

Episode 32

Major Climate Agreements II Agree To Live

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(This episode will once again focus on the need for sustainable agreements among nations to stop climate change and pollution. Though the emission of greenhouse gases is sought to be contained primarily, there are other gases that are polluting the atmosphere. These gases continue to be produced citing the demand of those in the economy. International norms are flouted to earn handsome profits from the production of these. However, the issue of livelihood has to be taken into account before trying to fit a tight cap on emission of gases that are harmful for the climate and human ambience. We follow Sujay and Bakul, two second year college students, as they help to expose the conflicts surrounding all these issues.)

[Traffic noise. Bus moving. It's a locality near Kolkata called Nagerbazar. A public bus suddenly takes a sharp turn and some of the passengers raise a hue and cry.]

Passenger1: What is this conductor? You are diverting the bus! How am I to reach the hospital?

Passenger2: What the hell are you trying to do? It's almost time that the school closes and I have to fetch my daughter. How can you divert the bus to a different route?

Passenger3: You silly driver! You must have informed us when we purchased the ticket. I have to reach the office in time. But you don't seem to care a bit even.

(Angry shouts from the passengers are heard. "Give us back the money we paid", 'You need a tight slap, you scoundrel!', 'How dare you act as per your whims!'. The conductor tries to calm them down.)

Conductor: You are blaming me unnecessarily. Just look ahead and you will understand why we are diverting the bus.

Passenger1: What happened? You are trying to cook up some story.

Con: I am not lying. Just look out of the window. What do you see?

Passenger2: What? I can't see anything...no, wait, there seems to be something wrong there...

Passenger3: Where? (Everyone competes to have a look at the spot) Ah, let me see...something wrong there. The police is creating a cordon. What happened conductor?

Con: Now you are asking me, no? Some gas is leaking from a nearby factory. I got the news just a couple of minutes ago on my phone.

Passenger3: Got the news! From whom?

Con: I know the owner of a sweet shop near that spot. He called me. He knows that our bus passes this spot every morning at this hour.

(The angry shouts in the bus suddenly scale down to a murmur. Bakul, a second year college student taps on the shoulder of his friend Sujay.)

Bakul: Tell me what is the gas the conductor is referring to?

Sujay: But he didn't mention any gas!

Bakul: I know that very well. But you are a student of chemistry. You should be able to tell from the clue you have.

Sujay: (He tries to smell something in the air) You are right. The tangy smell has already reached us.

Bakul: Yes my friend, its ammonia.

Sujay: That means ammonia leak has taken place over there. It could become dangerous for the locality if the leak is not plugged soon.

Bakul: Of course it can turn into a big accident. First everyone will feel some irritation in their eyes and nostrils and throat. If the pollution persists and the supply of gas is not cut off then many will have to be taken to the hospital.

Sujay: Come on! You sound scaring. I believe the leak will be identified soon and someone will definitely plug it.

Bakul: Optimism is good but it doesn't always pay.

Sujay: What do you mean by that?

Bakul: I mean that people have a very short memory. Last year a similar leak occurred at a factory, not far from here. There was no plugging for more than six hours. Do you remember?

Sujay: Oh yes yaar, just about a kilometre from here...it made big headlines the next day.

Bakul: Now tell me, what did we learn from that accident? Nothing I suppose! How can they allow such factories to operate without safety mechanisms? If I were in control, I would have shut down all these units.

Conductor: Many a poor fellow earn their livelihood from these factories madam! How can you think of shutting these factories! Everyone will starve.

Sujay: Hey Bakul, let's get down at this stop. We could take an autorickshaw to reach college.

Bakul: Yeah, let's go.
(Sujay and Bakul gets down and proceeds towards their college. The story will follow them from here onwards.)

(Noise at the college gate. Sujay and Bakul try to find the reason for unrest.)

Bakul: Something seems to be wrong here. So many students are not supposed to be here at the gate! It looks like an impromptu strike...

Sujay: Let me try to find out. Ankit is there at the corner. Let's ask him. Hey Ankit, here ... this way!

Bakul: Ankit seems to be agitated too. Something is definitely wrong.

(Ankit comes running. He is panting.)

Sujay: What happened? Why are you all at the gate? No classes today?

Ankit: It's a scandal yaar!

Bakul: What scandal? What has happened actually?

Ankit: Chemistry question for the first year test has been leaked.

Bakul: How do you know?

Ankit: This morning my classmate Suvankar got a call on his phone. The caller must have obtained some wrong information. The fellow thought that Suvankar is in first year. He offered to share the paper in return for two thousand rupees.

Sujay: Small sum yaar! People are getting so generous these days.

Bakul: Shut up Sujay! This is serious. What happened then Ankit?

Ankit: Suvankar got curious. He set up a meeting in the early hours of the morning near the jubilee park.

Bakul: You mean Suvankar actually paid the money?

Ankit: Yes he did. He did a sting operation. All the while he was talking with the fellow, he kept his cell phone camera on.

Bakul: So who is the culprit? Any clue?

Ankit: It seems to be someone in the computer section. We are yet to pin him down.

Sujay: Funny day yaar. First we had ammonia leak and now a case of question leak!

Bakul: What do we do now Sujay? Go back home or you have any alternative idea?

Sujay: Let us have a cup of tea first. Need to refresh our brains.

Bakul: Our usual place? Bonny dada's exclusive tea shop?

Sujay: Of course. Let's go.

(The two go down the road and round the corner to Bonny dada's tea shop. Two-three persons are sipping sitting on the benches provided in the front space. Bonny dada is ever busy with cleaning his utensils, serving tea-biscuit-omelette.)

Sujay: Two lemon tea Bonny dada.

Bonny: Take a seat. Give me some time. I am alone today.

Bakul: Where is chhottu? Can't see him today.

Bonny: Chhottu just left to see his father.

Sujay: See his father means? Anything unusual?

Bonny: There has been an accident at a factory in Nagerbazar. Some gas producing factory as far as I know. Chhottu's father is a labour in that factory. He stays in the factory compound. I got a call from an unknown number an hour back saying Chhottu's father has been admitted to the nearby hospital.

Sujay: (Exclaiming) Bakul, our bus was diverted to avoid that same accident route!

Bakul: See, didn't I say that ammonia leak could lead to dangerous consequences! Chhottu's father must have been living very near the storage tanks or the processing units. Thus he received the most serious impact when the leak started.

Sujay: Yeah, it's pretty serious it seems. Did the caller mention what has actually happened to Chottu's father?

Bakul: Nothing. He was in such a hurry. It seemed like he was given the responsibility of informing the family members of several such labourers.

Sujay: Gosh! That means it already is a major disaster!

Bakul: I will keep saying that such factories need to be closed down. One comes to such units for earning livelihood but actually spend their lives in great risk.

(One bearded thin fellow sitting in one of the benches join the discussion. He seems to be above fifty years in age.)

Farukh: Ammonia is in such demand in the fertilizer industry....such units will utilise all loopholes in the system to keep running their business.

Bonny: Want another cup of tea Farukh?

Farukh: I would love to have. Make it strong. I can't clear my throat. It's so irritating.

Bonny: My tea won't be sufficient to cure your disease Farukh. You need to see a good doctor.

Farukh: I told you several times, I do not have the money.

Sujay: What happened to your throat?

(Farukh coughs but doesn't say anything.)

Bonny: He won't tell you. Farukh used to work in a plywood board making factory. It was quite a big factory in the south. Labourers in his factory suffered from several health problems. Farukh suffered too.

Farukh: Ah Bonny, again you are narrating that story to people! I told you that I do not want to...(coughs)

Bonny: You just keep mum. Yes, as I was saying, Farukh himself was also affected by the wood dust. He organized the workers and started demanding more safety measures for the workers. The end result was that he was ousted from the factory.

(Farukh coughs loudly.)

Sujay: That is so tragic!

Bonny: Here is your lemon tea...see if you need some more salt.

Bakul: (Takes a small sip) No it's perfect. But Farukh...err...I took your name...I mean dada...

Farukh: Call me Farukh. I am comfortable with that. See, the most important thing is that nowhere in the world you will find factories obeying the rules. They will definitely find some way to bypass those.

Bonny: Look, Farukh is never limited to our locality or even our country. He is always concerned about the whole world. Here Farukh...take your tea.

Farukh: (Holds the tea cup and takes a long sip) You are college students. You must know about CFCs.

Sujay: (Hesitantly) CFC...I mean you are asking about chlorofluorocarbons, right!

Farukh: Right. What about the rules that were framed internationally to stop the production of those harmful gases? Who cares to obey those?

Bakul: You mean the Montreal Protocol? I am quite impressed by your knowledge Farukh.

Bonny: Didn't I say that he is always concerned about the whole of the world? He comes to my shop every morning and scans the pages of the newspaper like no one else does.

Sujay: The protocol was signed in 1987, no Bakul?

Bakul: You are always right with the dates and years Sujay! It was indeed 1987. What we have been told is that following that protocol the production of CFCs has officially ended in developing countries in 2010.

Farukh: That is all misinformation! Only a week ago I read a report that CFCs are being illegally used in about ten provinces in China.

Sujay: But if production has been stopped then where are they getting the gases from?

Farukh: There are unlicensed factories in Mongolia. Factories producing such gases continue to exist in mainland China even! Now, if this is the general picture then tell me, who would stop the unsafe production of ammonia in our country?

Sujay: CFCs are used in several industrial productions, I know.

Farukh: In China the factories are illegally using CFC 11 to manufacture foam. It is in high demand as an insulator in the booming construction sector.

Bakul: Really strange! The leaders from several countries join the international negotiations and raise high hopes for the future. But then, what happens? Things go on as usual.

Sujay: (Almost in a monologue style) CFCs are extremely dangerous for our ozone cover. Ultraviolet ray will penetrate freely into our body if that shield is gone.

Bonny: I only hope that Chhottu's father is safe. If Chhottu has to stay at the hospital for a few days then I will be in real trouble.

Farukh: You can be in trouble if you continue to keep Chhottu in your shop. You are employing child labour Bonny!

Bonny: Such an ungrateful creature you are Farukh! While I care for your health, have never asked you to pay for the tea in the last one month, you try to land me in trouble!

Farukh: But the fact is true, no? What if the police comes some day and arrests you for employing Chhottu? What will you say then?

Bakul: He is right Bonny dada. Employing child labour is a crime. We know that you are very kind hearted and you treat Chhottu well but how can you bypass the law?

(Bonny suddenly becomes upset. His voice mellows.)

Bonny: You all are speaking like this...but if I send Chhottu home then...I do not know whether he will at all want to leave my shop. We were planning to put him in a weekend school after the pujas are over.

Sujay: Whatever your plans are Bonny dada, please think over this again. We all need to be safe.

Bakul: Sujay, let's go and see if the agitation has mellowed. If possible I want to do the practical today.

Sujay: Right. Let us go. Here is the money Bonny dada.

Bakul: And thanks for the nice chat Farukh. We come to this shop quite often. We would look for you when we come for tea.

(They leave without waiting for the response from Farukh who coughs loudly. As they approach the college building both of them are sweating.)

Bakul: It's pretty hot no?

Sujay: Yeah, my handkerchief is already soaked in sweat.

Bakul: It's not supposed to be so hot at this time of the year. But see the heat.

Sujay: Right you are. I have to turn the fan full speed if I am to get sound sleep at night. And you know what my grandma says?

Bakul: What?

Sujay: She sort of keeps whining that it was never so hot when she was young. When she was married to my grandpa and came to our house then the temperatures at this time of the year was so soothing!

Bakul: (Smiles) Nice memories to cherish. But she is correct. Even the weather-wallahs say that the average temperature is climbing with each passing year.

Sujay: Again it's all about a gas escaping into the atmosphere!

(Both of them burst into laughter.)

Bakul: Well said. It's all about carbon dioxide piling up in our atmosphere.

Sujay: Hey Bakul, what about our Professor Rakshit?

Bakul: Why? What about him?

Sujay: Arreh, you have forgotten completely! Do you remember that we had a seminar about six months ago...

Bakul: That film was screened...what was the name...right, An Inconvenient Truth.

Sujay: And that was when Professor Rakshit spoke to us about climate change.

Bakul: Right you are! He in fact told us that he was going to Poland...umm, it was in December I suppose.

Sujay: Yes early December. I remember the name of that meeting. It is called Conference of Parties and this was the twenty-fourth edition.

Bakul: We will find him out today, ok? If the practical class is off then we shall seek to know what happened there.

Sujay: Nice idea. (They are close to the college building. The agitation over question leak is still on.) No let up in the agitation Bakul. Let us do one thing.

Bakul: What?

Sujay: There is a small gate behind the canteen. Very few people uses it. We will go through that and try to find Prof Rakshit. Why waste the whole day anyway?

Bakul: You are such a lovely buddy. Yeah yeah, let's take that route! (She sounds excited.)

(They go to the back of the building and enter through the small gate. Music may be used to denote change in scene.)

Sujay: So far, so good! No one noticed us. Now let us see whether Prof Rakshit is in his room.

Bakul: Most of the rooms are empty Sujay. Our teachers might be in some meeting or they might have left already.

Sujay: That is not our concern. Let us find out...there is his room...but it seems to be empty.

(Suddenly someone speaks from behind. It is Prof Rakshit.)

Rakshit: Looking for someone students?

Bakul: (startled) Oh...yeah...I mean yes sir...

Sujay: We were looking for you sir!

Rakshit: Me? I am honoured. What business do you have with me? Your mates are all there at the gate and you two come here stealthily looking for me!

Sujay: (Tries to smile but fails) No sir, actually we were very impressed by your speech in the seminar...

Rakshit: Which seminar? Are you talking about the one that was on climate change?

Bakul: Right sir. It was so informative. And you told us that you were travelling to Poland for attending the climate change meeting.

Rakshit: Yes I did. It is called COP24 in short. But what do you want to know actually?

Bakul: Sir we are curious to know what happened there? I mean we all keep saying that it is increasingly becoming hot and something must be done to stop this rise. We thought...

Rakshit: You thought that something had been done in Poland this time?

Bakul: No, I mean, we do not know...if you can tell us about that.

Rakshit: It's my turn to be impressed. What are your names?

Sujay: Sir I am Sujay and she is Bakul. We study Chemistry honours. We are in the second year.

Rakshit: Sujay and Bakul...second year...I see. Now tell me what do you expect to happen in such an international meeting?

Sujay: We do not have any concrete idea sir.

Bakul: May be some pact was signed!

Rakshit: (Laughs loudly) Ah...if it were so easy to get a pact signed every year. (Sighs) It is not done that way my children. Even if a pact is signed, it is extremely difficult to implement the same.

Sujay: I see sir.

Rakshit: No my boy, it is not even easy to see the difficulties. The first major pact on climate change that was signed is called the Kyoto Protocol.

Sujay: It was in 1997 sir.

Rakshit: Wonderful! I can see that you were very attentive in that seminar.

Bakul: He is very sharp at remembering the eventful years.

Rakshit: A useful quality, I must say. This year the conference was held in Katowice in Poland. And this was important for the Paris agreement that we had in 2015.

Bakul: I have read a little about this in newspapers. But I do not really understand why the Paris agreement is important.

Rakshit: Let me explain the scenario. The Kyoto Protocol defined emission levels of greenhouse gases for developed nations to be achieved by 2012. After that there was need for another agreement. Thus the countries of the world signed the Paris Agreement in 2015.

Sujay: What is the aim this time?

Rakshit: The aim is to limit the rise of temperature to 1.5 degrees over the pre industrial temperatures and also to boost climate action financing.

- Bakul:** You said that the countries of the world agreed. But I have heard that the United States of America has not agreed to the proposals laid down in the agreement.
- Rakshit:** You are right. The United States which joined the Agreement in 2016, announced its intention in July 2017 to withdraw from it. However, the nation remains a party to the agreement at least until November 2020, which is the earliest that it can legally request to withdraw from it.
- Sujay:** Oh I see! Does that mean that the Paris agreement has not succeeded in doing what it wanted to?
- Rakshit:** Do not jump to such a conclusion. You have to look at the positive aspects as well. The agreement has been ratified by 184 countries and entered into force in November 2016. The 2015 conference was important from other viewpoints also.
- Sujay:** Like?
- Rakshit:** Eighteen high income countries committed to donating one hundred billion dollar a year for climate action in developing countries. So far over seventy billion dollar has been mobilised.
- Sujay:** Sir, I am a bit confused. This morning we witnessed the consequences of a major leak in an ammonia producing factory. A lot of people would like to see these factories shut down. But...
- Bakul:** Yes sir, where would the workers go if such units are closed.
- Rakshit:** I still cannot follow the trail of your thoughts.
- Sujay:** What I mean to ask is that if all the agreements in the world seek to curb emissions it means those are scripted to stop the burning of fossil fuels. Right?
- Rakshit:** Absolutely right till this point. Go ahead.
- Sujay:** But Sir, is it possible to shut down our oil rigs or say, all the coal mines? Where would the hapless workers go?
- Rakshit:** Excellent Sujay! You actually pack a lot of questions in one query. See, most of the time in these annual conferences, what we see is a tug-of-war. Every nation strives to commit as little as possible. But for scientists and curious observers like us there are other points of attraction.
- Bakul:** What did you find attractive this time sir?
- Rakshit:** He place Katowice in Poland is in the heart of a coal dominated region. In fact Poland announced the opening of a new coal mine in the region shortly before the conference began.

Bakul: Sir you mean to say that the hosts themselves were showing disrespect to the theme of climate talks.

Rakshit: Um...you can say that but at the same time you have to give some importance to what they said.

Sujay: What?

Rakshit: Around eighty per cent of the country's electricity comes from coal. So it's not easy to give up on coal altogether. You will be amused to know that the Katowice pavilion inside the conference venue featured walls, floors, soap and even earrings all made from coal!

Bakul: That is so novel!

Sujay: But where does the workers' interest figure here?

Rakshit: Patience my boy! The President of Poland talked of a just transition for workers away from fossil fuel jobs.

Bakul: Sounds quite different – just transition!

Rakshit: Whatever it sounds like, a well-planned alternative has to replace the miner's job. Otherwise there will be unrest in the society. You just cannot render people jobless in the name of building a clean economy.

Sujay: (Sounding thoughtful) I can see, saving the climate and the people might mean two different things sometime.

Rakshit: Don't be so upset my boy. There are examples around the world where noticeable work has been done to replace coal as well as coal related jobs.

Bakul: I remember reading about the Navajo tribe of America.

Sujay: What about them?

Bakul: They had leased the land that contained a lot of coal to a private company. The condition was that people from the tribe should be employed sufficiently. But now the whole area is suffering due to the pollution created by coal mining. The tribes people are suffering too.

Rakshit: You are absolutely right. That is why some non-government are trying to create opportunities that will release the community fro their reliance on coal. So Sujay, hope is round the corner.

Sujay: The example is really impressive sir!

Rakshit: But now you have to impress me by leaving me alone!

Bakul: Why sir? Did we do anything wrong?

Rakshit: Not at all. The fact is that I am editing a volume on the outcome of Katowice conference. So I need to focus on my work now. But I would really love to chat with you whenever I get an opportunity. You two are really brilliant.

Sujay & Bakul: Thank you sir. Bye!

Rakshit: And listen, do not irritate the agitators. You better leak out from where you had entered.

(All of them burst out in laughter.)