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An anti-environment political discourse

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The Congress and BJP are for 'growth' with speedy environment clearances.
The Aam Aadmi Party shows better sense

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Going by a quick reading of election manifestos, the three parties competing for seats across most of India are all committed to harmonising development and environment considerations, ensuring social justice, and generating jobs for all.

There is rhetoric and promising language aplenty in what the Indian National Congress (INC), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) have put out.

But beneath the surface, they reveal a clear failure of imagination and new ideas, with only one party coming close to breaking through the hackneyed models that have thus far failed India.

Sixty-seven years after Independence, despite enormous strides on a number of fronts, India continues to struggle with poverty, unemployment, social strife, and environmental destruction.

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If poverty is defined as deprivation of basic needs, over 70 per cent of the population is still poor. The last two decades have seen hardly any net growth in employment in the formal sector, and much of the workforce labours in underpaid, exploitative, or hazardous conditions.

Narrow vision

Ecological devastation wipes out whatever GDP growth we are clocking, largely because of the nature of this growth itself. Several hundred million people suffer from environmental deprivations, including inadequate or polluted water, bad air, dangerous work, and shortages of fuel and fodder.

What do the INC, BJP and AAP offer as pathways to lead India out of these problems? Unfortunately, the first two suffer from a colossal failure of cognition, and offer only doublespeak; AAP shows deeper understanding, but it too cannot offer a coherent alternative vision of development that is deeply sustainable and equitable.

All three, in fact, lay their economic bets on high GDP growth, refusing to accept that on a finite planet, infinite growth is a contradiction in terms. There is some promise in AAP's attempted integration of 'Economy and Ecology', and in its invoking the principle of intergenerational equity (such that future generations can have access to the same natural bounties we enjoy). Such a vision is missing from INC and BJP manifestos.

The former proposes to replace a Cabinet committee on investments set up in 2013 to over-ride ministries that hold up clearances, with an even more powerful, permanent Investment Facilitation Committee under the PM. This Committee will ensure "rapid approvals", another name for bypassing environmental assessment procedures which of necessity take time.

The BJP follows the same logic, promising to "frame the environment laws in a manner that ... will lead to speedy clearance of proposals without delay" and "single-window clearances". Both are invitations to continue the scams that have been regularly exposed in the sectors of mining, forest land diversion, and hydroelectricity projects. One of the most powerful antidotes to the wholesale sacrifice of lands and resources at the altar of GDP growth has been local peoples' resistance.



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BY KUMAR SHANKAR ROY & BL RESEARCH BUREAU

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The middle classes who applaud the bypassing of environmental concerns to speed up growth, would do well to pay heed to such movements.

Only the AAP, however, recognises this widespread resentment against displacement and dispossession; it mandates that Gram Sabha consent will be needed for any land acquisition, diversion of forest land, and use of water, forests and minerals in areas that are under the village jurisdiction.

Decentralised governance

It also reiterates the importance of the Forest Rights Act in providing for such local control over forest commons; the Congress promises strict implementation of this Act but says nothing about its use in checking forest land diversion; and the BJP completely ignores it!

Enlarging this to the principle of direct democracy or *swaraj*, AAP also is more forthright in promising untied funds for developmental activities that the local body (rural or urban) decides on, community consent for payments made under government work, and an eventual role in formulating legislation.

The Congress too offers provisions for panchayats to get more untied funds and have the power to decide on how to use resources raised by themselves, but otherwise limits itself to generalities like “Gram Sabhas are strengthened and legally mandated to secure responsive and responsible local governance”. The BJP promises “extensive devolution of functions, functionaries and funds” to panchayati raj institutions, but is silent on specifics.

On a number of other counts, the parties seem to have learnt their lessons from grassroots movements: sustainable and organic farming, decentralised water harvesting and watershed management, renewable energy, and others.

They also promise the creation of jobs through labour-intensive manufacture, craft and artisanal work, and small and medium industry.

But without offering to curtail the enormous concentration of economic power that has taken place in the hands of Indian and foreign private corporations, such a promise is hollow. It is this concentration, and the continued lack of accountability of centralised state institutions, that leads to the environment and people's

livelihoods being sacrificed.

And therefore the importance of genuine political and economic decentralisation, accountable governance, and alternative models of human well-being that focus on indicators like basic needs and jobs rather than GDP growth.

None of the parties meet these criteria, but if one had to select one, the AAP comes closest.

The writer is with Kalpavriksh, Pune. The views are personal

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