

“We realized our focus shouldn't be to try to do everything”: Kat Hamilton of Force of Nature on helping young people turn climate anxiety into agency

Ambar Castillo
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Ambar Castillo: Please introduce yourself and your work.

Kat Hamilton: I am the Executive Director of Force of Nature. We are a youth-led nonprofit headquartered in the UK. We're registered as Force of Nature Education, a Community Interest Company (CIC). Clover Hogan founded Force of Nature in 2019 after hearing stories in boardrooms and classrooms she volunteered in, about being too small to make a difference in the climate crisis, and about overwhelm and feeling like the systems are too complicated to make a change.

Clover was running workshops about ecophobia and ecoanxiety and the beliefs that keep us feeling small and keep us from engaging with systems change and solutions, and the roots to develop meaningful feelings of agency in taking sustained, long-term action. Force of Nature was born out of this inquiry, and we developed a series of research-backed workshops.

We worked with climate psychologists and our advisors, and we did surveys to capture the insights of the mindset shifts in the workshops, and contributed to emergent research about ecoanxiety and feelings of climate distress in young people. We now run workshops about understanding feelings of overwhelm and distress and powerlessness in the face of the climate crisis, but also wider polycrisis.

We work with young people aged 16 to 35. We have skills-based training and workshops around developing an understanding of your skills and interests, your sphere of influence, and how you can channel those feelings into action in your local community. Our online community is just over 1,500 young people, and tens of thousands of young people have gone through our training and run Climate Cafés to

engage their local community in conversations about climate emotions and the current state of the world.

A lot of the shift can come from people feeling like they're not alone, and their overwhelm, anxiety, or fear is not isolated or wrong because these are existential crises and threats that humans aren't programmed to fathom and engage with. We see a major shift happening from having these conversations about emotions and well-being at the beginning of people's journey into taking action.

Ambar Castillo: What does your day-to-day look like at Force of Nature and in your role as CEO?

Kat Hamilton: We're a relatively small organization, with nine people. We have fluctuated between 15 people, and historically, with volunteers, which we're currently not doing. We're only working with paid young staff. My personal day-to-day, looks a lot like being on a computer and on calls. We are entirely remote because we were founded at the start of the pandemic, and we never had one physical space. Our team is also distributed; the majority are in the UK, and I'm based in Lisbon, Portugal.

I have team members in Canada and in the Netherlands. All of our work happens online, and we've gotten good at using different software. Our generation is quite tech-literate. All of our processes, systems, and programs are built online. I do calls, emails, communications, building out, and writing documentation of decisions, and I travel to be with the team in person and run programs and events.

I also speak to funders and write project briefs and reports, or review our team's impact reports. I run online workshops or speaking engagements and deliver some of our programming. Each day looks different, but a lot of it is behind a computer.

Ambar Castillo: Since you mentioned your team being made up of young people, through what age range, and why was that important?

Kat Hamilton: We just discovered our youngest team member, who's been with us for four years, is now 25. Young is also aging because we don't have a super high turnover rate as an organization. A few of our team have been with us for four years. The oldest team member is in her early 40s; she joined us as our head of fundraising last year.

We made a strategic decision to bring someone on who was outside of our age bracket. The other oldest team member is 33. I just turned 30, and we had people as young as 18, but all of us have aged. The average age of our team is 27. It's important to us that the work is led by young people, and we run youth focus groups and we have a youth advisory board. We are intentional about ensuring that what we're doing is answering the needs of the young people we serve. There's a lot of work that is prescriptive of what young people need and isn't led by them.

The most effective people have the most insight into the problems and ability to create change. I'm planning my succession as the executive director because it's important that the organization is led by someone who is younger. Building their own capacity and

skills to run an organization on that level are valuable, but also the insights, ways of thinking, and change over time. I am already operating on an old system or way of thinking that is different from the next generation.

I feel aged out of so many of the trends and communication patterns of younger people. Buckminster Fuller [American architect and futurist] said something along the lines of “young people are our elders in universe time”; they were born into a world that was already older than the world I was born into. There's different information and insights that people in each generation and contexts bring. It's important that we talk about what team diversity looks like, representative of the people we're serving.

It has to go beyond just lived experience of race and socioeconomic status and other marginalization; we see young people as a marginalized group where they're not given access to positions of power or aren't trusted or respected in a way that backs the narrative that young people are the future. How are we uplifting young people to lead as we go? It's always been important to us as an organization, and continues to be one of the ways we prioritize our mission.

Ambar Castillo: When you speak about aging out of trends or certain insights, are there concrete examples where you have noticed that shift or gap?

Kat Hamilton: For sure. Firstly, we talk about climate as being in the climate space, but we're seeing that the climate crisis is not the biggest. The narrative around climate may feel detached from the environment and nature. Climate has become a catchall word as a category that is no longer resonating.

Secondly, our online communications have been focused on Instagram and LinkedIn. We're seeing younger audiences using TikTok, YouTube, or Fortnite and other video gaming platforms.

And lastly, the language and humor that's being used. My younger brother, who is 25, is sending me memes I don't understand. The landscape of young people leading youth climate strikes has changed, too. Older team members are focused on different priorities in life. They're settling down or seeking stability.

Ambar Castillo: How can you, in this intragenerational age range, support that communication so that it transfers across?

Kat Hamilton: It's fundamentally about openness and listening and not making assumptions. For our audience or community, it is about ensuring points of contact, feedback mechanisms, and focus groups. We don't design something to help them; we see a need and want them to tell us how to meet that. It's a lot of feedback and sensing.

Every time we're building a new project or program, we're consulting with the people the program is for, or working with partners who reach those audiences and do research, to make sure we're checking in. The focus groups and consultations with young people are reimbursed. There's a lot of extraction of young people's time, which doesn't meet with integrity, nor values the expertise that young people bring.

We've been those exploited young people, asked to give time and expertise without any compensation. We did a study a couple of years ago with a UK-based audience engagement agency called Word On The Curb, about who is not in the room when talking about climate action. We looked at a cross-section of gender, race, and socioeconomic status in the UK. We found big barriers, including the volunteer barrier.

It's a privilege to have access to "free time", which was a major barrier for young people, especially from marginalized backgrounds or the ones who were the first in their families to go to college.

We did a study to challenge these structures, by doing it ourselves and influencing other organizations in paying young people for their time and ensuring that they're being advised by young people.

If we're still contributing to and building the same systems and structures that have gotten us to this point in the crisis in the first place, then our work isn't meaningfully changing anything.

Ambar Castillo: How do you translate across different communications? Are there certain ways you make sure that those voices are heard?

Kat Hamilton: We have a few different weekly meeting points. Our all-hands team meeting is an update on everything and shares major lessons. We had to be quite intentional and strategic about how we communicate with one another online. We use Slack for team communication and Google Meet for meetings. Each of our projects happens in "circles", subgroups of two to four team members working together.

We've done workshops around stickier parts of communication, like conflict or disagreement, so that we can hear what people are saying rather than have it be about ego or defensiveness. It happens, but our philosophy and values are around supporting conflict as a place of learning.

We're recruiting based on culture and values; even if we're not all comfortable with direct communication to begin with, we all develop the skills around it and build trust within the team. In meetings, every team member has a chance to bring anything to the table they want to support or problem-solve.

In the smaller groups, everyone contributes. We shifted our structure, and we're no longer an assumed hierarchy based on titles. We instead each have areas of expertise, and decisions that require other people's input are made by consultation in a group call. If no one has any major objections, the decision is moved forward. This distributed power model has helped everyone be responsible.

There's a lot more autonomy, trust, and speed in the team, because there are nine people doing a lot.

The people working with the community directly know better than I what the community needs. When it comes to strategy for the next three years, I go to each of the expertise areas and ask people what their biggest need is before putting together a proposal.

We'll have time for conversation and discussion, and then there is a deadline. The underlying philosophy is, done is better than good.

The other principle is that everyone's voice is valuable and should be heard, and so making time to do that in a structured way. We have to slow down to speed up.

We can't rush around; otherwise, we don't actually hear each other. It's my responsibility as an executive director to slow us down if a lot is happening, and our communication is falling short, or people develop conflicts because we haven't had a chance to speak about it.

Ambar Castillo: Is there an example of where you were able to navigate that?

Kat Hamilton: I feel like it's all the time, to be honest. At the end of last year, we ran Becoming a Force of Nature, a three-part online program that supports young people in the journey of starting from how they're feeling to going into their skills and interests, and the action they can take afterwards.

We recruited through partners, with ambitious targets for funders, and something wasn't working. There were four weeks, at the end of summer, when everyone was offline, and so many moving pieces, and frustration was mounting in the team about not hitting the numbers, but we couldn't pinpoint why it wasn't working.

We were trying to get the number of people in the program we had committed to. We had done the research, but we weren't seeing the signups, and COP was coming. I realized we needed to stop for a moment.

In one of the all-team meetings, we repurposed it into a strategic meeting. It required everyone to take a big step back from the immediate work. We discussed what was and was not working on a macro level, and creative ideas for shifting our energy.

It meant stopping the recruitment and changing our tactics. We pivoted social media and comms and leaned into our community members, the people who were engaged and had been through the program the previous year.

We asked them to post about why they joined and what changed for them. It shifted to a storytelling approach. We changed the number of meetings in a week to focus on doing this well. We backburnered other projects around the Conference of the Parties (COP) and reduced the amount we were doing.

Everyone got clear on their responsibilities, and we ended up surpassing the target for recruitment.

Saying no to stuff is a big thing. As a young non-profit organization relying on fundraising, you have to be opportunistic.

We have a clear theory of change and vision about our part in the climate solutions ecosystem and engaging with young people. We choose between saying yes when an opportunity moves us forward and is aligned, and not to focus on things we're good at and funders' commitments.

The third part is to recognize where our strategy is off, or needs change, or we missed a need to respond to. Being responsive and reactive are two different things, and we're figuring out how we're spending our energy, and if it's the best use of our time.

Ambar Castillo: Do you find that the lead-up to COP also coincides with more people wanting to join your organization or go through the training program?

Kat Hamilton: COP is a significant moment in the climate space. Every November, there is a ramp-up of engagements, conversations, and campaigns.

There is an uptick in news articles and communications about climate and nature, metrics tracking of net zero and emissions targets, and global climate wellbeing. We often don't attend, but we plan campaigns.

We attended COP26 four years ago in Glasgow, in the UK, and were part of different events around the city for young people who were not attending.

Since then, we have run the Climate Café campaign outside of the UN sphere for young people who want to start climate conversations in the community. 150 to 250 young people around the world run Climate Cafés, which are small-scale conversations to engage with their neighbors. We provide a framework for how to hold conversations around people's feelings about the climate and nature crisis, their concerns, and solutions.

Ambar Castillo: Do you find trends in attitudes in how young people you're engaging with feel about whether these larger conferences make a difference to them, and/or whether their voice is included in these global spaces?

Kat Hamilton: We haven't run a survey, but based on the conversations I have been part of, I definitely think it's fluctuated.

Overwhelmingly, young people are disillusioned by those in power and feel like their voices are not heard or represented. Simultaneously, there are now youth envoys where there didn't use to be. However, they are unpaid, and they're often required to self-direct themselves through the process, and it's one youth envoy representing all of the youth voices.

There are several youth conferences developing statements that are brought via the youth envoy to COP and into these decision-making rooms, where UN representatives read and take in what young people stand for.

The government bodies are slow, the level of bureaucracy is huge, and young people, when faced with the urgency of the crisis, often see it as ineffective.

Scientists have said that we have passed a tipping point for the world's oceans, meaning that the Great Barrier Reef and many reefs around the world are beyond a point of no return and will degenerate. That causes other crises in our ecosystems. Young people are faced with all of this information and knowledge, and it's not easy to step back and accept that it takes a long time.

There's a lot more feeling of urgency than that. It's either turning into overwhelm and apathy or grassroots and local community action. There is disillusionment with the actions of policy and companies, and disillusionment with how activism has been presented.

A lot of that comes down to media, and we lack nuance in seeing how these things are effective. Even in the education system, we're not taught how these systems lead to change. There aren't big visible initiatives that are creating tangible change. The media and the global narratives give information so quickly, and what is working doesn't get a platform or the most clicks.

Ambar Castillo: Could you take me through the origin of the Climate Cafés?

Kat Hamilton: We attended COP26, and we felt like an echo chamber. We wanted to reach and support the young people who are feeling overwhelmed and anxious, and don't know what to do about it; have their voices matter, and have influence, power, and agency.

We talked with other organizations because we sit in an interesting intersection of youth mental health and wellbeing, but also climate and social justice. Our partners are universities or other social action organizations. Many of them are not thinking about COP at all, but all of our climate people are thinking about COP. We're often in this in-between space.

The Climate Cafés came up as an idea to use the momentum of the climate narrative. We had done the survey on accessibility and diversity in the climate space in the same year. As part of the first-ever Climate Café initiative, we built a guide about how to run a Climate Café. How do you find partners? Where can you run it? What does a conversation facilitation look like? We open-sourced it, so everyone has access.

You sign up to host a cafe, and we platform it for you. We had a global action day in the second week of COP to show young people who want to do something, and put external pressure on what was happening behind closed doors. To ensure that young people had resources, we issued micro-grants from £20 to £100 to pay for transport, food or drinks, a space for people, or printed materials, whatever it was they needed. We launched that at the same time.

In the first year, we issued £2,100 of micro-grants. Not a huge amount, but it meant more people who couldn't otherwise access or host something. We couldn't pay them,

but we could ease the logistics of organizing an event. In the first year, we had between 180 to 240 individual events.

We could track all of them because people registered where they hosted them, in over 35 countries. A third of all the cafes finished the feedback form, and many sent through event photos and reports. We haven't yet had the resources to do a long-term study.

At COP, there's the Blue Zone, where diplomats and people with badges have access. Every country has a pavilion, an event space where people come together and share information. Pavilions are important in helping people connect and platform voices that aren't in the negotiation rooms.

Three years ago, a new pavilion was formed called the Entertainment and Culture Pavilion, which brings entertainment and culture into the conversation around the climate crisis and policy. They platform many young people from the global south and from movements that haven't historically had access to these spaces.

It was founded by people from the Dubai Climate Collective, which started after the first-ever Dubai Climate Cafe in the first year of our climate cafes. It's the first youth-led pavilion that gets funded all year long, not just for COP.

This is one of many stories in which organizations are born out of an informal format or a gathering with a purpose. The Climate Cafe model is a spark. Some people continue to host them monthly and build a community around them.

It's putting power back in the hands of young people and letting them know they matter. It's as simple as starting a conversation, connecting people to the community, and creating long-term feelings of agency and influence to sustain it. The online world can be isolating, and it's where most of us get our information from. It can lead to further isolation and feelings of disempowerment and powerlessness in the face of the crises.

Ambar Castillo: When you mentioned platforming people who sign up for these climate cafes, were you referring to promoting them online?

Kat Hamilton: Yes, because our programs have been global. The climate cafes enable people to gather in person. The hosts of climate cafes are important parts of our community. The page with all the climate cafes helps people find them more easily.

Ambar Castillo: Can you pinpoint at least one aspect you think made the difference for this to happen in all these different countries?

Kat Hamilton: It's around a certain moment in the year for it to have momentum, and the narrative around it has stood out. We acknowledge that people feel a certain way and tell them they're not alone. We are trusted for our principles around paying young people, and seeing them as voices of authority. We have a lot of amazing partners who will share that we are running an initiative, and that always brings people through.

Young people who've been through our programs advocate for us because they see that we are aligned with our values and youth-led. The third and potentially most important thing is the micro-grants. Even people who chose not to apply for micro-grants appreciated it. Many initiatives only offer young people experience. It can be valuable, but it can't be the only way to support them.

Ambar Castillo: When Force of Nature first started, were there other gaps the organization was filling in, in the climate or youth space?

Kat Hamilton: We started five years ago with the intergenerational exchange narrative. It's now a buzzword. We were trying to activate young people and bring their voices to the Halls of Power; boardrooms, policy spaces, businesses, and even educational decisions.

We did consulting and workshops in companies and for teachers. We brought young people in as often as possible, making sure they were paid. We didn't want to be dependent on a funding cycle we couldn't keep up with, because we were a four-person team at the time.

We started selling these services, and we were often brought in by chief sustainability officers or people in employee wellbeing and training. We saw a possibility for shifting mindsets within companies, because the sustainability strategy is still divorced from a company's strategy, and there aren't financial incentives for people to prioritize climate.

We hadn't managed to bring in enough money to hire a team to do the youth work separately. We honestly were burnt out from doing effective sales and programs to companies, which is its own whole business model and hustle. We saw the increasing need among young people attending our programs. That's when we launched climate cafes.

We stopped doing company workshops, but we had a community of 20 to 30 CSOs from major global companies called the Biome, having conversations about what's not working and how to change mindsets within the companies. We got a lot of referrals to other companies as a result.

Changing mindsets, cultural beliefs, internal stories, and shifting the way we think about the role of companies on the planet is very theoretical and hard. There aren't many funders taking the risk of funding it because it takes years to change. It's not recognized as a fundable space because it's not as outcomes-focused as building a system.

Conversations about intergenerational exchange and eco anxiety have normalized. People laughed at us when we first talked about it.

Ambar Castillo: What is something about your work or philosophy that others might find surprising?

Kat Hamilton: We don't believe there's one way of doing all this. We're always learning and challenging ourselves. It would be easier if we were just doing one thing one way all the time.

What we do develops over time, depending on the needs and feedback we get. We are working towards a “flat” organization structure — the roles and project-based working — as opposed to a typical managerial hierarchy. Another thing is the philosophy around paying young people for their time.

We always question the tradeoff of working with volunteers. Is it fair to ask young people to volunteer? How do we make that valuable for them? Many youth-led nonprofits of our size are entirely volunteer-run. We pay people for their time as much as possible, which sometimes limits the scope of our growth.

We don't want to build extractive systems, although in some cases, it could be valuable to work with volunteers if they see a trade-off. We've been registered as a CIC or a social enterprise, but we're looking at shifting into a charity because all of our income comes from grants, foundations, and family trusts.

Ambar Castillo: Of the Co-Labs' three focus areas, resilience, agency, or belonging, which would you say most aligns with Force of Nature's work?

Kat Hamilton: I see them all fitting. Building feelings of agency in young people is the cornerstone of everything we do. Belonging is part of the process of building agency. You have power when you are also in a community of people you belong to.

Similarly, we think about resilience as the long-term ability to do impactful climate work. It comes from understanding our emotions, reactions, and responses, and why we do what we do.

Ambar Castillo: Have you noticed tradeoffs when you're trying to strengthen resilience, agency, and belonging at the same time?

Kat Hamilton: We think about our work as a pathway. The biggest tension has always been capacity, because as a small organization resourced by funders, we have loads of ambitions, but in terms of what's feasible, we've stayed the same size over the last three years. In fact, we've lost two team members.

We're always learning how to be more effective and work with depth. The biggest trade-off is that if you're going to do breadth work, you're not necessarily reaching all of those people with depth. Resilience implies to me long-term sustainability, whereas agency is a moment. We track that people working with us feel increased feelings of agency and hopefulness.

We don't have long-term tracking of what that has led them to. Many organizations in this competitive and individual culture are trying to do it all. We also fell victim to that.

We developed skills-based training to get young people into jobs or positions of power and referred them to other places where they can continue their journey. We couldn't get as many people through the programs because we were developing so much new stuff.

We realized our focus shouldn't be to try to do everything. The sweet spot that we filled is meeting young people in the overwhelm. The challenge or tension is in how wide versus how deep to go, and realizing we're part of an ecosystem of other organizations, and lean into that.

There's not a lot of funding or resources around partnering with other organizations or building projects together. The approach to funding and resourcing nonprofits is individually-focused. That's a systemic thing we're facing.

Ambar Castillo: Could you share an example of a time when something at Force of Nature didn't work and you had to do trial and error?

Kat Hamilton: The work with companies that I was talking about. We were bringing in the money we needed for our team to run the programs with young people, but it wasn't working because we didn't invest in building out the team running the company work. We realigned on what our mission was, and this wasn't the most important to us.

We had to shift our tactics to bring in money that made sense according to the work we were doing.

Ambar Castillo: Aside from funding, what's the hardest challenge you're facing right now that hasn't been solved yet?

Kat Hamilton: One is around simplifying the core narrative of what we do. When I share about what we do, it can be complicated. What we do well is communication and visibility around that communication, and storytelling is a challenge.

It will lead to reach young people who are feeling overwhelmed, but in new, creative ways. Many organizations like ours are doing mindset and well-being work, but in the form of writing reports or making web pages of resources, which are not the most effective way to reach overwhelmed young people. Breaking out of the echo chamber is a big challenge and requires us to work with creative organizations that are doing that for other purposes.

The other challenge is around unlocking team well-being. We've done a lot of work around ensuring that we don't have high levels of burnout in the team. Now that a lot of us are aging, I wonder how to ensure we're still led by young people.

It's about succession, but also other ways that we as a team hold both the long-term vision and the immediate needs. It's personally challenging to hold the vision, mission, and values of the organization.

How to design long-term or midterm governance models to do all the things in a value-aligned way. I'm building a trustee board right now. It's super time-consuming, and there's not one way of doing it. I haven't had a board who are guiding me. That's one of the reasons I'm building it, to help with this as well.

Ambar Castillo: What's one lesson or practice from Force of Nature that you think could help others either in or outside of this field?

Kat Hamilton: All the lessons feel like cliches, but truly, you don't have to do things the way they've always been done. There are alternative models of governance, running an organization, and accessing finance. The thing I learned over and over again in this role, where I'm learning everything for the first time, is that you can design it according to your values.

Don't just inherit a structure; do things differently. Also, always lean into advice. Whether it's from advisors, people with experience in the field, or partners, and our focus groups. Lean into advice and do so with a spirit of generosity. Recommend other organizations that you think should be receiving funding, talk about other people's work, and uplift one another.

If you're in social change and well-being, there is not one moment of utopia in which it will all be done. This is the long game. Do what you need to do to resource yourself and build an organization and a team that can operate in the long term and is responsive to what's needed.

Ambar Castillo: How has being part of the Co-Lab Cohort influenced your approach at Force of Nature? And is there anything outside of the cohort? What emerging work in youth mental health or climate justice are you most excited about?

Kat Hamilton: The biggest thing about being part of the Co-Lab is the learning and research with the members of the cohort. Also, having five-year funding is massive. It unlocks a level of focus on the work for the next five years. Our founder, Clover, stepped down as CEO two years ago.

Even though I'm from within the organization, we've changed since I became the executive director. Everything is really in flux in the world; the security of long-term funding is huge. If we didn't have that, we would be fundraising for the beginning of next year.

Whereas we are now somewhat established, with the money from the Co-Lab and another committed funder.

I'm excited about the spaces we intersect in; the conversation of youth mental health is more central.

For the first time, mental health was talked about at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) week and during New York Climate Week. There's a group called

United for Global Mental Health that has been campaigning to bring mental health to the global agenda around climate for the last 12 years. Multiple countries have committed to mental health clauses as part of their annual commitments of action within their country, which is huge.

The conversation around mental health is central to how we understand global health, but I'm also seeing more conversations about inner work in terms of how we need to change the internal narratives for systems change. I see more support for youth-led organizations and resourcing capacity sharing in the climate space.

There are climate funds to support young people with ideas, ingenuity, and grassroots focus to build solutions around resilience and adaptation to climate in their local communities. We're seeing cool studies coming out of those funding bodies, too, around what it means to fund young people and new and innovative ways to do that, and how the ecosystem of fundraising can collaborate to support different kinds of initiatives.

Ambar Castillo: How do you know when a new program or pathway, or approach you are taking is working? How have you seen or started measuring that progress?

Kat Hamilton: The clearest way we see if it's working is if we're hitting the objectives we set out. We're understanding the need through focus groups and advisory sessions. At the end of every project, we review by speaking to people who've been part of it.

We're running surveys with the climate cafes, but we're also doing calls with people who've run climate cafes to understand the outcomes. We're always wondering if what we're doing is working, and we have developed a few ways to measure that. On a macro scale, it's coming back to the mission and seeing if the things that we've done this year moved the needle.

We've been lucky to work with researchers on different studies, which have shaped how we think about our work and how we measure it.

We're metrics-focused, but the grand philosophical discussion also still happens every year and relies on us continuing to speak to and learn from other people working in the space to ensure we're not just focused on our own processes but keep seeing the bigger picture.

Ambar Castillo: Thanks so much.

Ambar Castillo reports for Epicenter NYC, covering access and equity in some of the nation's most diverse neighborhoods. A former STAT health equity fellow through MIT's Knight Science Journalism program, her award-winning reporting bridges storytelling and public health. Supported by fellowships like the Solutions Journalism Network, Fulbright and Pulitzer Center, she has carried her reporting across communities from Queens to India.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*

