India as G20 President:

Fit for this purpose?

22 DECEMBER 2022, ASHISH KOTHARI

Forests on Great Nicobar, slated to be cut down for an infrastructure project @ Pankaj Sekhsaria

As India took over the presidentship of the G20 on 1st December, Prime Minister Narendra Modi penned some of his thoughts on what this could mean. In this and speeches at the G20 Summit in mid-November and on his weekly 'Mann ki Baat', he stressed that India will use its full capacities to address humanity's biggest crises, including climate, terrorism and pandemics. He called for a 'fundamental mindset shift', towards a 'One Earth-One Family-One Future' approach, away from 'confrontation and competition', war and conflict. He noted the leadership India can provide based on its traditions of seeing "all living beings, and even inanimate things, as composed of the same five basic elements; the panch tatva of earth, water, fire, air and space. Harmony among these elements - within us and between us - is essential for our physical, social and environmental well-being."

Wise words. And indeed, India has the potential to provide many answers to the critical problems the world faces, given its continued and unbroken history of several thousand years, its incredible diversity of human cultures and ways of life, its wealth of wildlife and natural ecosystems, its remarkable traditions of peace,

harmony and non-violence, and the amazing innovativeness and resilience of its people. But if we look at the Indian state's record of dealing with crises within the country itself, on how it has treated nature, and its economic outlook towards confrontation and competition, the question arises: will our actions match our stated intentions? What does its recent past and present tell us?

Perhaps the starkest indicator of this came in mid-November. At the G20 Summit in Bali, as PM Modi (and other country heads like Joe Biden) planted mangrove saplings, the PM's Office tweeted "PM @narendramodi and other G20 leaders visited a mangrove forest in Bali, giving a strong message of coming together to tackle climate change and boost sustainable development." In exactly the same week, the Indian government permitted infrastructure projects that will lead to the clearance of 130 square km of pristine evergreen rainforest and mangroves, the destruction of nesting sites of endangered Leatherback sea turtles and valuable coral reefs, and encroachments into a tribal reserve on Great Nicobar Island.

Ecological sustainability and wisdom are *not* the strong points of either the present or past governments in India. Since 1991 in particular, a strong push towards globalised economic growth has made some of the country's most ecologically sensitive areas into sacrifice zones, with Great Nicobar being only the latest. Laws and policies relating to the environment, a result of hard-fought gains by people's movements in the 1970s and 80s, have been whittled down since the early 1990s. The current government has intensified and hastened this decline over the last few years; in fact, during the COVID period, perhaps making use of the fact that people's attention was elsewhere and it was difficult to mobilise, an astounding 123 official instruments (legal notifications, government orders etc) have been issued, the vast majority of them weakening environmental regulations. All of this is aimed at making it easier for corporations to take over lands, forests, water, coasts, and other ecosystems, and for the further commercialisation and commodification of natural 'resources'.

It is not a coincidence that most of these areas are also home to India's culturally and economically vulnerable Adivasis (Indigenous peoples, though this is a term the Indian government does not accept) and other local communities, practising forestry, small-scale farming, pastoralism, fisheries, and crafts. In 2009, a Committee on State Agrarian Relations and the Unfinished Task in Land Reforms, set up by the Union Ministry of Rural Development, termed the take-over of Adivasi lands as the "biggest grab of tribal lands since Columbus". This was in its draft report: someone in the government must have gotten wise to the implications of such an admission and removed it in the final version. Nevertheless, the final report noted that: "recent developments relating to land acquisition for industrial and mining purposes in Orissa, Chattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh has created uprooting of thousands of tribal communities from their livelihood sources."

Can India lead the G20 to take urgent steps to reduce climate change emissions that the planet so desperately needs? Given that the countries in this formation are predominantly responsible for the climate crises in terms of historical emissions and currently destructive activities, this would be an enormous service indeed. One

encouraging feature is India's consistent stand demanding action by industrialised countries in keeping with their overwhelming role in creating the crisis. But its own domestic actions on climate do not inspire much confidence.

PM Modi did signal the intent to take firm action on climate when his government embarked on a very ambitious enhancement of renewable energy and reduction in the carbon intensity of several sectors. Some signs of finally accepting the need to move towards organic agriculture are also visible in recent pronouncements. At the Climate COP26 in Glasgow, Mr Modi announced a *panchamrit* (5 nectar) programme that included becoming net-zero by 2070, achieving 50% power production through non-fossil fuel sources, and 45% reduction in the carbon intensity of its economy. Unfortunately, there were a lot of [dubious subtexts hidden](#) in these pronouncements. They did not reveal that there will be continued expansion of coal mining and thermal power; they included large hydropower and nuclear energy in the non-fossil fuel sources which may be technically correct but which greenwashes their own serious ecological (including climate) and social consequences; and they were scale-neutral, allowing a continued prioritisation of land-guzzling mega-solar and wind parks set up by big corporations over a decentralised generation that could be in the hands of communities.

Most starkly, the government has done almost nothing to help India's vulnerable communities become climate resilient. Tens of millions of people are already impacted by extreme and unpredictable weather, sea level rise, the recession of glaciers, and other such clear signs of the climate crisis. Yet, adaptation continues to receive such low political attention and financial resources, it could be called criminal negligence. In 2022, the National Climate Action Plan got a ridiculous budget allocation of INR 30 crores (about US$3.5 Million, out of a total budget of about US$ 700 billion)!

Doublespeak has been perfected by today's political leaders, surpassing anything in Orwell's *Ninety Eighty Four*. As G20 President, PM Modi says he will promote harmony and collaboration, away from confrontation and conflict. But the Economic Surveys of his government (and those of his predecessors) aggressively focus on being 'globally competitive'. In the kind of cut-throat globalisation we live in, this entails massive compromises in labour and environmental standards. It also involves continued internal [colonisation of lands](#) and people, as also [grabbing lands in other countries](#) such as Ethiopia.

PM Modi also wrote about India's ancient democratic traditions, and how "We have tried to make national development not an exercise in top-down governance, but rather a citizen-led 'people's movement'." This is ironic, given how his government has treated actual people's movements, cracking down on democratic dissent, liberally using the terms 'sedition' and 'anti-national', blocking civil society groups from being able to receive foreign funds, and imprisoning political dissenters for years without any proper recourse to justice. Mr Modi also spoke appreciatively about India's enormous diversity of languages, religions, and customs, but his

government and political party have presided over increasing religious intolerance targeted at minorities. Calls for a 'Hindu nation' have become much more strident in the last few years, and there is no discouragement from the party in power.

According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's [Global Democracy Index](#): "In India, democratic norms have been under pressure since 2015. India's score fell from a peak of 7.92 in 2014 to 6.61 in 2020 and its global ranking slipped from 27th to 53rd as a result of democratic backsliding under the leadership of Narendra Modi, a member of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ... The increasing influence of religion under the Modi premiership, whose policies have fomented anti-Muslim feelings and religious strife, has damaged the political fabric of the country. The enactment in December 2019 of the Citizenship (Amendment) Act 2019 continued to fuel riots in 2020, with several left dead following clashes in February in the capital city, New Delhi. The Act introduces a religious element to the conceptualisation of Indian citizenship, a step that many critics see as undermining the secular basis of the Indian state."

It is also interesting that in his G20-related pronouncements, PM Modi gave little or no emphasis on inequality. Perhaps not surprising, given that the rich-poor gap has steadily worsened in India (as it has globally). Though marginally better than previous years, in 2022 India ranked 123 out of 161 countries in reducing inequality. More importantly, inequality has steadily increased; [according to Oxfam India](#), "the top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the total national wealth", and "63 million (people) are pushed into poverty because of healthcare costs every year - almost two people every second." Successive governments have paved the path for an astonishing increase in the wealth of a few individuals, in thinly disguised forms of crony capitalism. Gautam Adani of Adani Group has seen his wealth go up [a stunning 20 times](#) since Mr Modi became the Prime Minister, to become the world's third richest man, with plenty of evidence of how his projects have been given the go-ahead [bypassing laws and norms](#). With what face can India be a role model of integrity the G20?

Questioning India's fitness for the G20 presidency does not, of course, mean that any of the other nations is a better bet. Many, like the US and UK, are even further from any such status. In general, nation-states have failed humanity in dealing with the most serious problems it faces – inequality, war, ecological collapse, climate crisis, and health epidemics. Or rather, they have been responsible for creating or deepening such problems. This calls into question fundamental issues of governance, especially the inherent flaw in [liberal electoral democracy](#) which focuses power in the hands of political parties and governments rather than spread it across all people and communities. It also raises questions about a global economic order which encourages hostile competition between countries and is unable to rein in the enormous power of private corporations. In this sense, the G20 formation is hardly fit for purpose if the purpose is to move out of mega-crises and towards justice, peace and equity. It has presided over the worsening of these crises, and if the record of most of these countries at global forums like the Climate COPs is to be considered, there is little evidence of any significant shift in approach.

But even within this context, it is worth asking of whoever takes over G20's presidentship: does it have the potential to at least nudge the world towards such goals? Judging by the Indian state's performance vis-à-vis its own people and ecosystems, the answer is disappointing. If there is hope, it lies in people's movements and civil society groups exploring exciting, grounded initiatives in India and across the world, pointing to how these goals can be met. Some states within India have learnt from these and are trying innovative approaches including decentralized renewable energy and organic farming, and a few stray measures by the central government also hint at some opening. If the Indian state can go further along these lines, and take these learnings into the G20, we may still see some movement towards justice and sustainability, but that is a very big IF.

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3. 2022 G20 Bali summit, November 15, 2022, November 16, 2022

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5. PM Narendra Modi and Indonesia's President Joko Widodo hold hands during the handover ceremony at the G20 Leaders' Summit in Nusa Dua, Bali, on 16 November 2022

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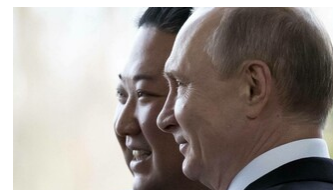

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