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The New York Times

INTERNATIONAL EDITION | THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 2025

Prolonged exposure to hot weather can hinder people's ability to lead safe and productive lives, experts say.

By Anupreeta Das Visuals by Anindito Mukherjee

Anupreeta Das spoke to farm workers, waste collectors and garment stitchers in Ahmedabad and rural Bihar, India, as well as scientists and doctors.

The Indian government has started campaigns to raise public awareness, urging people to alter their work hours to escape the worst of the heat, drink plenty of water and electrolytes, seek shade and take frequent breaks. Cities and districts have adopted heat action plans to deal with heat waves.

But a far more threatening future looms, scientists and public health experts say: Prolonged exposure to hot weather, especially when combined with humidity, can hinder the ability of people to lead healthy, safe and productive lives. The physiological stress can lead to chronic illnesses and increase people's chances of dying.



Figure 1 Published Nov. 16, 2025 Updated Nov. 17, 2025 Nilam Kumari, 29, harvesting rice in October in the Indian village of Sirkharia, Bihar. During the summer she tends to her crops early in the day, before the heat intensifies.

"That is much more of a public emergency than a heat wave," said Satchit Balsari, an associate professor of emergency medicine at Harvard Medical School. "In mission mode, you can take care of people," he said, referring to the specific goals of heat action plans. But studying morbidity — how the quality of life can deteriorate under extreme heat — is essential to avert a long-term crisis, he said.

Adapting to climate change by addressing livelihoods, built environments and societies, and making them more resilient, is a central theme at COP 30, the ongoing U.N. Climate Change Conference in Belém, Brazil. In late October, Bill Gates shifted his stance on climate change, writing in a memo that rather than focus



on reducing emissions, it would make more sense to put resources into improving the welfare of people facing the harshest effects of climate change.

'You Have to Learn' In Sirkharia, a village in Bihar — one of India's hottest and poorest states — many people dread the onslaught of summer. Average temperatures in the region have inched upward in the last four decades, according to a recent study. Lalita Devi, 60, said there had been more instances of fainting, dizziness and fatigue in the community starting around a decade

ago, usually when people were out tending to their crops.

"The ground water becomes hot, and for that reason, I don't want to go to the fields," Ms. Devi said.

With their husbands away in search of work, many women are left to juggle farming, cooking for extended families and raising children.

Meena Kumari, a 28-year-old mother of four, said she finds herself yelling at the ceiling fan on hot nights. They bring some respite, but "after a point it doesn't matter," Ms. Kumari said. "The fan is just circulating hot air."

Mohammad Sadullah, who works for the **Rural Development Trust**, a nonprofit that

works with more than 5,000 households in the area, said there are long stretches during summer when the daytime temperature is at least 104 degrees. But initially, many farm workers did not understand the concept of dehydration or that it was linked to their dizzy spells and fatigue.

After he explained that it was essential to drink water, more women now carry plastic bottles of water to work, wrapping them in cloth and tucking them in the shade of plants. The farm workers also learned to make electrolytes using a mixture of water, sugar, salt, lemon and "muri," or puffed rice, a cheap source of carbohydrates.



Figure 3 Water from hand pumps provides some relief to workers because it tends to be cooler. Some wipe themselves down with cloths soaked in the cool water or spread them over bedsheets before



Figure 2 Workers try to keep their supplies of water cool in the searing heat by tucking them under plants



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"The weather isn't going to understand that you need to rehydrate," **Mr. Sadullah** said he tells them. "So you have to learn."

Anupreeta Das covers India and South Asia for The Times. She is based in New Delhi.

home in Sirkharia village Figure 4 Meena Kumari preparing a homemade concoction of sugar, lime, salt and muri (puffed rice) that mimics the effects of an oral

