Elections2004

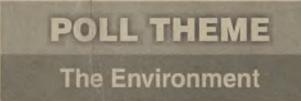
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The neglected issues: water, land, biodiversity

By any standards, India's environment and tos start with recounting their achieveenvironment-dependent people are in bad ments, but say nothing about safeguarding shape. Millions of people continue to die the environment, or taking development due to water and air pollution, water short- onto a more sustainable path. Both claim ages have become acute, wildlife is decreas- credit for taking India into the global econing, land degradation continues and omy, and a phase of high-percentage thousands of poor people get displaced ev- growth, omitting mention that these have ery year. Such damage costs the economy played havoc with the environment, and thousands of crores of rupees annually, due the lives of a majority of India's population to lost productivity, increased health care, that depends directly on it. In both the expenditure on anti-drought and anti-pol- manifestos, the prescription for the next lution measures and so on. Will the 2004 five years is based on old, increasingly disgeneral elections signal a change in this credited indicators of 'development': perscenario? Do the poll manifestos of the two centage growth rate of the economy, major contending parties promise anything industrial growth, creation of infrastrucdifferent?

The key planks on which BJP, Congress, exports and so on. and allied parties are fighting the elections dence of this in their manifestos.

human development and welfare based on banisation, and industries. Mega-projects to environmental concerns. sustaining, not destroying, these natural re- with potentially disastrous ecological con-



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

ture, increase in agricultural and industrial ronmentally sustainable manner"), massive 150 million hectares of degraded lands and thermal power expansion, and so on. A ma- water bodies that have spread across the grains. There is no mention of 'sustainable de- jor expansion of tourism is advocated, with country like a cancer. The NDA mentions are development, livelihood, and employ- velopment'. Neither manifesto talks of the no mention of ecological and cultural sen- "wastelands development" and "social forment. These issues are intricately tied to the urgent need for a comprehensive land use sitivity. The NDA promises relaxation of the estry" in passing, but gives no indication of fate of India's immense natural resources: plan, in which environmentally critical ar- Coastal Regulation Zone provisions (that the massive effort needed to optimise this water, land, and biodiversity (including for- eas (water sources, biodiversity-rich areas, have helped to protect India's coasts from opportunity of reversing environmental ests and seas). One would have thought agriculturally important regions, marine destructive development), and environthat with over half a century of hindsight, breeding grounds, and so on) are kept safe- mental clearance for all projects within 45 jobs these parties would move boldly towards ly away from destructive mining, dams, ur- days... a sure recipe for paying short shrift

The NDA and Congress visions of 'emlinking project (NDA), single-window clear- be the single biggest source of livelihood for does not even mention it. Both focus heavi-Both the NDA and the Congress manifes- ances for mining (supposedly in an "envi- the rural poor: the regeneration of the over ly on commercialising agriculture, giving

damage while generating several million

sound? To its credit, the NDA mentions 'organic farming', but this more in passing

agro-processing priority, and boosting notes the need to balance economic develagro-based exports. For fisheries, exploita- opment with ecological sustainability. Both tion of the deep seas and spread of trawler manifestos also promise much greater potechnologies is promised. Small farmers litical and financial empowerment of local and traditional fisher-folk in India need fa- village bodies. But such promises have cilitation to develop forms of production been made before only to be broken. Both that are self-reliant, organic, biologically di- parties have had time since the 1993 constiverse, and based on traditional knowledge. tution amendment providing powers to Yet both manifestos promise agricultural panchayats and gram sabhas, to actually and fisheries development that will primar- carry out such devolution. But both have ily benefit the richer farmers and large- failed. Nevertheless this promise could be scale fishers. Shockingly, they do not even one sign of hope in a rather bleak political promise a phasing out of the deadly chem- scenario for the environment. icals used in agriculture and health programmes, that are now known to lace side of the manifestos and promises of the drinking water, vegetables, fruits, and big parties.

vesting by communities, a positive sign. But sues of water, food security, land regenerneither mentions that this needs to be the ation, forests and forest-based rights. single most important direction. The NDA, Communities in some areas have threatin the same breath, promises the river link- ened to boycott the elections if issues of ing project, ignoring the history of small- water, pollution and so on are not tackled. scale projects being consistently displaced These remain, however, scattered and

mega-projects.

sources. Unfortunately, there is little evi- sequences are promised, including the river ployment' miss out on what could possibly than as a central thrust; and the Congress ties score, is the promise of land or resource cant. rights over forests to tribals. The section on tribals is the only place where the Congress pavriksh - Environmental Action Group)

There are a few other signs of hope, out-

A number of Independent candidates in Both manifestos talk about water har- several constituencies have raised basic is-Is their vision of agriculture any more in budgets and political attention, by such small. If the key party manifestos are any indication, the environmental movement The one count on which both sets of par- in India still remains politically insignifi-

(The author is the founder member of Kal-