



THE QUEEN'S COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2020

The Waters Rise

by Ananya Mukerji, Senior Runner-up, aged 16 from India

When I was a boy, I loved the sea. Its vastness – the mighty waves, the gentle humming of the tide, the rush of the icy blue water against the flaming sand.

My father was a fisherman, just like my grandfather, and his father before him. He would set out early each morning, in an ancient, rotting wooden boat, and return only well after sunset. I would run after him as he set out towards the horizon, and paddle out in the water as far as I could go without losing sight of his tiny boat. I remember begging him to take me along, but he never did. This was uncharacteristic of him; my father was a kindly man. He said it was far too dangerous for a young boy like me. I never understood that. The sea was our livelihood, it provided for us, as it had for generations. What danger could there be? I sat beneath the rustling leaves of my favourite palm tree and spoke aloud to the waves, wondering what harm they could possibly cause.

I was only a child then. I could not have imagined the gentle, iridescent current transforming into a raging maelstrom of angry froth. I could not have imagined waves towering over the palm trees, the shimmering blue water turning an unfathomable inky black. The bamboo walls and thatched roofs of the fishing village reduced to strips of bark and broken, jagged planks. But I was forced to learn. I was forced to witness the ocean turn monstrous, engulfing our homes, inundating fields of crops. And even when the waters receded, things were never the same. The patch of sand where I sat each day, awaiting the calls of the returning fishing boats, now lay several meters below the capricious tides.

The sea had been rising for years. The village elders all said so, spoke of markers now long submerged, of coastlines lost to the abyss. As I grew older, I heard of it on the radio, listening to the voices from thousands of miles away, spelling out our doom as casually as they would announce the weekly lottery numbers. We learned to ignore it. What else could we do? Each day we worked the fields, tending to the rich black soil as we had for centuries. My father often said that the earth was a friend to our people. 'Treat it well,' I remember him murmuring as he dozed in the dry summer evenings. I listened to him - but others did not.

Now, my home is all but gone. Every year brings a new season of storms. And every year, even less remains. Families torn from each other, torn from their homes. Villagers left adrift, compelled to abandon a way of life that is older than any other nation in the Commonwealth. And what are the survivors to do? Fishermen without boats, farmers with no land, craftsmen with no tools, children with no future.

When I was a boy, I loved the sea. Today I wake terrified from nightmares of the rising waters. It is consuming us, one by one. Eleven thousand people will be gone soon, their stories lost, their culture forgotten. I have sat before you many times before, listened to a great many distinguished leaders stand at this very podium and speak of a world united, of humanity joined in common cause. I have heard the words, heard calls for peace and compassion. Each day, more of my people die. Where is your compassion now?

Perhaps we don't matter to you. We are, after all, just a tiny Pacific island. I've heard the laughs when we call ourselves a sovereign state. Our population at its peak was less than a twentieth that of Westminster, London. But are our lives any less meaningful? We have

dreams too. Dreams and aspirations, and above all, hope. Hope suppressed by the inexorable rising tides, hope slowly extinguished by the raging waters surrounding our island home. We deserve hope, just as you do. I want to love the sea again. And I think that secretly - you all wish for it too.

We don't want to become the first climate change refugees of this world. We deserve a better future than that. And what have we done to deserve this? We are a remote island. Our only industries are fishing and agriculture, both sustainable, both done as our ancestors did, centuries ago. We have no factories, no emissions, barely any vehicles, and a carbon footprint smaller than any nation in the world. If you wonder at the cause of our grief, you need only look into a mirror.

The air and sea have no boundaries. They care not for geographic borders; they pay no heed to the invisible lines we draw to demarcate our lands. The toxic fumes you churn out constantly, the noxious chemicals you dump into the water, poison not your home, but mine. I wonder, do you think of us each time you fill up the gasoline tanks in your cars? Does a fleeting thought cross your mind when you drive to work in the morning? When I was a young man, I remember the oil tankers crossing just beyond the shallows of my village. I remember the day when the waters turned to night, where sea birds were pulled down, and the fish we depended on surfaced, struggling through their last, frantic breaths. Many of us wondered then, who would bear the cost? Who would compensate us for the weeks we would go hungry, for the years our children would find oil-soaked feathers in the sands?

We received nothing. No one has come to our aid, no one has granted us their support. The world is dying, and we are the first to go. Today, I stand before you and point the finger of blame. You are responsible for this, you great, industrial nations, with your globalization and your economic growth. Don't believe for a moment that my country is the only one to suffer - your time will come as well. You take from this world, and then you take some more. You deplete its resources and poison what remains.

I can sit idly by no longer. I cannot wait another decade, and watch the Tuvalu I grew up in sink and disappear. I cannot wait another day, and neither can you. We cannot leave our home, and we should not have to. All I ask is that we be allowed to live, to continue our way of life. The most basic of human rights. We demand a voice, and we demand to be heard. Tuvalu might be too far gone to save, but we must try. The time for words has ended. The time for action is now.