

ENVIRONMENT

A promise belied

ASHISH KOTHARI

Print edition : Aug 13, 2004

T+ T-



The Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance lets go of the opportunity to present a bold new vision to conserve the environment through sustainable development.

GIVEN the excitement generated by the way in which the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) came to power in May, one could be excused for feeling a certain level of optimism on the environmental and social fronts. The UPA's Common Minimum Programme (CMP) was expected to provide a bold new vision of how Indian society should move ahead in a just and sustainable way. Does it live up to the promise? Does it try to ensure that the country's battered environment is given a reprieve? Does it promise steps to help the fishing and farming communities and the Adivasis, who are the most dependent on natural resources, regain security of livelihood and life? And what does it offer to the country's threatened wildlife and biodiversity?

The CMP has placed strong emphasis on issues such as employment, agriculture, education and health. These are areas that have been generally neglected over the past few years, with economic policies tending to pamper the upper-middle class. A natural adjunct to such a shift in emphasis would have been an equally strong focus on environmental sustainability, an aspect that is almost completely missing in the CMP. The CMP has missed several elements that can be introduced as actual programmes and schemes.

Employment: The CMP does not mention one of India's biggest potential sources of employment - the regeneration of land and water. These essential resources have been exploited to such an extent that productivity has been reduced to abysmally low levels over more than 60 per cent of India's landmass. This will lead to low agricultural yields, water shortages, lower fuel and fodder availability, and so on. The best way to regenerate such lands and waterbodies is to get it done with the help of rural and urban communities that are adequately empowered and supported. The success of the regeneration efforts that have been undertaken by communities under the joint forest management and water-harvesting initiatives over several million hectares is an example. However, the official programmes do not go far enough in sharing power with the communities. A Planning Commission report some years back and the report of the Government of India's Task Force on Greening of India in 2001 highlighted the potential for employment in the field.

Such an approach would help the government tackle three critical issues simultaneously. It would help ease the crisis of land/water degradation, which worsens the impact of droughts, causes the migration of villagers to cities, and destroys wildlife. Second, it would help reduce the massive unemployment prevalent in rural areas. Third, it would arrest the declining economic productivity of land and water. The ongoing programmes of wasteland and watershed development would fare better in the hands of local people as the emphasis would be on local solutions and indigenous knowledge, planting or regeneration of local species, and encouraging indigenous farming practices.

Agriculture: It is surprising that despite the increasing focus on organic farming in the reports of the Planning Commission and other official agencies and despite some initiatives taken by the governments of States such as Uttaranchal and Mizoram, the CMP makes no mention of organic, sustainable farming. Several reports have shown the unsustainability and dangers of chemical-intensive farming, which uses one crop variety over huge areas (monoculture). Studies suggest that many cases of suicides by farmers in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and other States are linked to the high debts incurred in buying expensive inputs with frequently unreliable results. It has been proved that organic and biologically diverse farming is safe, productive and within the reach of poor farmers. The "special programme for dryland farming" that the CMP talks about would predominantly support organic agriculture with high seed and livestock diversity. Such areas are eminently suited for production without expensive surface irrigation facilities and for the

continuation of indigenous food crops and varieties such as millets and pulses. Such crops need much greater focus given their proven resistance to diseases and high nutritional value, the deep knowledge people have about the crops, and the fact that farmers can keep the seeds in their control and not lose out to transnational corporations. In the dryland belt of Andhra Pradesh, the Deccan Development Society (DDS) has facilitated such farming among several thousand people, especially Dalit women, and significantly raised productivity, employment and self-reliance in several dozen villages. Agricultural programmes should also encourage the rearing of local breeds of livestock, which have over time proved their worth in difficult situations.

Food and nutrition security: Food security and nutrition are often badly compromised by the conventional system of agriculture, which focusses predominantly on financial returns. On the other hand, a system based on small-scale, organic, biologically diverse farming would go much further in ensuring food and nutrition security. For instance, the DDS initiative has shown how local foodgrains grown organically by farmers, if propagated through the local Public Distribution System (PDS), can provide security to farmers and high nutritional inputs. The implementation of the CMP would do well to focus on reorienting the PDS to procure food locally rather than import it from far-flung centres of rice and wheat production. This could be linked to community-based grain banks (successfully demonstrated in several parts of India by the efforts of the community or non-governmental organisations), which should be promoted instead of the centralised system of godowns of the Food Corporation of India.

Local grain could also be promoted as part of the food-for-work and mid-day meal schemes (treated as a national scheme in the CMP). It would help provide an incentive to local farmers to continue growing indigenous and ecologically safe grain. Such schemes would be critical for women and children.

Women and children: Although the CMP rightly focusses on women and children, two disadvantaged sections of society, it does not explicitly link their rights and interests to natural resources. Such a link is obvious and critical in most parts of India, given women's direct dependence on forests, land and water, biomass-based energy, livestock, or other aspects of natural resources. Nutritional inputs to children are also intricately linked to the availability of natural resources. While emphasising on self-help groups in the "ecologically fragile areas of the country", the UPA could have given an ecologically sensitive orientation to the empowerment of women and children.

Panchayati Raj, SC/ST: The CMP emphasises the establishment of Adivasi rights over non-timber forest produce, mineral resources, and water sources, and an end to the displacement of tribal people from forest areas. It is over a decade since the panchayat-related constitutional amendments were brought in and almost a decade since the even more radical Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act was promulgated. Yet precious little has been done on the ground. Central and State government agencies have been reluctant to let go of power, especially administrative and financial power. From the environmental point of view, a careful assessment is needed on how decentralisation can actually work, how strong rights with responsibilities regarding natural resources can be given to village and urban communities. On the most critical issue, the UPA needs a clearer road map on how it plans to deliver what previous governments failed to.

Economic growth vis-a-vis environment: The CMP acknowledges, only in one or two instances, the need to reconcile economic growth with the environment, one of them in relation to tribal communities. But this is perhaps India's biggest current challenge, for today's growth patterns are clearly unsustainable and enormously damaging to the environment. The CMP's focus on continuing "economic reforms", high infrastructural development, industrialisation of areas like the northeastern region, and so on, are not adequately tempered with strong measures to ensure ecological sustainability. A case in point is the specific commitment in the CMP to complete the Sethu Samudram project (also provided for in the new Budget). The project involves massive dredging of the seabed in the sensitive marine ecosystem of the Gulf of Mannar, which would destroy its globally important biodiversity and affect seriously the local fisherfolk.

A comprehensive review of macro-economic policies from an environmental standpoint is required. Each major sector of the economy, such as infrastructure, industry, agriculture, energy, communications and transport, should be subjected to environmental and social impact assessment procedures (currently EIAs are only applied to individual projects, not to entire sectors). However,

EIA procedures and procedures for according clearance to development projects need to be strengthened considerably. Such procedures were diluted by previous governments to such an extent that it is rare to find honest, comprehensive EIAs. For instance, in the case of Sethu Samudram, there is only a preliminary EIA, a rather incomplete one. So it is strange that the government should be committing itself to its early completion.

Water: One of the most heartening announcements made by the new Water Resources Minister is that the government will critically review the proposed river-linking project. The CMP is somewhat equivocal about the issue, but one hopes the government will deliver on its promise to make a re-assessment "fully consultative". The CMP makes only a passing mention of local water harvesting and other decentralised forms of water conservation and use. As an alternative to expensive, ecologically disastrous and socially disruptive mega projects, these decentralised methods need much greater attention than governments have given them so far. If coupled with the promise to give water-related rights to communities, they could bring in a revolutionary change in rural and urban areas.

Administrative reforms: There is an urgent need for reforms in the forestry and water sectors. The departments concerned need to become less of "governors" and more of facilitative partners to help communities manage natural resources. The CMP's commitment to enhance the right to information is welcome as it could be a key plank to make governance more environmentally accountable.

Science and Technology: Given the previous government's distortion of 'traditional knowledge and practices' to suit its own communal agenda, it is understandable why the UPA wanted to steer clear of references to tradition. However, an extreme approach in the matter would be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. There is enormous merit and relevance in traditional 'sciences' or knowledge systems, technologies, health and agricultural practices, and industrial systems. The country would do well to encourage these strengths while combining them with what is best and appropriate in modern systems. It is strange, for instance, that under Health, the CMP does not even mention the need to provide traditional and local health traditions a major fillip so that they fill the enormous healthcare gaps in the villages and cities.

Energy: It is high time greater attention was given to non-conventional sources of energy and the government stopped treating them as poor step-cousins of conventional sources. The CMP only mentions the "hydrocarbon industry", which is frightening given its known unsustainability and the ecological damage it causes. Non-conventional sources have enormous potential in India (to the order of several hundred thousand megawatts). All that is required is a strong governmental push towards research and development to make them more economical. The CMP's aim to achieve "an integrated energy policy linked with sustainable development" will hopefully give a fillip to R&D in the sector.

In conclusion, the CMP is rather minimalist in its environmental orientation. It belies the expectation that the new government will provide a bolder vision on how development can actually be made more sustainable. It is disappointing that even a mention of wildlife and biodiversity conservation has not been made.

On the bright side, in his address to the nation, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh spoke of the need to make growth "environmentally sustainable". He referred to non-conventional energy sources, spoke of an energy policy package that included environmental aspects, stressed on community-based solutions to water issues, and promised action on urban pollution and sanitation. However, he did not touch upon critical aspects such as sustainable agriculture, traditional and community-based health systems, conservation of biodiversity, and specific measures to make the market and the powerful economic forces more sensitive to ecological sustainability. Finance Minister P. Chidambaram's Budget too is a mix - although the focus on water harvesting and non-conventional energy is welcome, precious little has been promised on many of the aspects mentioned.

Obviously, the UPA has a long way to go in ecological literacy. But it has the potential, and the opportunity, to show that a socially and environmentally more sensitive development model can be brought in. Hopefully, some of the institutions it has created, such as the National Advisory Council, will help it achieve the goal. Otherwise the country will miss another opportunity to show to the world a sustainable path to achieving human welfare.

Ashish Kothari is founder-member of Kalpavriksh, an environmental action group based in Pune/Delhi.