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OPINION GOVERNMENT

No Atma, Lots of Nirbharta: The Socio-Ecological Bankruptcy of Modi's Self-Reliance Stimulus

The most blatant example of ecological illiteracy in the name of 'self-reliance' is that of coal mining – a sector which is being opened up in parts of central India which were hitherto off-limits.



Representative image: Local women carry coal taken from open cast coal field at Dhanbad district in Jharkhand September 19, 2012. Photo: Reuters/Ahmad Masood/Files



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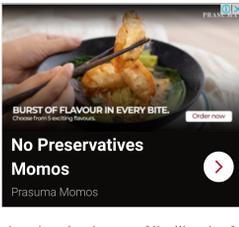
For a government that is tom-tomming its environmental record across the globe, it is interesting that nature, ecology and environment are almost totally absent from the Indian government's COVID-19 recovery or stimulus package labelled 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (self-reliant India).

This package was announced in mid-May this year along with a **national address** by Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In these, he waxed eloquent about how the pandemic teaches us to move towards being self-reliant, from the village upwards to the country as a whole. He also extolled India's civilisational ethos, regarding the earth as 'mother', and valuing nature.

But this was clearly just greenwash or doublespeak. The Atmanirbhar Bharat stimulus package not only has no place for environmental safeguards, but is in fact ecologically regressive.

Firstly, one would have thought that the increasing scientific evidence linking this and previous disease outbreaks to **ecological devastation**, would prompt a government that proclaims itself to be 'sustainable' to put in place measures for conservation of natural ecosystems and wildlife. This is totally missing. There is no mention of any increase in the budget of the environment ministry or other relevant bodies; in fact, over the last few years this sector has received far less than 1% of the central budgetary outlay, and COVID-19 has not changed this.

But if not increased attention, we could have expected someone named the 'Champion of the Earth' by the UN to include environmental safeguards in whatever economic measures are contained in the package. And if not this, at the very least, he could have ensured that things did not get worse.



But on all these counts, and on the related count of livelihoods of 400 million people directly dependent on nature, the Atmanirbhar Bharat package is shockingly regressive. And it has been accompanied by clearances to massive projects in ecologically sensitive areas, a draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) notification that will make environmental governance spineless, and **several other damaging steps** during the COVID-19 lockdown when people cannot mobilise to respond adequately.

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Probably the most blatant example of ecological illiteracy in the package, or should one say criminal intent, is that of coal mining. In what can only be termed a cruel joke, this sector is being opened up to a major commercialisation and privatisation boost, and auctions have begun for mining blocks in some of India's most ecologically and culturally sensitive areas. These include parts of central India that the previous government (led by the Congress party) had declared 'no-go', i.e. off-limits to such activities. And this is justified in the name of 'self-reliance', to reduce coal imports.



A thermal power plant in Haryana. Photo: Vikramdeep Sidhu/Wikimedia Commons.

Expansion of coal mining, meant to feed thermal power, blatantly mocks global concerns regarding the climate crisis. This prompted the UN Secretary General to express serious concern and urge India to instead **go for clean, renewable energy**. In June he had already stated that there was no reason for any country to **include coal in its recovery plans**. India's actions are also in violation of all its internal commitments to ecological sustainability and the rights and interests of the adivasi (tribal) peoples who inhabit these areas. The mining auctions are taking place with absolutely no public consultation in these areas, and without honouring the rights of communities enshrined in the Forest Rights Act.

It is rather strange that an argument for national self-reliance in coal, completely undermines these communities, most of whom are in fact already living relatively self-reliant lifestyles. Modi's doublespeak is evident here; in his May addresses he spoke about the need for village level self-reliance, and about how we should all become 'vocal for local', but his government's actions are clearly violating these. Indeed, when local communities have become vocal in their opposition to mining plans, the central or relevant state government has accused them of anti-national, even 'terrorist' activities.

The only concession made to environment is the promotion of coal gasification and liquefaction, and mechanised transfer of coal. In fact this is the only place the word 'environment' figures in the entire stimulus package (and 'nature', 'ecology', etc are totally absent). While these measures will reduce environmental impact, this pales into insignificance given the impacts of the massive expansion of mining and all that it entails. India's existing coal mines have left a trail of devastation on land, forest, water, wildlife and communities that is impossible to ever compensate, let alone reverse.

Nor does the package stop at coal. It proposes to auction 500 other mining blocks, including to private bidders. There is no mention of ecological or social safeguards in this.

Beyond mining, the package has other serious environmental consequences. One of the five pillars of the package is demand: "In order to increase demand in the country and to meet this demand, every stakeholder in our supply chain needs to be empowered. We will strengthen our supply chain, our supply system built up with the smell of the soil and the sweat of our labourers."

I will not comment here about the poetic words regarding labourers, except to say that the thoughtless manner of the COVID-19 lockdown, and the subsequent relaxation of labour laws by many states (mostly led by the ruling party), seem to be aimed at making them 'sweat' even more. I will confine myself to the environmental aspects.

Also read: To Rebuild the Economy, India Needs to Be Atmanirbhar in Ideas

One can understand that an important aspect of economic recovery is the revival of consumer demand. But surely we can no longer sustain unregulated, ever-increasing demand in any sector? Already in 2008, according to a **report by the Confederation of Indian Industries and the Ecological Footprint Network**, "India now demands the biocapacity of two Indias to provide for its consumption and absorb its wastes."

It is, in other words, already eating into what should rightfully belong to the next generations. But rather than use the current crisis as an opportunity to correct this course, the package aims to significantly increase demand and supply, with no concern for sustainability. For instance, in fisheries, the objective is an "additional fish production of 70 lakh tonnes over 5 years". This is alarming, given indications that India's seas may **already be overfished**. In none of the sectors the package deals with, are any guidelines or directives given for assessing what levels of production or use may be sustainable.



A man casts his fishing net into the Adyar river in Chennai. Photo: Flickr/Pushkar V (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Coupled with this, the lack of clear reservations for small producers means that much of the stimulus may get hijacked by **big producers and the corporate sector**. This concern has been expressed, for instance, by the artisanal and small-scale fishworkers groups across India with respect to the Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY), and by farmers with respect to provisions for agricultural infrastructure. In the latter case, measures such as contract farming, no stock limits, deregulation of crop sales, cold storage facilities, and so on, all put subsequently into three ordinances by the central government in the name of benefiting farmers, have significantly exacerbated this concern, with the All India Kisan Sangharsh Coordination Committee holding a series of **demonstrations against them**.

In all, the government is behaving like the captain of a ship who wants to rapidly head out of a storm, but, knowingly, straight into an iceberg. Start preparing your lifeboats, people.

Did the captain have a choice? Yes. Instead of an iceberg, he could have (still can?) head into clear waters. Any stimulus and recovery package out of COVID-19 needs to prioritise the sustainable livelihoods of small producers in all sectors, from farming and pastoralism and fisheries and forestry to crafts and manufacturing. It needs to reserve these sectors for such producers, including clear priority to handmade, rather than leave them open to the most powerful bidders and those with huge capital potential, who are also into mechanised and automated production with low employment potential.

Between agriculture in all its forms and crafts, for instance, and the regeneration and conservation of natural ecosystems and the land, there is potential to provide dignified livelihoods to 200 to 400 million people. Add decentralised manufacturing and infrastructure, and services, and one could reach the vast majority of India's workforce.

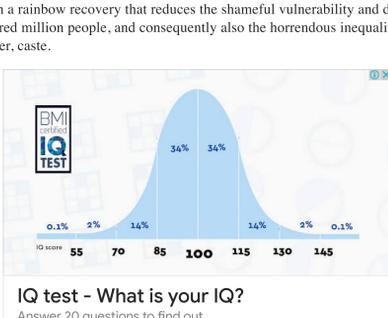
Why cannot textiles, footwear, tourism, banking, and most other sectors of production and services, be managed by community enterprises spread across India? Already there are hundreds of **examples of this**, some from ancient times like handlooms, some new like homestays and community-led tourism, that we can learn from. The re-orientation of the National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme, and its extension to urban areas, could have catered to such sectors.



Also read: Pulwama, China and Atmanirbharta: Is Modi at the End of His Tether?

There are other demands for making India ecologically secure were made in the recently held **Janta Parliament** session on Environment, on August 18. Generated by networks and organisations representing tens of thousands of people from diverse backgrounds, the **resolutions passed** there have been sent to the government. But over the last few decades, none of the parties in power in Delhi have gone for such an approach with any seriousness. They have instead kowtowed to captains of industry and to large producers. Corporate and wealth tax breaks given by this government before COVID-19 have meant that significant revenues that could have been used for the stimulus are not available. Economists have suggested that a mere 2% wealth tax on the richest 1% of Indians, coupled with an inheritance tax, **could generate more revenue** than the total Atmanirbhar Bharat package. It would be enough to support **universal rights** to food, employment, health care, education, old age pension and disability allowance. But the government is not listening.

COVID-19 could have been the break that we needed to re-assess priorities. We could have come up with a rainbow recovery that reduces the shameful vulnerability and deprivation of several hundred million people, and consequently also the horrendous inequalities of wealth, gender, caste.



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Instead, we have an Atmanirbhar Bharat package that has no *atma* (soul) and only increased *nirbharta* (dependence) on the state and on corporations (the 'Reliance' in self-reliance!). One can only hope that continued resistance and alternative pathways shown by people's movements and civil society, still alive and kicking as demonstrated in the nation-wide mobilisation against the EIA notification 2020, will slowly turn the ship towards safety.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh and Vikalp Sangam. Views here are personal.

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