

## ENVIRONMENT

## No sign of green

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Destruction wrought by the Parvati hydroelectric project in Himachal Pradesh.-ASHISH KOTHARI

The Approach Paper to the Eleventh Plan fails to emphasise India's commitment to sustainable development.

AT the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, India along with other member-countries of the United Nations, committed itself to a path of sustainable development. In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, this commitment was reiterated through a unanimous Political Declaration. At the turn of the millennium, the countries also framed the impressive Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), one of which is to "ensure environmental sustainability". While several countries have gradually moved towards meeting this commitment, India seems to have moved further away from its commitment. This becomes apparent when one examines the 80-page Approach Paper to the Eleventh Five-Year Plan, released recently by the Planning Commission of India.

On the face of it, the government does seem to be aware of the need to integrate environmental concerns into developmental strategies. The Approach Paper makes the bold statement: "The 11th Plan must integrate development planning and environmental concerns". But the rest of the document seems to go in the opposite direction.

The first chapter, on "Objectives and challenge", contains no reference to environment or sustainability whatsoever. A single paragraph "Protecting the environment" is all that it gets under the section, "Some major challenges". Somewhat later in the document, in the chapter on "Sectoral Policies for the Eleventh Plan", a couple of pages are devoted to "Environmental sustainability", dealing mainly with technical and managerial aspects such as increasing green cover, conserving wildlife, reducing pollution and tackling solid waste. There is no focus on how to steer the economy towards greater ecological sustainability although at the Johannesburg summit India had committed itself to a "10-year framework of programmes to accelerate the shift towards sustainable consumption and production" and the MDGs require India to "integrate principles of sustainable development into policies and programmes". The concrete targets set in the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation or the specific elements of the MDGs do not figure in the Approach Paper. There are no indicators to measure whether India is moving towards achieving the targets domestically or

internationally.

On the contrary, time and again the Approach Paper makes it clear that environmental regulations should not be a hurdle in reaching a growth rate of 8.5 per cent. Under the section "Industrial growth", the paper recommends single-window clearance for industrial applications to reduce "delays" in various procedures, including environmental clearances. The reduction in "delays" is a euphemism for diluting environmental standards and regulations, as witnessed in the amendment to the Environmental Impact Assessment notification in 2006. Under "Environmental sustainability", the paper warns of the danger of environment protection leading to a "new licence permit raj system", and recommends a review of environmental clearance procedures without which "large increases in investment required for accelerated growth will not fructify".

Under "Mining", it recommends "elimination of constraints in the way of investments in mining activities" and goes on to cite favourably a report which recommends that mining companies that are given "reconnaissance permit" should also have the right to get "prospecting licence" and thereafter "mining lease". Given that many State governments are already eager to lease out forest tracts and Adivasi habitats to mining companies, these recommendations are alarming. Measures such as the removal of the Urban Land Ceiling Act are suggested, with no reference to the unsustainable boom in construction activities and heavy road traffic that cities are witnessing and no recommendations have been made on urban environmental regulations. It is ironical that while the Approach Paper recommends full provision of public services such as health the government is facilitating the wholesale takeover of land and water for industrial purposes, depriving communities of basic health resources such as nutritious crops and forest and aquatic produce.

Strangely, the section on agriculture does not acknowledge the critical role of environmental degradation in lowering the average productivity of land, although it mentions other reasons such as imbalanced fertilizer use. Nor does it mention, in its recommendations, the importance of organic or sustainable farming. A series of measures to accelerate production and enhance farmers' security are recommended, including greater orientation towards markets and trade (especially exports), without referring to the enormous impact this would have on land and water. Contract farming is favoured, ignoring the highly iniquitous relationship between corporate bodies and farmers and the environmental degradation caused by monocropping promoted by companies as part of such deals.

Also ignored is the safer alternative of building direct links between farmers and citizen consumers, and of diverting local agricultural produce into the Public Distribution System (rather than procuring from Punjab and Haryana for the whole country). Achieving self-sufficiency and food security through organic, low input farming does not find a mention in the Plan document.

The crisis that pastoral communities face is acknowledged, and strong words are used to trace this to government policy, which has resulted in the blocking of migratory routes by development and conservation projects and encroachment on pastures by activities such as biodiesel plantations. But no recommendation is made on how to deal with this situation.

Creditably, the Planning Commission recognises the displacement of communities for development projects as a serious problem. However, the solution it provides does not touch the heart of the matter, which is the flawed decision-making process regarding what development projects are necessary in the first place. Such a process would incorporate environmental and social impacts, and would centrally involve affected populations in decision-making, possibly avoiding many cases of displacements in the first place. It is, for instance, not good enough to say that in mining areas the "rights of those whose lands are acquired must be suitably protected"; what is needed is for such people to be involved in taking an informed decision on whether the mining project is necessary in the first place.

The Approach Paper cites a National Common Minimum Programme statement that India can "absorb" three times the current Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) average of \$5.4 billion a year. It is not clear whether the term "absorb" includes the carrying capacity of the environment; and what will such a massive jump in the activities of multinational corporations in industrial, mining, infrastructure and other sectors entail? The Paper makes no mention of this.

As the Planning Commission moves towards the finalisation of the 11th Plan, it must find ways to operationalise the Approach Paper's commitment to "integrate development planning and

environmental concerns". If it wants to show that it truly means that "there should be no compromise on protecting the environment" and that "in the longer run environmental sustainability and human well-being are not necessarily in conflict", it needs to integrate the following into the Plan:

A range of indicators to assess progress towards sustainability, including per capita availability of environmental services such as clean air and water, sanitation, forests and other natural ecosystems, reduction in the rates of biodiversity loss, clean and sustainable energy production and consumption and health standards linked to a clean environment. Countries such as the United Kingdom have developed a large number of such indicators, which we could assess for suitability in Indian conditions;

A commitment to move increasingly towards non-conventional clean energy sources (wind, solar, biomass, and so on). China, which we never tire to show as a model of economic growth, has announced a target of meeting 15 per cent of its energy needs through such sources by 2020; Sweden has announced that within 15 years it will be an oil-free economy. These are the sort of goals we should be setting for ourselves;

Strategies to make every economic sector more environmentally sensitive through environment impact assessments, not only of individual projects but of entire sectors and departments. For instance, when the Power Ministry or Water Resources Ministry drafts its plans and policies, it must go through an assessment of their possible environmental and social impacts. An "ecological footprint" analysis needs to be built in, which shows how much damage is caused by an economic sector, or a city, or the country as a whole;

Green budgeting and accounting in which the true value of services provided by intact ecosystems and biodiversity, including water and food security, are factored in, and in which the true social and economic cost of destroying the environment is centrally integrated. China is considering introducing a "green gross domestic product" regime, having realised that its economic miracle will not last long if environmental degradation continues at the current rate;

Sufficient investment to regenerate the degraded land and water resources, a mission which could provide employment to millions of people;

Redefining the concept of "backwardness" so that districts currently classified under this are considered ecologically and culturally sensitive and development plans are devised accordingly; and

Shifting subsidies away from unsustainable products such as agro-chemicals, towards organic, biologically diverse agriculture and animal husbandry (what the Approach Paper calls "multi-product" farms).

None of these concepts is new. They are being employed in a number of countries. If India wants to project itself as a global superpower, it must first show it is capable of living much more responsibly on the earth and providing a much healthier and cleaner environment.

However, there is one silver lining. The working groups set up to develop the component on Environment and Forests contained a number of civil society actors. Their final report contains a number of progressive ideas. One of these is to set up a Commission on Sustainable Development, an autonomous statutory body with powers to monitor and guide the government's development direction.

Others include an Environment Clearance Authority that can function independently of both government and project proponents, and compulsory public hearings and written local community consent for all development projects.

It is, however, not clear how much of this will go into the final Plan. If we do not incorporate such measures into our planning and development process, we will continue on a perilous collision course with the very ecological conditions that give us life.

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