"I Will Still Fight for It till the End": Factors That Sustain and Detract from Indian Youths’ Climate Activism

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Abstract: This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews with 22 Indian youth climate activists (mean age = 19) from 13 cities across India to explore factors that sustain or detract from climate activism. Data were analyzed using reflexive Thematic Analysis. In addition to two gatekeeping factors (lack of family support and financial and job pressures) that may prevent youth from joining or cause youth to quit their climate activism entirely, this study identified factors that affected youth’s sustained climate activism: two detracting factors (negative interactions with government, and online and in-person bullying and harassment); four supporting factors (sense of community, internal motivations, seeing tangible achievements, and personal growth); and one factor (climate anxiety) with mixed effects on sustaining youth activism. Further, we describe ways in which youth holding minoritized identities, including lower-income, Muslim, and rural youth, had distinct experiences.

Keywords: climate activism; environmental protest; India; youth activism

1. Introduction

“...The truth, at one point [you] might be telling [me] that there is no way back and the earth is doomed... But at that point, also, I would still maintain what I should do. And I will still fight for it till the end... If right now somebody says to me that there is no solution out there and the Earth is doomed, I will say how are you sure about it?... There’s no 100% in this universe, so you can keep your opinion to yourself, I won’t disturb that. But I would still believe that there must be some 0.0001% probability that I can, or the people of Earth can come up with a solution and save this place. I will fight for that probability, and fight for that solution. And that’s why I will keep fighting for it”.—Abhishek

Every year, scientists’ warnings about the climate emergency grow more dire. India is one of the world’s most populated countries and faces some of the most immediate impacts from the climate emergency [1]. Yet, India is not often the focus of climate crisis news and commentary. For example, while international news extensively covered the July 2022 heat wave in Europe, where the UK experienced its hottest ever recorded temperature of 40.3 °C (104.5 °F) [2] scant news reported on a heat wave in India’s most populous state of Uttar Pradesh, where over 240 million inhabitants experienced average weekly temperatures of 43 °C (109 °F).

Indian youth have collectively risen in the face of the climate crisis. In 2019, when Greta Thunberg called for a global youth strike for climate, thousands of Indian youth joined millions of young people in protests across the world as part of the Fridays for Future (FFF) movement [3]. Yet, despite the growing climate emergency in India and young people’s significant contributions to the climate movement [4] there is little research with young Indian climate activists [5] or Indian youths’ broader civic engagement [6]. This gap reflects a larger trend in the literature to study predominantly white, wealthy young climate activists in the Global North [5].
In addition, very little research has addressed the factors that sustain young people’s climate activism. Research has identified factors that relate to youths’ initial engagement in climate activism, such as their motivations to be with other like-minded individuals and peers [4,7]), as well as outcomes of youths’ climate activism, such as acquiring new skills [8]. However, this literature does not explicitly address potential links between these factors and youths’ sustained climate activism. In addition, some studies have suggested factors that could lead to changes in youth’s level of participation in issue areas that are not related to the climate [9–12]. Further, most existing research on youth climate activism has been conducted in the United States and Europe, whose cultural, political, and socio-historical contexts are distinct from India. Therefore, this study explores factors that support and detract from young climate activists’ sustained engagement in the climate movement in India, according to young activists themselves.

1.1. The Youth Climate Movement in India

Climate movements in India were well established before the 2019 FFF strikes took place. Indeed, India has a rich history of environmental movements, many led by tribal and Indigenous peoples, to prevent government development projects like dams and mines from destroying natural resources [13]. Local environmental movements resisted the Indian government’s focus on economic development since its independence from Britain in 1947 [14] These economic development projects displaced tens of millions of people [15], many of them Indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed from their ancestral land and economic lifeline [14]. Thus, beginning in the 1940s, Indians formed grassroots movements to protest displacement and environmental degradation [16].

Youth-led climate organizations in India began mobilizing en masse as part of the global climate movement FFF in 2019, but youth climate activism has been on the rise in India for decades [3,13,17]. In 2020, FFF India mobilized thousands of people to email public comments to government officials to protest proposed legislation called the Environmental Impact Assessment and helped coordinate the Save Mollem movement, where youth engaged in all-night vigils, protests, and blocking railway lines to prevent the government from building infrastructure through Goa’s wildlife sanctuaries [18]. FFF’s dozens of Indian chapters also organize local activities. For example, FFF Gorakhpur has mobilized volunteers to educate over 2000 middle and high schoolers about climate change and to lead training for over 200 university engineering students on eco-friendly design. In addition to FFF, there are organizations such as the Indian Youth Climate Network, which has engaged over 10,000 volunteers and provides leadership training to young people across India [19] and the Swapna Foundation, which has mobilized over 1500 young volunteers to lead clean-ups and climate awareness campaigns in several cities [20]. Youth for Climate India has engaged over 8000 young people in 20 cities to educate students about climate policy, lead in-person strikes, and campaign against the government’s dilution of environmental laws [21]. There are also local youth-led initiatives across India, such as the Pune Ploggers group, which has conducted more than 180 clean-up drives in the state of Maharashtra. Social media has facilitated youth climate activism as grassroots actions, such as a youth-led campaign in Assam to save the Dehing Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary, go viral online [22]. Thus, Indian youth climate activists have increased public awareness about the climate crisis and successfully pushed for policy change at local and national levels [17].

1.2. Factors Motivating and Detracting from Youth Climate Activism

Participating in social movements and grassroots organizing can have positive impacts on multiple domains of youth development, which may be motivating for young people to continue their climate activism. For example, through collective action, youth can develop knowledge and skills that are relevant both to organizing and their professional growth [23,24]. Youth value this type of personal growth and recognize it as a positive outcome of their climate activism [8,25]. In addition, seeing tangible achievements as a result of their climate activism can help youth gain a sense of competence [26] and gain
agency in their ability to create collective change [27], which could cause them to sustain their activism. Research with Indian youth engaged in non-climate related causes also shows that through volunteering, youth gain skills and confidence that propel their future civic engagement [6,28].

Regardless of the type of activist cause, social connections with peers within organizations can be a primary motivating factor in youths’ activism [29]. In India, young adults’ sense of community was positively related to their volunteering efforts [30]. Indeed, research shows that young climate activists are motivated in their activism by connecting with like-minded people who have shared values about caring for the environment [8,31]. Peers are an important part of adolescents’ and young adults’ civic development [32] and building a strong community with other civically engaged youth can lead to social connections that may motivate youth to stay engaged [33,34]. Youth may also be inspired by their peers in the broader climate movement in India and internationally.

Youth may also be motivated to continue their climate activism due to personal values and beliefs. For example, young climate activists see themselves as personally responsible for fighting the climate crisis, which they view as a form of intergenerational justice [35], and some young activists view collective action as the only way to mitigate climate change [36]. Youth may also be motivated to take action on behalf of or in solidarity with communities they are not part of but who bear additional unjust burdens of climate change, such as Indigenous communities and those in the Global South [37].

Emotions such as fear, worry, and hope can also be powerful drivers motivating youth to engage in climate activism. Recent non-climate-related scholarship suggests that emotions are a critical part of youth’s process of becoming aware of injustice and feeling a sense of agency to take action [38]. Anger is correlated with young people’s engagement in climate protests in several countries [39,40]. Hope, which is defined both as an emotion and a cognitive process [41], can inspire youth toward collective action for the environment. Two studies qualitatively analyzing India-based environmental nonprofits’ social media accounts found that posts evoked viewers’ emotions by, for instance, utilizing quotations from climate-affected individuals [42] or showing the pain and suffering of animals [43], in an attempt to galvanize people to action.

Climate anxiety, defined as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral impacts of persistent worries about climate change [44] is associated with young activists’ negative wellbeing [45,46] and could be a demotivating factor in young people’s sustained climate activism. A recent survey across 10 countries found that Indian youth reported some of the highest rates of worry about the climate crisis [47]. Whereas some research finds that climate anxiety decreases climate activism, other research suggests that it is a coping response to the reality of the climate crisis and may motivate youth to act [36,48]. Other research finds that collective climate action can buffer against the negative impacts of climate anxiety [49–51].

Finally, there are a number of negative factors youth could experience in the course of their activism, causing them to disengage. For instance, adult activists may face backlash to their activism, which can lead to decreased participation [52] and youth can experience discrimination within activist spaces that harms their wellbeing [53]. Conner and colleagues [9] found that youth activism could cause mental health struggles and burnout, which may cause youth to decrease their activism. The authors identified online backlash to young activists’ efforts as a factor correlating with burnout, although they also noted that a sense of belonging and support from peers could mitigate activist burnout. Indeed, online harassment is an increasing problem for climate activists who use social media, particularly girls [54] and is a particular concern for activists holding minoritized identities across political causes [55,56]. Young women climate activists in India have been subjected to sexist harassment and bullying online [57]. Online harassment of climate activists may be particularly harmful to the movement because social media is the primary context where many youth are learning about climate change and opportunities to mobilize for activism [3].
1.3. Political Repression and Youth Climate Activism

Political repression is defined as “state or private action meant to prevent, control, or constrain noninstitutional, collective action (e.g., protest), including its initiation” [58] (p. 263). Earl’s [59] typology of political repression includes overt repression, such as violence and arrest, as well as covert forms, such as government surveillance. Covert forms of repression, also termed “soft” repression, include stigmatization and labeling of social movement activities [60]. Increasingly, social movements are mobilizing online, and young climate activists in India have an active online presence [61]. More recently, scholars have added digital repression to the typology of political repression [62]. Governments may monitor activist accounts on social media [63] or respond to online activism by stigmatizing and vilifying activists to dismiss their experiences [64]. The threat of political repression to activists’ safety in global South countries is well documented, particularly against Indigenous communities in non-democratic nations (e.g., [65,66]). An area of research that is less explored is how political repression in democracies, particularly “soft” forms of repression such as surveillance, may shape youth climate activism.

An analysis of India’s environmental movements is not complete without a focus on the political context [67]. Historically, the Indian government has used both overt [68] and covert forms of repression [69] in an attempt to quell social movements. As in many countries across the world, India’s democratic government has become more conservative in recent years, and there is a growing trend toward nationalism [70]. Under the current government, there are reports that freedom of the press and speech have been curtailed due to surveillance and arrests, including on social media [71]. For instance, in 2020, when Fridays for Future India members mobilized to protest the Environmental Impact Assessment legislation that would exempt many development projects from government oversight, they found that the Fridays for Future India website had been shut down by the government under an anti-terrorism law (the website was later reinstated) [72]. Similarly, in 2019, a prominent young climate activist, Disha Ravi, was arrested and detained for three months under charges of “terrorism” for sharing Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg’s social media post with a toolkit for peaceful protest [72] and subjected to harassment on social media [57]. In India, arrests targeting young climate activists are seen as retaliation for collective actions against development projects [13,72]. As journalist Adve [72] (paragraph 3) wrote, “The state’s targeting of climate and environmental organisations in recent years is deeply worrying, as is the worldview underlying it: that voicing environmental concerns or... to question environmental damage is to attack the nation-state”. Indian youths’ climate activism must be understood in the context of these political dynamics.

2. The Current Study

Extant research suggests various factors that sustain or detract from youths’ climate activism, ranging from climate anxiety to relationships with peers within the climate movement. However, there is a need for a more cohesive and qualitative exploration of the factors that young activists believe are most salient in sustaining their activism. Most importantly, few of these factors have been researched with Indian youth climate activists, leaving gaps in our knowledge of how best to support Indian youth in sustaining their climate activism to combat a rapidly worsening climate crisis.

3. Methods
3.1. Sample

The sample included 22 young people, ages 14–23 years old, who lived in thirteen different states across India. A little over half (55 percent) of the sample were cisgender men, and the majority (86 percent) lived in urban areas. About half of the youth (55 percent) were Hindu, which was a lower percentage than national statistics, indicating that almost 80 percent of Indians were Hindu [73]. Due to the current political climate in India and the dangers to young climate activists’ safety [72], we chose not to include a table listing each participant’s demographics, as is common in qualitative research. Instead, we have
included overall sample characteristics in Table 1. In the Findings section, participants are referred to by their chosen pseudonym and age range to ensure their confidentiality. Any identifying information such as city or organization name has been removed in youths’ quotes and marked by brackets with a generic descriptor (i.e., [city name]).

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>17–19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>20–23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Christianity</td>
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<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hinduism</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>55%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Islam</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zoroastrianism</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None or agnostic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18%</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic Area</strong></td>
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<tr>
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<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
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<td>86%</td>
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<td>Upper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Recruitment

Youth were recruited through their local Fridays for Future chapter and through snowball sampling. The first author reached out to the Fridays for Future chapter Instagram accounts with a message explaining this study and asking the chapter to share the information on this study with their members. Interested members contacted the first author to indicate their interest and eligibility to participate. The second recruitment method was snowball sampling. Following the interview, participants were offered an additional INR 400 (around USD 5) if they agreed to reach out to a peer, asking them if they were interested in completing an interview. This additional payment was not contingent upon any follow-up action, such as the peer reaching out to the first author or completing the interview.

When the first author contacted or responded to initial messages from potential participants, she first confirmed that their age was between 14 and 23 years old. Any participants under the age of 18 were sent an online parent permission form, and this form was signed before interview scheduling.

3.3. Procedure

Semi-structured virtual interviews lasted around 1 h and were conducted using video or only audio due to connectivity issues during the interview. All interviews were held in English. Participant assent was conducted at the beginning of the interview. During the interview, participants were asked about their journey into climate activism, factors that motivated or demotivated their climate activism once they had already been engaged, and recommendations they had for climate organizations to better support young climate activists like themselves. The majority of interview questions were broad and open-ended
Youth to inductively capture young people’s climate journeys and experiences with changing levels of engagement over time. Some questions probed for upward and downward change, and the interviewer tried to equally emphasize positive and negative valences in asking these questions to avoid bias in any direction. Following the interview, participants were asked for demographic information, including gender, religious background, and family’s economic background.

In the final section of the interview, the interviewer asked participants about how certain factors identified from extant research conducted outside of India on factors influencing changes in youth activism were relevant to participants in this study. Thus, these questions were more deductively derived from the literature. Youth were asked whether the following factors led to changes in their climate activism: social media bullying and harassment; fear for their safety; mental health; identity-based discrimination; seeing an impact, having friends within organizing spaces; and having personal experience with the climate emergency. These factors were only addressed if they had not already come up in the interview. We also used member checking [74] to ask youth to reflect on experiences brought up by other participants in prior interviews. For instance, when one youth mentioned the strong influence of parents on youth climate activism, the interviewer asked subsequent youth whether the first participant’s views resonated with their own experience. The themes identified below in the findings section emerged across the full interview transcripts and not only from the deductively driven questions. Additionally, not all deductive interview questions were reflected in themes. The full interview protocol is reported in Supplemental Materials.

Interviews were audio recorded, and transcriptions were completed by the first and second authors using an online transcription service. Participants were paid INR 1500 (around USD 20) for the interview. As mentioned above, participants received an additional INR 400 (around USD 5) if they agreed to ask a peer if they were interested in participating in the interview. We paid the additional INR 400 based on the participant’s stated intention to ask a peer; we never followed up or required any type of documentation that the participant, in fact, did contact a peer. Providing financial incentives to youth participants in qualitative research is common practice but an understudied topic, particularly in non-Western contexts such as India [75]. We relied on ethical research frameworks suggesting that researchers should compensate participants for their time and effort [76] and decided on an incentive amount that would not unduly influence youth to participate in this study. This study and its procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first and third authors’ universities.

3.4. Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to identify themes, which were conceptualized as patterns of shared meaning [77]. The first step of analysis began during transcription when each of the first two authors took an equal number of interviews to transcribe from interview recordings. Throughout the transcription process, the first two authors met to discuss and document factors influencing changes in youth activism, as well as to begin to identify ways that different ideas might interact. In this analysis, we decided to include both youth’s own experiences, as well as any experiences they described about their peers. For example, several youth described seeing young activists drop out of the climate movement due to parental pressure. These anecdotes were included in this analysis even though they did not represent participants’ own experiences. Once the interviews were transcribed, the first and second authors each reviewed notes and memos from our discussions to develop a set of codes. After two rounds of discussion, we identified some factors as primarily negative and some as primarily positive; we next created a list of codes that included the parent codes “supporting factors” and “detracting factors” as well as child codes within each. These parent codes reflected the a priori concepts of interest in this study. We next both practiced coding the same transcript with this set of codes, making small modifications to reduce overlap and improve coding consistency. For instance, “mental
health” was originally a separate child code from “climate anxiety”, but we realized that youth often discussed the two simultaneously, and, therefore, we merged them into one child code. When satisfied with the codebook, we began applying it to the transcripts and came back together in weekly discussions to continue identifying ideas and patterns in the data.

When all the transcripts were coded, we each analyzed separate codes using memos. This step involved immersing oneself in the code’s data and writing memos on topics such as the researchers’ process of identifying ideas and themes within the code, ideas that came up in coding, how the researchers’ own identities and experiences may factor into this process, and how this code might interact with other codes. After two rounds of discussion about these memos, we next completed the same process with co-occurring codes that we had identified in the prior step. Once we had created memos for each code and several different code co-occurrences, we re-read through the corpus of our memos to write memos identifying broader themes. We then discussed these themes with the third author to formalize broader patterns and concepts in the data. Through this process, we identified different kinds of factors and how they related to changes in youth activism.

Once this manuscript was written, all youth were contacted again to confirm that the quotes selected did not reveal any identifying information and that they agreed with the way their quotes were presented. Youth were sent their quote(s) alongside some text from the publication so they could view their quotes in context. Two changes were made: Lee changed his quote in the climate anxiety section from worrying about only his family members to worrying about a broad range of people affected by the climate crisis, and Aditi changed their quote from being focused on social media engagement to how they increased their climate activism on all platforms in response to climate anxiety.

4. Findings

First, we identified two factors that we termed “gatekeeping” factors that prevented youth from joining the movement or caused them to quit activism entirely: these were lack of family support and financial pressures. We identified two detracting factors (negative interactions with the government and online and in-person bullying and harassment), four supporting factors (sense of community, internal motivations, seeing tangible achievements, and personal growth), and one factor (climate anxiety) that had mixed effects on both sustaining and detracting from youth climate activism. Further, we describe ways in which youth holding minoritized identities, including lower-income, Muslim, and rural youth, had distinct experiences related to sustaining their climate activism.

4.1. Gatekeeping Factors in Youth-Sustained Climate Activism

Lack of family support. Youth explained that a lack of parental support could prevent them from engaging in climate activism in the first place. Aman explained that “most of the parents will not let them [high schoolers] do any extracurricular activities... There’s a lot of parental pressure, which is stopping activism”. Even when youth were not financially dependent on their parents, a lack of family support could cause youth to disengage quickly from the climate movement. As Jai said, “A lot of our [university] students... their parents are [like] “what the hell you are doing”... so they are not having support from their parents, and their priority is studying so they left”. Youth explained that many families urged their children to focus on their academics and careers instead of voluntary work.

Financial pressures. Youth said that climate activism was expensive; they paid for their own transportation and the cost of materials. Youth reported that these costs kept lower-income youth out of the climate movement, who also had to weigh the opportunity cost of their activism against earning money. Aman explained that “there are many people who join our cause, ... and then they just leave because you know, in the end, getting a job is more important... they have to earn money”.
4.2. Sustaining Factors in Youth Climate Activism

“It feels like we are a family”: Sense of community.

Community supported youth activism at the interpersonal, organizational, and global levels. At the interpersonal level, the community supports youth through friendships and mentors. Participants shared that the friends they made through Fridays for Future were more than acquaintances or peers but were people they considered very close or even, in some cases, family. Some youth had co-founded their local FFF chapter with friends or had recruited their friends to join the chapter. For these youth, having friends in the organization gave them a sense of responsibility and motivation to continue.

At the organizational level, many participants welcomed the chance to meet like-minded individuals who shared a passion for the environment and finding solutions to combat climate change. As Bellum@ said, “Friday’s for future, I feel like we are not a team. It feels like we are a family”. Aman explained that “all the people there were also climate conscious. That is why they were there. And our thoughts and our goals resonated a lot. So, that was also a factor for me to stick by”. Having a community of like-minded youth activists was particularly powerful for youth who had felt isolated in their activism. Dao explained:

Initially, I should think that I’m the only one person in this entire world who is doing all this, because I don’t have similar people around me. So I had that feeling of alienation. But now when I go with Fridays for Future, or now when I go with youth groups, it’s just so fun to see, like, you know, people are there, people are actually working, people are so aware. So that kind of, I mean that feeling is something which I really, really cherish most in my life. And that is what I get out of being in this climate movement.

By working alongside and forming meaningful relationships with other youth who cared deeply about the climate, youth reported a sense of belonging that kept them motivated to continue their activism despite challenges.

Youth reported that seeing the dedication of the climate movement community at India-wide and international levels, particularly a growth in numbers and support, was inspiring and supported their continued climate activism. Kabir explained that “one thing that motivates me the most is the growing numbers. About how in every protest, successful protest, I see the numbers growing. And when I see the social media reach of our chapters and how they grow each day, then I feel maybe it is not hopeless”. Indeed, Kabir noted that after he had a “disappointing” event happen in his activism, “when I see young activists enthusiastic about continuing the protest or restarting the protest. I again [think], you know, alright, let’s do it”. Other youth were motivated by the collective power of the international climate movement. Advit explained that “change is coming. People are waking up. This tagline most motivated me. Yeah, I was talking about Greta Thunberg’s [How Dare You] speech that motivated, mostly motivated me”. Thus, seeing momentum in the broader climate movement and being inspired by other young climate activists motivated youth to continue their climate activism.

“If not us, then who?”: Internal motivations.

Internal motivations included a sense of personal responsibility, hope in the power of collective change, and sociocultural values. In contrast to the previous theme, where youth described the power of community and the climate movement as an extrinsic motivator of their activism, in this theme, we describe intrinsic motivations that were part of youths’ personal philosophies around climate activism and social change, and that supported their continued engagement despite detracting factors.

Youth reported that their continued climate activism resulted from a sense of personal responsibility for saving the world from the climate crisis. Youth shared a widespread perception that previous generations of adults had failed them and that the world was on the precipice of mass extinction. Because of adults’ failure, as well as the urgency of the crisis, youth felt that solving climate change—and ensuring the future of humanity—was in their hands. Bellum@ noted this sense of responsibility when he explained that
“we [youth] shouldn’t be doing, this should be the responsibility of our parents, like of our older generation, okay, but they are not doing so like, we have to do this. We don’t have any choice”. Many youth felt that they were the last ones who could save humanity, and used the phrase, “If not us, then who?” to describe what kept them going in their climate activism. For these youth, climate activism was a means of survival. For example, Aliya said she continued her climate activism despite challenges “because there’s no other choice”. She went on to explain:

If we don’t do it, who else will? You know, there’s literally like, it’s our future, right? And I think it’s mostly because we care, and there’s no one else to do it if we don’t do it. So I would say, that’s what motivates us. Sometimes we become exhausted and burn out, we take a break, but then we come back, because we care for our future.

The urgency of the situation and the necessity of their survival, combined with adults’ failure to take action, created the sense that youth were left on their own. This feeling was encapsulated by Angelina, who stated, “I think it’s very important to get motivated on your own because nobody’s gonna do it for you. Nobody’s gonna save you from the disasters which are coming up”. As seen in the above examples, while this sense of responsibility was motivating for youth’s activism, it was also associated with detrimental impacts on their mental health. Therefore, our conceptualization of a “sustaining factor” is related strictly to its impacts on youth climate activism and does not have a valence with respect to being a positive or negative factor for young people.

Finally, youth described sociocultural values, often developed in childhood through family members, that supported their continued commitment to climate activism. For example, Kash explained how the concept of karma motivated his climate activism, “I guess the one thing which managed to help me do more is my grandmother, because she taught me those values, those morals, your doing is your karma… So if I do good with people, and you know, have that vision that helping these people, I’m going out of the way to help people”. Aman described how Islam shaped his beliefs around climate activism, “We are told from a very small age, that everything, all the resources on this earth is a gift from God. And you have to honor that gift, even wasting a drop of water is a considerable sin in Islam… Yes, being Muslim has really shaped my overall and core values. Also in activism as well”. Riya was inspired by her ancestors, who modeled environmental stewardship and motivated her to continue in her activism for future generations, “Actually, our ancestors used all this natural resources very properly and carefully. That’s why we are using all these natural resources. So now it’s our time to keep it safe for our next generation, that they can also use it”. Thus, sociocultural values developed through family members and religious beliefs supported youth in continuing their activism.

“I have dropped some impact on my own“: Tangible achievements.

Seeing a tangible impact was important in helping youth overcome doubts about the efficacy of their activism, particularly when peers, family members, and societal expectations pressured them to decrease their activism and focus on academics or their careers. First, youth reported being motivated to sustain their activism by being able to change the climate views and behaviors of people around them. This form of impact rewarded youth in their repeated efforts to raise awareness about the climate emergency and change how people acted at the individual level, such as recycling and avoiding plastic. A common characteristic of the experiences described by the participants was the repeated effort it took to convince or change the perspective of others, specifically at the family and peer level. Brad described how he would “constantly poke” his father to bring reusable bags to the market, to no avail. Finally, one day, his father showed him all the reusable bags he was bringing. For Brad, this experience showed him that “we have to keep trying till the point like people actually believe in this stuff you are doing”, and he cited this example when asked about what kept him going despite the challenges he faced. For other youth, social media was the main context for their climate activism, and they felt a tangible impact when they received messages and comments of affirmation from followers. As Varun explained:
I do have a folder called Don’t Quit. And it has sort of messages that people have
given me on [social media]. There are so many people who text me that they
have been inspired from what I talk about, what I tell people to do, and they have
adopted change. So surely there is some, even if it’s a very small impact, I have
dropped some impact on my own… and that is actually the motivation that you
need that if you have done that much work, you can do a lot more than that if
you are determined to go ahead.

Thus, seeing the impact of their efforts to change the climate views or behaviors
of people around them was a powerful motivator that encouraged youth to continue
their activism.

Other participants reported that seeing the successful completion of an initiative led
to a feeling of pride or accomplishment that they had created substantial change with
their activism. Many youth brought up a feeling of achievement from tree plantation
drives or river clean-ups. Other youth were encouraged by seeing the impact that they
personally had on an initiative. For instance, Kash described feeling motivated by being
able to single-handedly put together a successful strike:

So this last time strike, I was doing it alone… I was handling media and I
was conversing people alone, campaigning alone… And I tend to pull [several
hundred] people on the strike in [city name], which is a great number… these
are small things, which, you know, keep me motivated.

For many youth, seeing the tangible impact of their activism through successfully
completing initiatives—whether in the form of plantation drives, strikes, or other projects—
motivated them to continue through challenges. For both forms of seeing a tangible impact,
youth derived a sense of pride from being able to distinguish their own personal impact as
instrumental for the success of the initiative.

“I’ve learned much more in these two years than I’ve learned in school”: Personal
growth.

Youth described personal growth as developing skills and knowledge in ways that
furthered their own personal development. We identified two primary aspects of youths’
personal growth that often happened in sequence: gaining knowledge about the climate
emergency prior to engaging with a climate organization, and then building skills and
applying their knowledge through climate activism. Youth highly valued the personal
growth they gained through activism work and described it as one of the reasons they
continued their work.

Gaining knowledge was a primary motivator for youth. Shreshti explained, “The most
meaningful thing [about climate activism], you know, for me, personally, has been gaining
knowledge about a lot of stuff”. Many youth reported a self-education process about the
climate emergency that propelled them to deepen their activism by raising awareness
(usually also online) and then joining climate organizations where they expanded their
knowledge and learned new skills. For instance, Angelina described her journey of first
educating herself about the climate emergency online, then using her social media account
“as a weapon” to raise awareness, and then being motivated to join a climate organization
where she gained leadership skills:

I started studying about it [climate change] … [through] online sessions where
I can learn more about this activism and make people aware about the [same].
And yes, that’s what kept me going… And then I slowly use my social media
as a weapon, as a tool to learn and to gather more about this thing. So started
writing blogs… And then I started working for Friday’s for Future.

Youth described climate activism as interlinked with their development over the
course of adolescence and young adulthood. For example, Brad shared that initially, he
was a shy person but that through climate activism and the support of mentors within the
organization, he gained skills that bolstered his self-esteem, “I was a very shy person to be
honest in school… And I used to be mocked and bullied by some particular people… I
used to be very scared of all the things like I was socially very inactive. But through Fridays for Future I met people who had the similar passion like me, and who were concerned for the same purpose, they were very supportive, like every person. Brad spoke highly of another climate activist who had mentored him and given him opportunities to practice public speaking and leadership. In this way, the subtheme of personal growth sometimes overlaps with a sense of community. Other youth noted that climate activism supported their career development; Joshua explained that “getting involved in the process of climate activism really made me interested in environmental law, and in environmental policy. And that was probably something I would like to, you know, make a career in.”

Finally, youth reported that climate activism was an engaging journey of discovery that allowed them to exercise their full and unique potential. As Lee noted, “[Through climate activism] I got a platform to actually use my intelligence and all that I had. And something that is not limiting me. And I could add more and more of myself into it”. Youth appreciated the ability to gain new experiences and to learn from both successes and failures. Varun noted that “it [my climate activism] increased because all these success and failures in the activism, teach a lot. These are all experiences and new experiences come with lots of new values and teachings so you can be better and be stronger next time and be more are organized for your movements, or all the activism you’re doing”. Because of the learnings and skills youth built in the course of their climate activism, they were motivated to continue even when faced with challenges.

4.3. Factors Detracting from Youth Climate Activism

“They actually don’t think that climate change is an issue”: Government corruption, apathy, and betrayal.

Although government corruption did not cause a decrease in youths’ overall level of climate activism, it significantly altered their strategy, reducing their attempts to engage in policy change. Riya, who had personally experienced local government corruption, said that her dream was “to do something without taking part in politician [politics]”. In addition to seeing the government as corrupt, many youth viewed the government as too slow and ineffective to be a viable activism strategy to meet the urgent needs of climate change. Even when laws were passed, they often were not enforced. As Aman shared, “It’s not the problem of policies, the problem is actually of implementation here”. Multiple youth described laws the government had passed, such as plastic bans, which were not actually enforced. Because of perceptions of government corruption and inefficacy, many youth reported avoiding working with the government in their climate activism.

When youth interacted directly with the government through their climate activism, they described facing a lack of support due to government apathy. Making politicians care about and prioritize climate issues was a constant struggle for youth. Angelina noted that “some [politicians] appreciate the effort. But actually, they have bigger things to do. And they actually don’t think that climate change is an issue right now”. Even youth like Joshua, who described the political environment for climate activists in his state as “more supportive”, described meeting elected officials as “simply as a token of just getting it over with. Simply as just extending a hand of courtesy rather than treating it as an urgent matter”. Aliya said that when the government ignored all of her and other activists’ hard work and research, “it feels like you know, sometimes we feel hopeless like why are we even doing this? Like does it actually help?” Thus, over time, government apathy—both about the climate crisis and towards youths’ climate activism—could discourage youth in their climate activism.

Youth who had interfaced with the government in their climate activism also described being demotivated by political betrayal, whether by promises politicians never followed through on or misleading statements politicians made about their commitment to climate change. Advit explained that political betrayal was harmful to his mental health, “[politicians] are saying global warming is real and we have to do that, but on another side they are developing and implementing a coastal development project that will that will intense
the intensity of flooding”. He continued to say that when he sees this happen on the news, “[I] take a break for an hour or I switch off my phone and go to sleep, and do nothing. Sometimes I cry for a while. Because I can’t do anything”. Political betrayal was a difficult experience for youth and can have significant negative impacts on their wellbeing and their climate activism.

“Even if you think something they’re just going to arrest you”: Political repression. Thus far, we have described how youths’ perceptions of and experiences working with the government—particularly government corruption, apathy, and betrayal—could shape youth climate activism. However, we categorized these experiences as distinct from political repression because the government was not focusing specifically on preventing, controlling, or restraining youth climate activism, as per Earl’s (2011) definition. In contrast, the following section describes how political repression, in the form of both overt and covert government repression that specifically targeted the climate movement and individual climate activists, impacted youths’ motivation to continue their climate activism as well as their mental health and wellbeing.

First, youth reported overt political repression by the government stigmatizing climate activism work and labeling the climate movement a threat to peaceful democracy. Youth reported that the government used terms such as “anti-nationalist” and “anti-development” to describe climate activism. Advit said that in his city, the government “[is] trying to go through this [development] project, they’re working more hard to spread their propaganda that we [youth activists] are against development and all”. When the government began stigmatizing climate activists in this way, there could be serious repercussions in the form of harassment and even arrests, described further in this section. Furthermore, youth explained that being labeled anti-national was not only dangerous in the short-term; it could affect their long-term career prospects and personal lives. Angelina explained that “this is the most negative part here I faced in my activism, and sometimes it feels like that I shouldn’t do it if such things are happening, even sometimes my family is even afraid that you’re getting such you know, threats from these people, they are quite resourceful and that should affect your career”.

One way government stigmatization of climate activism affected youth was by limiting their opportunity for peaceful protest. For example, several youth reported having difficulties obtaining permission from city officials for peaceful protests. Shresthi explained:

Once you get into activism, you know, specifically in India, the government considers you as you are their enemy or something. Because your activism has a very different meaning... it’s always considered as protest because here in India, whenever you do any sort of peaceful demonstration... then you require you to take permission from the city magistrate.

Even though in India peaceful protests are legal, youth often face challenges in exercising their democratic right to protest due to government officials’ perceptions that they would become violent.

Fear of arrest was one of the most frequently mentioned detracting factors for youths’ climate activism and came up in nearly all the interviews. In general, youth were afraid to strike and engage in other forms of peaceful protest for fear of being arrested. In particular, youth brought up the case of Disha Ravi, which had a significant and negative impact on climate activism across India. As mentioned earlier, Disha Ravi is a young climate activist, who was arrested by the government under terrorism charges for sharing a toolkit for peaceful protest online. Youth described how Ravi and other young climate activists’ arrests, as well as government stigmatization of Ravi and other climate activists as “anti-national”, had significantly decreased youths’ engagement in the climate movement across the country. Dao noted:

That definitely slowed the entire climate movement in India down. I mean, there are people doing their best on local level. But still, I mean, like, whatever an entire nation could do together. That definitely has went dormant. And because Friday’s for future, the name was attached to her. Most of parents have also
stopped, like, you know, supporting their children when they’re doing this. And
yeah, as I said, parents play a very important part in the child’s life or rather
an Indian child’s life... And then you know, we stopped associating us with
Friday’s for future for a few months... Because see it’s a big deal, because honor
and respect. And if you’re going to go in jail, your parents would literally be, like,
so angry on you and... when it comes to like, the overall movement, I’m sure
that many of people definitely left the movement.

As we explored in the section on family support, parents are integral and founda-
tional supports for youths’ climate activism. Thus, the government’s repression of climate
activism through arrest and stigmatization as anti-national was a significant detractor to
youths’ climate activism and their wellbeing.

In addition to impacts on the broader climate movement, youth described how the
threat of arrest negatively impacted their wellbeing. Aliya reported that several climate
activists she knew had been arrested and noted how discouraging and mentally draining
it was for her, “It’s taking a lot of toll because you know, it’s getting too much political,
friends are getting arrested and all, that’s why it’s a bit demotivating. It mentally drains
you”. A sense of fear was palpable throughout the interviews. According to Bellum®,
he and other young climate activists are “still starting to recover from that phase what
happened with the Disha Ravi. It really shook all of us when this thing happened... we
still try to you know, stay as far as we can from politicians you know, there’s a fear of
politicians all of us from after that”. In contrast to other countries such as the U.S., where
holding people in power accountable is a central activist strategy, youth like Abhishek said
activists in India “try to avoid taking specific names from the government” because they
know “what they are capable of... how much power they have, how much they control”.

A last, covert form of political repression was through government surveillance of
youths’ activities, both in-person and online. Because youth described heavily utilizing
social media to disseminate information and mobilize others, government surveillance of
their accounts could be a significant detracting factor in their activism. Youth like Reggo
stated that activists were “extremely discreet with our identities, especially while giving
interviews while talking to people, and while also chatting on [online] groups”. Lee said
that in his state, all the climate activists “know our [phone] numbers are with the CID
[Criminal Investigative Department] and Intelligence Bureau. So they can keep a check on
us whenever they want”. Youth reported having changed their communication strategies
with each other as a result. Without going into detail here to protect activists’ work, Aliya
explained that “online, it’s not always safe, because you know, they’re always spying on us.
And it’s really not safe in India, especially now, even if you think something they’re just
going to arrest you, whatever it is. So it has helped us be more, you know, more concerned
with security, like how we communicate”.

“What is the point of doing all this?”: Bullying, Harassment, and Verbal Abuse.

When youth directly interacted with members of society, they sometimes encountered
bullying, harassment, and verbal abuse that was detrimental to their wellbeing and activism.
One of the main contexts where youth experienced bullying and harassment was on social
media. Almost all youth posted about their climate activism online, either through their
own personal accounts or through organizational accounts such as Fridays for Future.
Youth rely on social media to increase awareness of the climate crisis and to mobilize others
for their cause, but the public space of social media can also enable targeted bullying.
Katniss said that bullying on social media could “get ugly”, and Varun noted:

I’ve seen posts and even sometimes my own post where things got really out of
hand, and people get abusive for no reason, because it’s just the climate denial... So
yes, it gets really, it gets really sad and demotivating that even after your
efforts, even after you’re trying to speak up for truth, this is happening and
people are not believing. And instead, they are trying to defame you or they’re
trying to demotivate you.
The bullying on social media could be particularly negative for youth holding minoritized religious identities in India. Angelina described how she received additional, more targeted harassment online intersected because she was Muslim, “people started writing down hate comments that you’re a Muslim, you’re this, you’re this... it makes me feel post less, because I’m trying to speak up but the people who are watching my post, people who are actually, you know, stalking the profiles and everything”. When Angelina received these types of threats, she temporarily reduced her climate activism online.

In addition to social media, youth reported bullying and harassment when they participated in street actions such as strikes and trash clean-ups, which were common activities for many youth in the FFF movement. Some youth said that members of the general public would make fun of them, calling them garbage men or street sweepers. Aman explained, “Some people tease the activists, they say, they use words like you know, kulawallah, which is basically garbage man, and other such degrading titles for many activists, they say that on social media [and] they say that to people’s faces when they’re cleaning up [the streets]”. Others like Brad reported that people would fight with him when he encouraged them to use reusable cloth bags instead of plastic, which he described as “one of the demotivating factors” in his activism. Others reported that people would mock their efforts as being ineffective. Aman said: “people also comment, What is the point of doing all this? What are you gaining out of it? . . . That also affects us”. Broadly, youth reported encountering remarks from people they did not know that mocked their efforts, created a hostile environment for volunteering activities, and cast doubt on youths’ ability to create change. Thus, in addition to harming youths’ wellbeing, societal bullying, harassment, and verbal abuse could be a demotivator for their climate activism work.

“[It’s] one of the worst aspects of being a climate activist”: Climate anxiety. Youth acknowledged climate anxiety as an issue that affected most climate activists, and even youth who reported that they had not experienced climate anxiety referenced it as a detractor for others. As Katniss said, “Climate anxiety really exists. And it’s quite difficult. And one of the worst aspects of being a climate activist”. Although most youth quoted in this section used the term “climate anxiety”, we identified differences in how youth described the term. Therefore, the following paragraphs attempt to differentiate two forms of climate anxiety that youth described and how they shaped youths’ level of climate activism.

The first form of climate anxiety youth described was prompted by the worsening state of the climate crisis. Whether due to direct experience with the climate crisis, seeing natural disasters on the news, or learning about wildlife and nature being harmed, youth reported feeling anxious about the climate crisis. Angelina stated, “When I think of the future ahead, I’m constantly in a state of fear. When I see the air quality each morning, worsening day by day, I think of what I’m reading and question whether even I am safe at the comfort of my own home”. In particular, youth worried that their family members would be affected by climate change. Lee said, “I have some younger nephews and nieces. [But] it’s not because of merely my kin affected, more of what I can’t stand is the farmers, people working at the frontlines, their children, being the first and most affected when any crisis occurs, same with the climate crisis, also being their livelihoods directly connected to climate”. In addition to worrying about the world’s current population, youth also expressed anxiety over how worsening climate change might impact future generations. “What are future generation will get from us?” Riya said. “We have to plant trees, that in future they will get fruits and all oxygen and all from that. But we are doing nothing for them”. Many youth described an almost constant state of anxiety over the worsening state of the climate.

Anxiety over the worsening state of the climate crisis had mixed supporting and detracting effects on youths’ climate activism. Several youth explained that even witnessing secondhand news of the climate crisis, usually through social media, could lead to short-term decreases in their activism. Kash, who felt a particular connection to ocean life, explained that “I get burned out because I feel like any maritime loss or any disaster
happen I feel like a personal connection towards it... So I tend to take break. So in that point, engagement goes down”. However, climate anxiety about the worsening crisis could also motivate youth to increase their engagement in the climate movement. Aditi explained that when they felt more climate anxiety, they increased some aspects of their climate activism, “When I’m feeling... more climate anxious, then I write and reach out to people through creating climate justice-centric work... the amount of time I spend being anxious about the crisis and the amount of time my mind is able to work... that’s what keeps fluctuating but the passion that I feel is level, throughout. The anxiety sometimes helps fuel that passion into work”. Thus, this first form of climate anxiety, focused on worry about the worsening state of the climate crisis, seemed to have mixed impacts on youths’ climate activism.

A second form of climate anxiety was worry and discouragement over whether youth were making an impact with their climate activism. Although this concept could be equated with activist burnout, it is important to note that youth used the term climate anxiety to talk about this phenomenon of becoming discouraged after not seeing a tangible impact. Magnum explained this type of anxiety through an analogy with school work, “If I have an exam upcoming, and if I know that I will fail and still I’m working on it, it’s pretty obvious that I’ll get depressed and anxious. The same way that happens with the activists as well. We know that we’re working hard, but if there’s no change it won’t make a difference”. For some youth, this second form of climate anxiety built off the first—in other words, because of youths’ worry about the worsening state of the climate crisis, when they didn’t see change happening quickly enough, it could compound the effects of the first form of climate anxiety. Katniss described this dynamic, where she could be motivated to increase her climate activism due to anxiety over the worsening state of the climate crisis, but then could also feel discouraged and demotivated when not seeing a tangible impact:

It [climate anxiety] has affected my level [of activism]. And sometimes it motivates me because anxiety is for a reason. It exists for a reason, right? It’s a fight or flight response. So realizing that situations are dire and something needs to be done, motivates me a lot of the times, but when the work doesn’t get done, when we’re not able to mobilize people as effectively, when we’re not able to see as much change as there should be, then it kind of demotivates us too. So it’s really about this complex balance of maintaining enough motivation, and maintaining enough hopefulness and positiveness to be able to just push through it all.

Thus, not seeing an impact was a detracting factor in youths’ activism, and could exacerbate the negative effects of the first form of climate anxiety, which was worry over the worsening state of the climate crisis and its impacts.

4.4. Youth Holding Marginalized Identities Face Additional Detractors to Their Climate Activism

During the interviews, youth brought up experiences of marginalization based on class, religion, age, rural location, and Indigenous identity. Interestingly, gender did not come up as a marginalized identity in this study. This section briefly summarizes youths’ descriptions of marginalization within the climate movement to identify pathways for future research to explore.

The most commonly marginalized identity that youth discussed was related to class. Youth explained that climate activism was costly; they paid for their own transportation to meetings and events, and because Fridays for Future does not accept donations, members paid for any additional costs out of their own pockets. Youth explained that the lack of compensation or reimbursement kept lower- and middle-class youth out of the climate movement. Reggo explained that for activists who did not come from upper class backgrounds, they “eventually have to make a choice” whether they could continue with activism or had to find a job. Further, youth explained that the climate movement was disconnected from entire working-class communities, such as fishing communities, who were often most directly impacted by climate change and government development projects.
Youth also brought up marginalization and discrimination based on religious identity. For instance, Angelina described harassment she experienced online, where people questioned how she could be Muslim and a climate activist because she ate meat. Several youth tied religious discrimination against Muslims to the recent turn toward Hindu nationalism in India. Aman explained that there is a lot of “Islamophobic propaganda” in India and that, as a result, “many Muslims, they feel like they have responsibility, they have to do a little bit extra, you know, than the majority to cement their nationalism. . . to cement that they are, you know, they belong here”. In this way, youth holding minoritized religious identities were subject to distinct forms of harassment and discrimination related to their climate activism.

Most youth in this study lived in urban areas, and many acknowledged that rural youth were usually unable to join the climate movement. “One of my major critiques of the Fridays for future movement was that it’s largely been very urban centric”, Joshua explained. “The movement in a way remains concentrated mostly within urban areas, cities and towns, and for a lot of the people who, in a way, weren’t really being able to reach out”. Indeed, few rural youth described challenges of becoming involved with their local Fridays for Future chapter because they were not able to travel for meetings and events. Unlike urban youth, who could join meetings virtually, Riya explained that in her village, there was little access to the internet, “In village everyone has no online, means everyone has no mobile and all, so it’s not possible to take meetings online”. A closely aligned form of identity-based marginalization was of Indigenous and tribal peoples in India, who often lived in more rural areas. Youth explained that Indigenous communities were often most directly impacted by climate change but were not often included in the climate movement. Joshua stated that often climate activists “speak on behalf” of Indigenous communities, which effectively means “co-opting someone else’s articulation of the problem that they are facing”. In this way, both rural and Indigenous communities appeared to be marginalized in the climate movement in India.

5. Discussion

This study used inductive qualitative methods with a sample of highly engaged young climate activists to explore, in young people’s own words, factors that shaped their continued engagement in the climate movement. Prior research has identified a variety of factors that might sustain or detract from young people’s climate activism, such as climate anxiety [48] and a desire to further their personal growth and development [8]. Our study extends this research by shedding light on the complex ways that these factors can shape young people’s climate activism in India, particularly by complicating the distinction between factors that detract from and support youth climate activism. Further, this study highlights young climate activists’ agency in choosing how to respond to these factors—for example, by shifting their activist strategies to avoid working with an increasingly repressive government. Below, we further discuss the factors that sustained youth climate activism.

Similar to prior research (e.g., [8]), our study shows that personal growth and a sense of community are powerful factors in motivating and sustaining youth climate activism. Further, we show that seeing a tangible achievement from climate activism can sustain youth engagement, particularly when they are discouraged by challenges such as harassment. This finding demonstrates that seeing tangible achievements, in addition to motivating youth activism [26], may be a buffer against negative experiences youth may face in the course of their engagement. Further, our findings align with prior literature finding that hope is a powerful emotion motivating youth’s engagement in the climate movement [41]; however, in our study, youth described hope in the power of collective action to mitigate the crisis. This conceptualization differs from prior literature that views hope either as cognitive (e.g., incorporating a sense of self-efficacy and agency) or emotional (e.g., as a feeling that the climate crisis can somehow be mitigated) [41]. In our study, youth described hope as both cognitive and emotional, as they believed in the
power of collective action (cognitive) and the possibility, however dim, of mitigating the climate crisis (emotional).

Further, this study aligns with prior scholarship’s mixed findings on how climate anxiety affects youth’s climate activism. We show that climate anxiety both instigates \([78–80]\) and detracts from climate activism \([48,81]\) and, therefore, cannot be easily placed into a supporting or detracting category. We join scholars in calling for additional research into how climate anxiety affects young activists’ wellbeing, particularly youth from underserved communities that are facing the most immediate impacts of the climate crisis, and in preparing resources for the inevitable climate anxiety that all youth will feel as the climate crisis continues to deepen \([48]\).

5.1. Implications for the Climate Movement

This study has implications for how climate organizations can support and sustain their member’s activism. For instance, our findings that youth value seeing tangible achievements from their activism is in line with scholarship showing how seeing the direct impact of their activism can inspire feelings of pride and accomplishment that motivate youth to continue \([6,28,32]\). In our study, youth highlighted that seeing even small achievements—like convincing a stranger to use a reusable bag at the market or receiving an encouraging message about their activism-related posts on social media—could give them the motivation they needed to continue. Social media was cited as a powerful tool to build a sense of collective efficacy to combat climate change, particularly when centering accomplishments by young people and emphasizing the power of the international movement. Importantly, the findings also make clear that many youth feel dispirited and discouraged about the government’s apathy and lack of support for their climate activism. In order to address India’s climate crisis, the government must be less punitive toward and more responsive to youth climate activism, and seek ways to include them in policymaking related to climate change. Despite the lack of support from many government officials, young climate activists are using their agency and collective action to combat the barriers they face and work toward large-scale climate solutions. Non-government organizations (NGOs) could authentically partner with and support the work of youth climate activists in India to continue to identify and mitigate barriers to their climate activism. For instance, the Farm2Food Foundation, Commutiny’s Changelooms initiative, and the Youth Parliament Foundation all build young people’s capacity to organize their communities to respond to the climate crisis.

5.2. Expanding Research with Young Climate Activists

Extant scholarship on youth climate activism predominantly centers on white, wealthy youth from countries in the Global North \([5]\). This study highlights the importance of India’s unique socio-historical, cultural, and political context in shaping young people’s climate activism. For instance, research in the Global North describes pressuring the government as a primary goal for young climate activists (e.g., \([78,82]\)), and measures of youth climate activism include items about engaging in protest and contacting government officials \([83]\). Yet participants in our study emphasized that India’s current political environment makes it difficult, and even dangerous, for youth to pressure the government. Youth faced barriers in protesting, highlighting that future scholarship with young climate activists—even in democracies such as India—must not assume that working with the government is a realistic, safe, or efficacious strategy to mitigate the climate crisis. Indeed, FFF India’s stated goal is not to pressure the government but to reduce India’s greenhouse gas emissions by organizing campaigns, seminars, and marches aimed at raising awareness among other young people \([84]\). Although many FFF India chapters have achieved policy change and helped to halt government development projects that would harm the environment, emerging scholarship highlights the unique challenges Indian youth climate activists face in more radical and political forms of activism due to the political context \([3,17]\).
Further, our findings on gatekeeping factors in youth climate activism (family support and financial pressures), as well as the role of sociocultural values in youth’s sustained activism, point to the importance of broadening scholarship to include youth outside of the Global North [85,86]. Youth emphasized that in India, compared with the U.S., parents are more likely to prioritize their children’s academic and career success and have a larger say in their extracurricular activities, which aligns with prior research on parent pressure and academic stress in India [87] and Indian parent’s prioritization of their children’s career [88].

Finally, prior scholarship explores marginalized youth’s engagement in climate activism, highlighting how classism ([89] and racism [90] are built into the climate movement. Indigenous youth across regions are particularly impacted by and employ unique strategies to counter the climate crisis [48,91]. In our study, youth raised issues of equity and marginalization within the climate movement that extend this literature. For instance, youth reported that structural barriers prevented rural youth from engaging in the urban-centered FFF movement. Further, Muslim youth reported higher rates of harassment, especially on social media, and fear of political repression due to increasing Islamophobia in India. Again, these findings highlight the importance of conducting research in countries outside of the Global North to identify how marginalization operates differently in countries depending on socio-historical, political, and cultural contexts.

6. Future Research

Our study highlights pathways for future research with climate activists in India to explore how to best sustain their activism. First, youth described climate anxiety as an issue they should resolve on their own without seeking support. This view may reflect broader stigmatization of mental health in India [92], and additional scholarship with Indian youth to explore their climate anxiety is important to develop culturally relevant interventions to mitigate climate anxiety. Second, research is needed to explore the unique experiences and marginalization of Muslim, rural, lower-income, and Indigenous youth in India and how the climate movement can better incorporate and amplify their important contributions. Finally, future research could more deeply examine the linkages between young climate activists’ mental health and wellbeing and their sustained activism.

7. Limitations

A primary limitation of this study was that all youth were highly engaged in the climate movement. Therefore, we are unable to form conclusions about what might cause youth to cease their climate activism (although we were able to point to some directions for future research based on what youth witnessed in their peers). Second, interviews were all conducted in English. Indians who speak English are likely more educated than their peers. A related third constraint is that youth in this study were all recruited from FFF chapters, where much of the organizations’ discussions were held in English. Although there is no research on the demographics of FFF India members, it is likely that youth engaged in this organization tend to be more socioeconomically privileged than their peers (and indeed, several youth noted this fact in the interviews). Therefore, this study can only draw conclusions about youth engaged in the FFF movement, who are likely wealthier and more educated than the average young person. Fourth, parts of our interview protocol probed for young people’s experiences with specific supporting and detracting factors that were identified from extant literature. These questions were asked at the end of the interview after youth had described the factors that supported or detracted from their climate activism. We made this methodological choice to ensure that our interviews could speak to the existing literature in terms of young Indian climate activists’ experiences on different concepts of focus. However, this choice may have skewed our findings toward these particular factors, such as experiencing discrimination or climate anxiety, and underestimated other factors. Qualitative analyses are not meant to be generalizable, yet our interviews with 22 young people certainly cannot capture all of the variability in Indian youths’ experiences of the climate movement.
8. Conclusions

At a time when the world is facing a rapidly worsening climate emergency, young Indian climate activists are mobilizing to create a better world for their families, communities, and future generations. Despite facing considerable challenges, including harassment and climate anxiety, youth are making critical advances in fighting the climate crisis, from resisting deforestation projects to educating and arming the next generation of children with information to mitigate the climate emergency. Activists holding marginalized identities, particularly Muslim, low-income, and rural young people, are working especially hard to continue their climate activism despite structural barriers. It is critical for the climate movement, scholars, educators, and others to understand how best to support these young people’s important work.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/youth4030078/s1, Interview Protocol.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.W. and L.W.-L.; methodology, S.W. and L.W.-L.; data collection, S.W.; analysis, S.W., A.R., and L.W.-L.; writing—original draft preparation, S.W. and A.R.; writing—review and editing, S.W., A.R. and L.W.-L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the North General IRB (at UCLA) (protocol code IRB#22-000898 and approved on 1 August 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: For participant’s safety and confidentiality, data from this study are not publicly available.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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