

ENVIRONMENT

Sustaining India: Is There Anything to Choose Between BJP and Congress?

A look at how the country's political heavyweights deal with environmental issues and livelihoods in their poll manifestos



Coal mining in Maharashtra. Credit: Ashish Kothari



Ashish Kothari

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interactions



ENVIRONMENT 3 HOURS AGO

Twin crises beset India today: serious unemployment and the loss of livelihoods, along with the collapse of the ecological basis on which we all survive. Any political party that does not deal with these is not serious about the country's future.

So how well do the country's political heavyweights, the Congress and the BJP, deal with the environment and livelihoods in their poll manifestos?

Overall vision of livelihoods and ecology

The Congress manifesto, '**Congress Will Deliver**', appears to have recognised at least some important steps that are needed to slow down the

catastrophic destruction of the environment. The actions it promises could help provide dignified livelihoods for 65-70% of Indians who depend directly on the natural environment, including farmers, forest-dwellers, fishers, and craftspersons.

These include a rejig of its flagship MNREGA programme to incorporate land-based work, and substantial focus on forest-fish-agriculture based livelihoods.

Unfortunately, its main economic plank for these and several other major programmes remains economic growth. For some reason, every major political party in India still relies on the outdated myth that high rates of GDP growth will magically translate into jobs, environmental security, and much else.

This is not surprising coming from the Congress; it was after all the one that ushered in economic liberalisation and globalisation in 1991, with macro-economic policy shifts that have not generated substantial net new employment ('jobless growth', as its called), and on top of this have proven disastrous for the environment and for nature-dependent communities.

But this serious blindspot afflicts the BJP too. The BJP's overall vision of livelihoods and ecology does not exist. Its ecological ignorance is breathtaking, and its cavalier approach to the livelihoods of nature-based communities is callous.

Also read: [Under Modi, India Has Witnessed an Unprecedented Chomping of the Earth](#)

In a way, at least, it is consistent. In the 2014-2019 phase, it has shown itself to be quite insensitive to the needs of those who toil the land or in the forests or in the seas, or at home using natural ingredients to make crafts. The same attitude with which it hurt the lives of such people through

measures like demonetisation and the Goods and Services Tax oozes through much of its manifesto.

Environmental clearances

Take this tragicomedy:

“We have ensured speed and effectiveness in issuing forest and environmental clearances for eligible projects due to which we have added around 9000 sq. kms to the forest cover of the country. We are committed to maintaining this pace through the adoption of cleaner practises to make our nation a greener country.”

This is either ecological ignorance or deliberate neglect at its worst.

‘Environmental clearances’ is a euphemism for allowing forests to be destroyed for mining, dams, expressways, industries and the like.

Also read: [The Supreme Court Sends Forest Rights Back to a Dark Past](#)

So what this seems to be saying is that several thousand square km of land have been allowed to be deforested; perhaps an equivalent or more has been planted as part of ‘compensatory afforestation’. But even a schoolchild would be able to tell the BJP bosses that no plantation can replace a natural forest.

Wildlife and biodiversity

The joke the BJP manifesto plays on forests gets even more deadly in its vision on India’s wildlife and biodiversity since there is none.

There is no mention of the country's incredible wild flora and fauna, and the imperative of conserving these. Nor any kind of recognition that natural ecosystems of various kinds need to be protected for their own sake, and for the irreplaceable ecological functions they provide to us, not the least of which is water security which we so desperately need in the face of a growing cycle of droughts, floods, and other calamities made worse by the climate crisis.

The Congress fares better, committing to a “comprehensive land and water use policy and plan that will include measures for the conservation of ecosystems and the bio-diversity and wildlife contained therein, without affecting the legitimate rights of local communities”.

Rights of communities dependent on nature

The issue of the rights of communities dependent on nature has been a major battlefield for decades. For forest-dwellers, the Congress commitment to the Forest Rights Act (one of its other flagship actions during UPA I regime) is explicitly stated; BJP's is more muted – not surprising given its rather lukewarm defence of the Act when it was challenged by some wildlife groups in the Supreme Court, and repeated attempts to bypass gram sabha consent for clearing forest land.

Small-scale fishers have sought rights to coastal and marine areas, especially for security against large-scale commercial operators and against projects that gobble up the coasts (tourism, sandmining, city expansion, ports).

Unfortunately, neither the BJP nor the Congress touch on this, though the Congress “promises to protect the coastal zones of the country”, reverse “recent steps that diluted the coastal zone regulations”, and do all this “without affecting the livelihood opportunities of fishing communities”.

It also offers a dedicated Ministry of Fisheries and Welfare of Fisherfolk. The BJP's offer to fishers is restricted to some charity and welfare

measures.

Neither party mentions pastoralists; there is no trace of concern about the serious plight that several million nomadic livestock herders face in the cutting off of their migration routes and the neglect of their customary rights to grazing lands.



Kharad weavers, Kachchh. Credit: Ashish Kothari

Craftspersons

Another huge section of Indians dependent on nature is craftspersons, the country's second biggest employer after agriculture. The BJP has nothing to say about them at all. So much for its commitment to Mahatma Gandhi, whose 150th birth anniversary it mentions.

The Congress, on the other hand, "will promote the manufacture and export of India's traditional products like handloom products and

handicrafts that employ lakhs of persons”.

Strengthening laws and regulatory bodies

One of the biggest problems with all governments, especially since 1991, has been the bypassing of environmental laws and policies to make it easier for mining and dam projects. For many years now, citizens have been asking for (and have managed to get into the recommendations for the five-year plans), a national body with independent constitutional status like that of the CAG and the Chief Election Commission. Such a body could oversee the implementation and monitoring of environmental laws.

The BJP has nothing whatsoever on strengthening environment-related institutions (not surprising, for it has intensified the sidelining of the ministry of environment).

But refreshingly, the Congress promises an “independent, empowered and transparent Environment Protection Authority (EPA) to establish, monitor and enforce environmental standards and regulations” (which) “will replace all other bodies that currently exercise jurisdiction and powers.”

Pollution

On pollution, the Congress has more to offer. It accepts that “air pollution is a national health emergency”, and promises that “all major sources of emission will be targeted, mitigated and reduced to acceptable levels”.

BJP too recognises the issue, but restricts its promise to reduce air pollution by only 35% in the “102 most polluted cities”, as if that will be enough to remove the emergency. On water, it offers only to clean the Ganga (without saying how, given that its enormous budget for **Namami Gange** has failed to make any dent in pollution levels); the Congress at least recognises that there is a need to clean up all rivers.

Also read: [Almost Rs 4,000 Crore Spent, but the Ganga Is More](#)

Polluted Under Modi's Watch

Farm crisis

Both parties must be cognisant of the enormous crises facing farmers and agriculture. Commendably, they both recognise the need to promote organic farming, though neither ventures into any comprehensive target, nor a commitment to phase out harmful chemicals. The Congress additionally commits to millets and on-farm diversity. Both will support farmer producer organisations, both have lots of welfare measures lined up.

To its credit, BJP wants to initiate a pension scheme for small farmers. The Congress wants to establish “National Commission on Agricultural Development and Planning consisting of farmers, agricultural scientists and agricultural economists to examine and advise the government on how to make agriculture viable, competitive and remunerative”, its recommendations being binding on the government.

But the absolute dire straits Indian agriculture is in will require nothing short of a drastic overhaul of economic and social priorities, and neither party appears equipped to even conceive of how to do this.



Munsiari Himalayan scape in Uttarakhand. Credit: Ashish Kothari

Renewable energy

Farmers, fishers, pastoralists are also being affected by the climate crisis. The BJP mentions its global role in this, and promises to continue the journey towards substantial renewable energy capacity. That, however, seems to be its sole solution.

The Congress recognises it as a wider issue. It too promises cleaner energy, notably also “off-grid renewable power generation with ownership and revenues vesting in local bodies”, and commits to a major programme on adaptation (missing from BJP’s manifesto).

Democratic empowerment

Finally, any kind of success in generating dignified livelihoods and protecting the environment, is contingent on the democratic empowerment

of all people. This means the completion of the journey begun in the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments providing powers to gram sabhas and urban ward sabhas. Governments have been extremely reluctant to devolve full political, financial, legal, and administrative powers to these levels, or recognise these where people mobilise to assert them.

The BJP shows no inclination towards this at all in its manifesto. It cites ‘gram swaraj’ as “one of the pillars of Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of India”, but then offers a version of it that would have made Gandhiji cringe with horror: a list of charity offerings like piped drinking water, housing, roads, etc. Nothing whatsoever on the direct democratic powers that people should have.

The Congress’s vision is clearer, it “promises to enhance the role and authority of the gram sabhas in matters concerning the villages and panchayats” and in relation to laws like the Panchayat Act, the Forest Rights Act, and the Land Acquisition Act, “to ensure that the authority of the Gram Sabha under the following Acts is obeyed and upheld”.

Also read: [Pushing States to Dilute their Land Laws Will Not Make Acquisition Easier](#)

Neither the BJP nor the Congress, however, say anything on empowering urban wards or area sabhas, though the Congress does commit to providing more powers to municipalities.

The score card

In general, the BJP’s regressive attitude towards democratic rights is typified in its manifesto’s utter silence on these issues. In its 2014-19 period, it has not brought in a single rights-based legislation, conversely trying its best to dilute existing ones.

The Congress manifesto repeatedly affirms human rights and democratic

freedoms, and promises to repeal or amend anti-democratic laws, that have been used to harass, intimidate, and even kill citizens who dissent from official policy or demand their constitutional rights. Its emphasis on democracy in water, forests, and other arenas is decidedly progressive compared to BJP's silence.

Having been a strong critic of Congress economic policies for all of its terms in power, I never thought I'd say this: going purely by its manifesto (and leaving aside the thorny issue of implementation), the Congress seems a necessary evil, far better than the BJP.

Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune. The views expressed here are personal.



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