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A manifesto for justice that has sprung from crises

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The 'People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India' attempts to resist the forces of destruction and give life to human needs and aspirations

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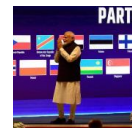
As India staggers through multiple crises, there is a desperate search for solutions to the problems of unemployment, social and cultural strife, ecological collapse, and erosion of democratic rights.

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The last few years have seen a worsening situation. The recent desperate attempt by unemployed people to draw attention to their plight by gatecrashing Parliament, the sinking of Joshimath and the dam burst in Sikkim, the conflict in Manipur, the attempt to stifle democratic voices by slapping false cases against activists and journalists and lawyers who dare to speak up, or by suspending Opposition Members of Parliament en masse are indicative of the growing malaise affecting India. We are not alone, for crises are engulfing other parts of the world.

Hope lies in the many initiatives to resist the forces of destruction, and to construct alternative pathways of meeting human needs and aspirations. Some of these come from governments and businesses, many are by communities and people's collectives. There is a growing demand for basic policy level shifts to support such alternative approaches.

A gathering of initiatives

On December 18, 85 people's movements and civil society organisations released a **'People's Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India'**. Gathered under the national platform, Vikalp Sangam (Alternatives Confluence), these groups represent hundreds of initiatives working on ecological food production, decentralised water harvesting and management, community-based energy production, dignified housing and settlements, meaningful education and health security, locally empowered decision-making, and resistance against destructive projects.



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In about a decade, Vikalp Sangam has convened over 30 physical assemblies, published 1,500 stories of positive change, brought out a collective vision of the India we want, and advocated policy changes.

Also read | People's Manifesto: Over 85 movements unite for a just, equitable, and sustainable India

The manifesto is aimed at the general election 2024 but also at various local to national institutions and processes. On the economy, it takes on the serious crisis of unemployment, especially among the youth, urging priority attention to small manufacturing, crafts, value added produce from agriculture, forestry, fisheries, and pastoralism, and the extension of the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act to urban areas. To make these viable, it asks that all goods and services that can be produced through handmade and small manufacturing, should be reserved for these.

The Vikalp Sangam process has compiled hundreds of practical examples of these approaches. Its website, www.vikalpsangam.org, has stories of rural revival, leading to reduced outmigration, and, in many cases, even reverse migration back from cities and large industries to villages and small manufacturing or crafts. There are dozens of stories of dignified, remunerative livelihoods based on agriculture or other land-based occupations, combined with new ones such as homestay-based tourism, youth enterprises combining traditional and modern knowledge and technologies, and other ways to escape the mechanised, uncreative rat race of mass industrial production.

Such examples will remain limited in their reach as long as macro-economic policies and budgets are focused on large industry controlled by big corporations and government agencies, with extreme inequalities of economic and political power. The manifesto demands curbs on the enormous black economy, reduction in the

ratio of highest and lowest salaries, greater wealth and inheritance taxation of the rich, and basic income and pension for all workers.

Noting both the increasing authoritarian tendencies of the state, and the unfinished task of decentralisation, the manifesto asks for real devolution of financial and legal powers to village and urban assemblies, fuller implementation of panchayat laws, a comprehensive law on accountability of state agencies including mandatory public audits, and reviving the independence of institutions such as the Election Commission and the media. Remarking also on the illegitimate crackdown on peaceful dissent, the manifesto seeks the repeal of repeatedly misused laws like Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act and The National Security Act.

Expressing concern about inter-faith and inter-ethnic conflicts, hate speech, and vulnerabilities of minorities, the manifesto asks for forums of dialogue and restoring co-existence, and for priority in all public and private institutions to the most marginalised sections (women, Dalits, Adivasis, religious and sexual minorities, persons with disability). It seeks to reserve 6% of GDP for education, based on mother tongue, activity-based, culturally and ecologically rooted learning. It notes the need for community health processes based on multiple systems, priority to preventing ill-health through adequate nutrition, safe water, and other determinants of a healthy life, and for all this, 3% of the GDP.

A specific focus on environmental issues

The manifesto urges a national land and water policy that protects important ecological functions (such as water and soil), effective community-led conservation of wildlife and biodiversity, and collective rights to natural resources by extending a law such as the Forest Rights Act to other ecosystems. It urges complete conversion of India's farming to organic, biologically diverse methods by 2040,

and drastic cuts in toxic products, plastics and other non-biodegradable materials. Decentralised water harvesting managed by communities, decentralised renewable energy and phasing out fossil fuels and nuclear power by 2030, are suggested.

The manifesto asks to roll back the weakening of environmental impact assessment and forest clearance processes, and introduce impact assessment of sectors, such as energy as a whole. A National Environment Commissioner is recommended, with an independent constitutional status like that of the Election Commissioner or the Comptroller and Auditor General.

The climate crisis, already bearing down on tens of millions of Indians in the form of erratic weather, extreme heat, and the drying up of water sources including glaciers, needs much greater priority than given so far. This includes greater allocation for helping communities adapt to these impacts.

There are other recommendations spread over 25 pages, summarised as a 21-point charter. Backed by documented examples available on Vikalp Sangam's website, this is not an exercise in abstract, wishful thinking. But will political parties and governments listen?

A previous attempt like this, in 2019, resulted in some parties including some recommendations in their election manifestos. The one that came (back) to power, had not included anything. But even if parties incorporate some crucial points, they may not implement them.

As citizens of India, we need to be much more alert and pro-active, demanding that elected representatives do what they are supposed to do, but also asserting our own voice in all decisions affecting our lives. In a special section, the manifesto also urges enabling the voices of the country's large youth population.

Many decades ago, the Adivasi village, Mendha Lekha of Gadchiroli district of Maharashtra, stated: “we elect the government in Delhi, but in our village we are the government”. Dalit women farmers in Telangana have asserted complete control over seeds, knowledge, water, and land to achieve nutritional security. Residents’ associations in Bhuj town of Kachchh have implemented local decision-making as part of urban planning.

The Vikalp Sangam Manifesto is infused with these notions of direct and accountable democracy, economic self-reliance, ecological responsibility and socio-cultural equality. Member-organisations of the Vikalp Sangam will continue promoting these through advocacy and ground action.

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



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