The Climate Crisis Is Driving People to Substance Abuse

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KAMAL SONAVANE KNEW she’d pass out if she chewed smokeless tobacco one more time. It was a scorching April afternoon in the middle of another of India’s brutal heat waves, and with no job to go to, the farmworker had already chewed tobacco five times that day. “Even an addicted person avoids doing this in extreme heat because there’s a risk of fainting,” she says.

Yet Sonavane repeated the familiar ritual: adding the slaked lime to the tobacco leaves, then putting the mixture in her mouth. “I would have anyway collapsed, either because of the heat waves or the mounting stress,” she says, sitting in her two-room brick house in Bhadole in the Indian state of Maharashtra. Anxious about money, her lack of work, and the extreme heat, she turned to the tobacco once again.

Climate change is making farming in Maharashtra harder. This in turn impacts day laborers, who are hired when agricultural help is needed. “Every few months, farmers report losses caused by heat waves or floods,” says community health worker Shubhangi Patil, who serves the Kolhapur district where Sonavane lives. When crops fail, earnings become more precarious, and farm laborers “resort to substance use to forget their problems,” says Patil. It’s a prevailing issue across the region, Patil says.

It’s also a phenomenon that isn’t limited to India—or to countries with predominantly low- and middle-income wages. Research from other regions has found groups responding to the pressures of climate change by increasing their consumption of alcohol and other substances, with potentially deleterious effects on their health.

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