended developing a comprehensive global framework convention to protect the atmosphere.

Neeraj: Do you take Brahmi regularly?

Avijit: No...but why?

Neeraj: I am told that if you take Brahmi leaves regularly in the morning then your memory improves fantastically. I was wondering...46 countries...340 participants...you must be hooked to Brahmi!

Avijit: Good joke sir! Now back to our discussion. Following a proposal by the country called Malta, the United Nations General Assembly addressed climate change for the first time by adopting Resolution 43/53.

Neeraj: And now I must address my physical pressures. Shall be back from the washroom in a couple of minutes. Excuse me.
(The music playing in the cabin becomes louder as Avijit leans back with an expression of leisure, 'Ah!')

Neeraj: (Back from the washroom) now it feels so light! When are they going to serve meal buddy? I am hungry.

Avijit: That will be soon I believe.

- Neeraj:** Till then let me listen to some more information on climate change.
- Avijit:** I told you about IPCC. Another important thing is the United Nations Framework on Climate Change or UNFCCC. This was mooted in 1991 but after all required signatures by participating countries it came into force in 1994.
- Neeraj:** Signatures seem to be very important!
- Avijit:** There are so many countries and all of them have their own peculiar interests. But you have to bring them on the same platform to start something global.
- Neeraj:** All signed the document?
- Avijit:** The framework came into force after fifty countries signed it. The Conference of the Parties to the Convention became the Convention's ultimate authority . They are called COP in short. The parties held its first session, called COP 1, in Berlin early in the year 1995. There was already a document of commitment from industrialised countries. The Parties to the Convention agreed that the commitment was inadequate and launched the "Berlin Mandate" talks on additional commitments.
- Neeraj:** So COP meeting is continuing still?
- Avijit:** Of course! But I must tell you about COP3. This was held in Kyoto in Japan. COP 3 adopted the Kyoto Protocol in December. The Kyoto Protocol sets individual, legally binding targets for industrialized countries prepared to take positive steps to curb emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from sources within their control.
- Neeraj:** This COP is just a single body?
- Avijit:** Single yes but there are subsidiary bodies to assist in the job. The Convention establishes two permanent subsidiary bodies, namely the Subsidiary Body for Scientific and Technological Advice and the Subsidiary Body for Implementation. These bodies advise the COP. These bodies hold their own meeting regularly.
- Neeraj:** I think there is some business opportunities here. Who is the head by the way?
- Avijit:** I believe that you have to address the Executive Secretary. The secretariat is institutionally linked to the United Nations and administered under United Nations. Its head, as I was saying, is the Executive Secretary. He or she is appointed by the Secretary-General of the United Nations in consultation with the COP.
- (Food arrives. 'At last, food for the stomach!'. Neeraj is excited. "Thank you" he says to the hostess. He starts munching right away. 'This airlines is known for its cuisine, you know!' Avijit joins.)
- Avijit:** It might sound a little funny Neeraj-ji but one subsidiary body established by the COP was called COW.

Neeraj: I can take it. Getting used to all types of surprises.

Avijit: No this is true. The COP may delegate work to a Committee of the Whole or the COW in short. It is open to all delegations and has its own Chair to conduct negotiations and report back to the COP.

Neeraj: But Avijit, whatever meetings you might hold, you need to address one particular issue. That is technology. You need to have good, new technology if you want to reduce the emission of harmful gases.

Avijit: Agreed. In fact the COP has established an Expert Group on Technology transfer. It was launched by the Marrakesh Accords at COP 7 in 2001. Its task is to provide scientific and technical advice for transfer of environmentally friendly technologies under the Convention. The group comprises 20 experts, taking representatives from all regional groups.

Neeraj: Marrakesh! Sounds nice.

Avijit: Yes. Through that accord another very important group was established. It is called the Least Developed Countries Expert Group or LEG in short. The LEG advises Least Developed Countries on preparing and implementing national adaptation programmes.

(An elderly gentleman rises from his seat behind Neeraj and Avijit and comes round to stand in front of them.)

Gerald: Hello, I am Gerald Johnson. I was listening to your discussion with interest. It's really interesting. In fact I worked for some time at the Bureau of COP.

Neeraj: Oh great! The world is so small! We can have a discussion together.

Gerald: I would have been very happy to join you but you can't have that much space in economy class.

Avijit: But tell me sir, did I say anything wrong?

Gerald: On the contrary you are right on spot. You have given a very clear picture of the whole process.

Neeraj: You mean to say Mr Gerald that I am in good company?

Gerald: (Laughs) No doubt about that. I only wish that Mr Avijit had informed you about some conventions that are effective now.

Avijit: You mean the ones like Convention on Biological Diversity?

Gerald: Right. Or say the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification.

Neeraj: You mean to say that all these are linked to tackling of climate change?

Gerald: Of course. All these are part of the cumulative process to save our planet.

Neeraj: I wish I could hear more from you.

Gerald: But you still have food left on your plate and before the hostess asks me to move I must be back to my seat. Let me hurry. I shall be listening.

(Gerald departs)

Neeraj: Nice fellow eh?

Avijit: Sure he is. The Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Convention for Combating Desertification are very important. Along with that another convention is important. It is the Convention on Wetlands. It was adopted at Ramsar in Iran in 1971. All these have been actively involved in the UNFCCC process.

Neeraj: Excellent food and yes, excellent information as well. Now I want to have a nap and prepare for landing.

Avijit: Please do. I am going to follow you sir.

(The cabin music becomes loud and after a while an announcement is heard: Good afternoon passengers. This is your captain speaking. We are currently cruising at an altitude of 33,000 feet at airspeed of 400 miles per hour. The weather looks good and with the tailwind on our side we are expecting to land in Doha approximately fifteen minutes ahead of schedule. Music rises and fades out).