

Elections 2004

The neglected issues: water, land, biodiversity

By any standards, India's environment and environment-dependent people are in bad shape. Millions of people continue to die due to water and air pollution, water shortages have become acute, wildlife is decreasing, land degradation continues and thousands of poor people get displaced every year. Such damage costs the economy thousands of crores of rupees annually, due to lost productivity, increased health care, expenditure on anti-drought and anti-pollution measures and so on. Will the 2004 general elections signal a change in this scenario? Do the poll manifestos of the two major contending parties promise anything different?

The key planks on which BJP, Congress, and allied parties are fighting the elections are development, livelihood, and employment. These issues are intricately tied to the fate of India's immense natural resources: water, land, and biodiversity (including forests and seas). One would have thought that with over half a century of hindsight, these parties would move boldly towards human development and welfare based on sustaining, not destroying, these natural resources. Unfortunately, there is little evidence of this in their manifestos.

Both the NDA and the Congress manifes-

tos start with recounting their achievements, but say nothing about safeguarding the environment, or taking development onto a more sustainable path. Both claim credit for taking India into the global economy, and a phase of high-percentage growth, omitting mention that these have played havoc with the environment, and the lives of a majority of India's population that depends directly on it. In both the manifestos, the prescription for the next five years is based on old, increasingly discredited indicators of 'development': percentage growth rate of the economy, industrial growth, creation of infrastructure, increase in agricultural and industrial exports and so on.

There is no mention of 'sustainable development'. Neither manifesto talks of the urgent need for a comprehensive land use plan, in which environmentally critical areas (water sources, biodiversity-rich areas, agriculturally important regions, marine breeding grounds, and so on) are kept safely away from destructive mining, dams, urbanisation, and industries. Mega-projects with potentially disastrous ecological consequences are promised, including the river linking project (NDA), single-window clearances for mining (supposedly in an "envi-



POLL THEME

The Environment

Party manifestos suggest that our politicians have not given serious thought at all to the environment, writes Ashish Kothari

ronmentally sustainable manner"), massive thermal power expansion, and so on. A major expansion of tourism is advocated, with no mention of ecological and cultural sensitivity. The NDA promises relaxation of the Coastal Regulation Zone provisions (that have helped to protect India's coasts from destructive development), and environmental clearance for all projects within 45 days... a sure recipe for paying short shrift to environmental concerns.

The NDA and Congress visions of 'employment' miss out on what could possibly be the single biggest source of livelihood for the rural poor: the regeneration of the over

150 million hectares of degraded lands and water bodies that have spread across the country like a cancer. The NDA mentions "wastelands development" and "social forestry" in passing, but gives no indication of the massive effort needed to optimise this opportunity of reversing environmental damage while generating several million jobs.

Is their vision of agriculture any more sound? To its credit, the NDA mentions 'organic farming', but this more in passing than as a central thrust; and the Congress does not even mention it. Both focus heavily on commercialising agriculture, giving

agro-processing priority, and boosting agro-based exports. For fisheries, exploitation of the deep seas and spread of trawler technologies is promised. Small farmers and traditional fisher-folk in India need facilitation to develop forms of production that are self-reliant, organic, biologically diverse, and based on traditional knowledge. Yet both manifestos promise agricultural and fisheries development that will primarily benefit the richer farmers and large-scale fishers. Shockingly, they do not even promise a phasing out of the deadly chemicals used in agriculture and health programmes, that are now known to lace drinking water, vegetables, fruits, and grains.

Both manifestos talk about water harvesting by communities, a positive sign. But neither mentions that this needs to be the single most important direction. The NDA, in the same breath, promises the river linking project, ignoring the history of small-scale projects being consistently displaced in budgets and political attention, by such mega-projects.

The one count on which both sets of parties score, is the promise of land or resource rights over forests to tribals. The section on tribals is the only place where the Congress

notes the need to balance economic development with ecological sustainability. Both manifestos also promise much greater political and financial empowerment of local village bodies. But such promises have been made before only to be broken. Both parties have had time since the 1993 constitution amendment providing powers to panchayats and gram sabhas, to actually carry out such devolution. But both have failed. Nevertheless this promise could be one sign of hope in a rather bleak political scenario for the environment.

There are a few other signs of hope, outside of the manifestos and promises of the big parties.

A number of Independent candidates in several constituencies have raised basic issues of water, food security, land regeneration, forests and forest-based rights. Communities in some areas have threatened to boycott the elections if issues of water, pollution and so on are not tackled. These remain, however, scattered and small. If the key party manifestos are any indication, the environmental movement in India still remains politically insignificant.

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