

‘Nyay Patra’ vs ‘Modi ki Guarantee’: Free citizens or wards of the state?

The Congress and BJP manifestos are unflatteringly similar, but with one crucial difference: the empowerment of citizens.

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Unemployed youth filling application forms to access job openings in the private sector outside an “employment van” in Hyderabad on August 25, 2021. | Photo Credit: NOAH SEELAM/AFP

Their respective titles are indicative of the differences: the manifesto of the Congress is called “Nyay Patra” (Justice Letter), whereas the BJP’s is called “Modi ki Guarantee”. But beyond the collective image vs personality cult character (Prime Minister Narendra

Modi is mentioned 67 times in the BJP manifesto), there are similarities and differences of deeper, more long-term consequence.

Election manifestos are notorious for being none-too-consequential in convincing voters, and even less important in the actions of a party after coming to power or in the opposition. Yet, they do indicate a mindset, and some party actions are likely to flow from this mindset. It would be interesting to see how they fare on goals that are crucial for India and the world: social justice, democracy, ecological sustainability, jobs, and livelihood security. As India enters history's biggest-ever election, with consequences even beyond its borders, it is important to get an understanding of what its two biggest parties are thinking.

Broad similarities in promises and omissions: First, the broad similarities, both in terms of what they are promising and what they are omitting. The BJP promises a spate of welfare measures for nearly all sections of society, from the marginalised to the middle classes. The Congress is less detailed on this count but has considerable focus on reaching those who have been deprived or left out. Both contain actions relating to education, health, economic growth, environment, jobs, defence and security, and infrastructure. There are several progressive actions in both, like promoting renewable or green energy, sustaining cultural heritage, establishing multimodal urban transportation, and cleaning up India's dismally polluted air and water.

On some specific actions, one scores over the other. For instance, in promising the adoption of natural farming, learning in mother tongue, traditional sports, and sustainable consumption lifestyles, the BJP is explicit. The Congress, on the other hand, has more promising language when it comes to "same work same wage" for men and women workers, self-reliance of panchayats in energy, climate resilience and adaptation, free and universal healthcare, an urban job guarantee scheme, and linking ecological restoration to livelihood creation.

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Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP President J.P. Nadda release the BJP manifesto ahead of the general election, at the party headquarters in New Delhi on April 14, 2024. | Photo Credit: SAJJAD HUSSAIN/AFP

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What is omitted is equally important. Both manifestos are silent on some crucial actions that could lead India to achieve the goals of justice, equality, and sustainability. For instance, on jobs and livelihoods (one of India's biggest crises given what are now the highest unemployment rates in decades), there are glaring gaps. There is considerable evidence of the livelihood potential of micro and small manufacturing and service units, especially labour-intensive ones and those dealing with handmade goods, and though both parties promise to support such units, it is meaningless unless they are given either reservation and/or tax exemptions or other such incentives. Unfortunately, for the most part, they have to compete on a highly unequal playing field, with big mechanised industry in the hands of powerful corporations. Yet, both parties have prioritised such industrialisation even though the paradox of high economic growth but stagnating job creation ("jobless growth"), largely due to automation and

mechanisation, has characterised the last few decades. Both have also ignored the long-standing demand to exempt handmade products from GST.

There are other such misses. Multimodal transport is a good idea, but neither manifesto explicitly prioritises cycling and walking and buses; in the context of a huge chunk of public transport budgets going into metros, this absence is glaring. Both parties list several environment-related actions such as pollution control, conservation of forests, and recycling. But these read like a haphazard, random set of actions with no coherence and comprehensiveness, especially because they are not contained within a coherent environmental governance approach or a systematic land and water use policy.

Both also continue to believe that high economic growth (measured by metrics such as GDP) is a proxy for development and well-being, ignoring global evidence that there is no necessary relationship. They ignore the need to diversify indicators of well-being, including questions such as does everyone have clean drinking water and clean air; does everyone have adequate nutritious food; does everyone have access to good quality learning and education; does everyone have a voice in decision-making, and so on. When it comes to education, both retain a top-down and homogenised approach (with some qualifiers like the BJP's promise of mother-tongue-based teaching); this ignores the enormous potential of the diverse, community-integrated, ecologically and culturally rooted approach built on multiple knowledge systems.



Congress leaders Sonia Gandhi, Rahul Gandhi and Mallikarjun Kharge display the party's manifesto for the general election in New Delhi on April 5, 2024. | Photo Credit: ADNAN ABIDI/REUTERS

Possibly the biggest problem with both manifestos is their reliance on an economic pathway that has proved to be severely problematic from multiple perspectives. In the past few decades, and especially since 1991, economic globalisation and high growth rates, heavy industrial and infrastructure development, and other land-intensive sectors have pushed India into the zone of ecological unsustainability, displaced millions of people, and widened the gap between the rich and the poor to unprecedented levels.

Ironically, the Congress manifesto lauds its record in ushering India into the global economy in 1991, while also claiming actions for ecological sustainability and social justice, ignoring the inherent contradictions.

The BJP wants to take the same approach further when it says it will make India the world's third-largest economy and promises to convert nearly all sectors into "global" hubs or models with digitisation and tech-heavy investments. This includes targeting fragile areas like the Lakshadweep and Andaman and Nicobar islands for global tourist flow, ignoring the adverse impacts of unregulated tourism that many such areas are

already reeling under. Already, its planned mega-infrastructure project in Nicobar is likely to destroy 130 sq km of prime rainforest, dispossess some of India's oldest tribal populations, and violate both environmental and tribal rights laws.

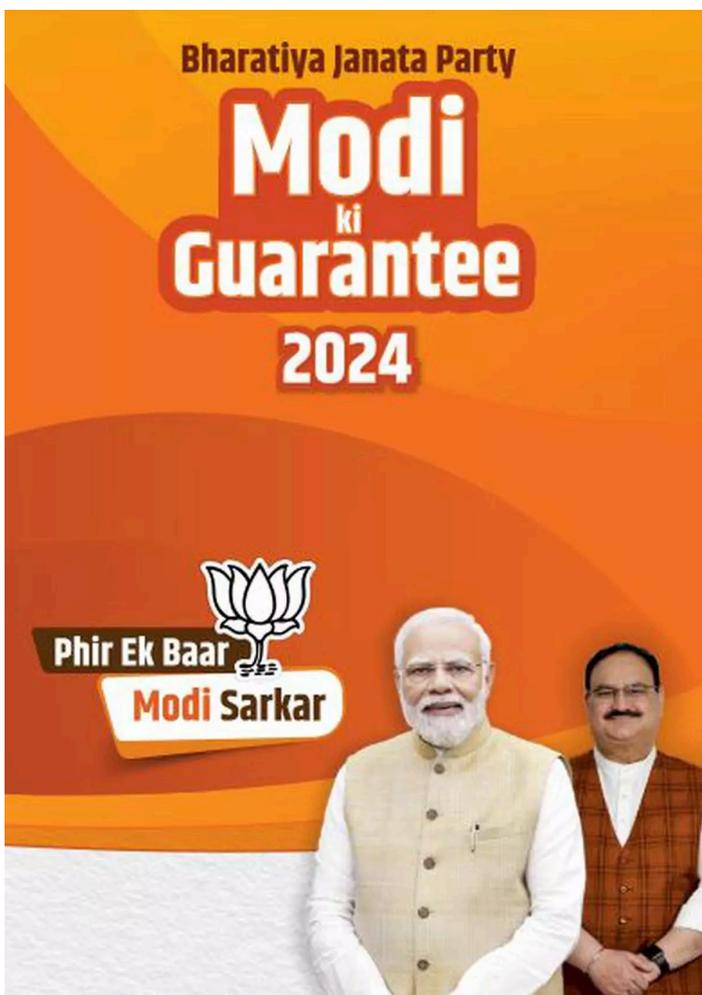
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In pursuing its climate pledges of 500 GW non-fossil fuel power, the BJP has also targeted fragile areas like Ladakh and Kachchh, home to not only unique wildlife but also nomadic pastoral communities with highly sustainable lifestyles, for mega-energy projects. Globally, such an approach is called "green land grab", but the Indian government is promoting this in its attempt to be a global climate champion.

Bowing to the dictates of political appropriateness, both parties promise to be mindful of sustainability in pursuing the above kind of economic strategies. But this ignores evidence that when powerful corporate and political forces are intent on maximising profits at all costs, sustainability remains only a buzzword or green cover. Crony capitalism (which by no means started with the BJP but appears to have become much more entrenched in the last decade) systematically undermines the ability and willingness of regulatory agencies to do their work. Neither party has asked the crucial question: how much demand of energy, materials, and products is sustainable, whatever the source may be; the BJP manifesto highlights Modi's acronym LIFE, which is supposed to encompass sustainable lifestyles, but its predominant economic strategy will only encourage consumerism, as it has done so far.

In all the above aspects, both the BJP and the Congress do not pay heed to the thousands of grounded initiatives led by communities, civil society, businesses, and even some government agencies that show the potential of ecologically sustainable, equitable, and just solutions.

Crucial differences: charity vs rights: So far, we have looked at the broad similarities, including positive and negative aspects. More important, however, are the crucial differences in how the parties view India's citizens. The BJP treats citizens primarily as recipients of charity, promising to solve all problems through welfare, reinforcing the colonial "mai-baap" mentality. It has almost no focus on *empowering* citizens through rights and entitlements.



The cover of the BJP manifesto. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement

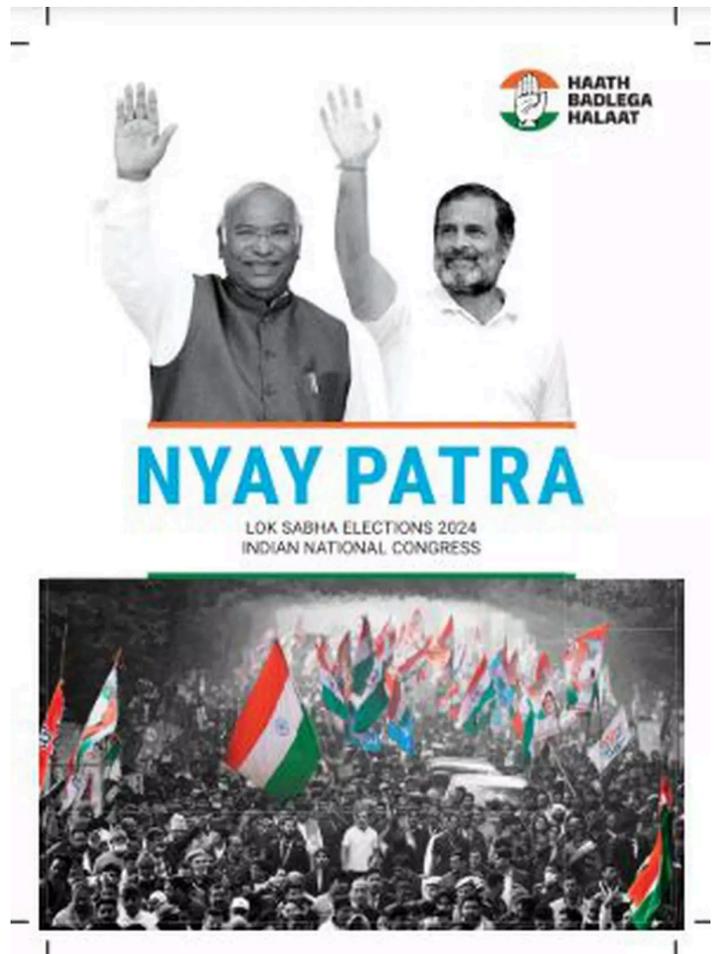
This, in contrast, is the fulcrum of the Congress manifesto. It is reviving its record of promulgating several rights-based laws (information, forests, education, rural employment) in the early 2000s, in the first of two consecutive United Progressive Alliance terms. The additional laws relating to basic rights that it is now promising are a right to homestead and a right to apprenticeship for all graduates, including a year's scholarship. While both parties mention unorganised workers (including the rapidly expanding number of "gig" workers), only the Congress talks about their empowerment and entitlements. The Congress manifesto also notes the need to safeguard personal rights and the right

to privacy, including those that are threatened by new laws on digital media and telecommunications that the BJP has brought in. It promises equality for women through several measures and specifically mentions the rights and entitlements of disabled people and the LGBTQIA+ community.

The BJP mentions only transgenders and "*divyangs*", or people with disabilities, in a limited context (again, not as entitlements but as charity) and is silent on the right to privacy. Its only mention of "rights" and "equality" is while promising a uniform civil code, a controversial move that does not necessarily balance the needs for gender equality with those of cultural diversity, and whose pros and cons have not been properly debated in the current atmosphere of religious polarisation. In this context, the Congress manifesto lists actions to bring back communal harmony, stop hate speech, and hate crimes. Unsurprisingly, the BJP is silent on these.

The BJP repeats its cliché of Bharat being the "Mother of Democracy" but fails to acknowledge that its two terms have significantly undermined all the pillars of what

has made India a thriving electoral and representative democracy. Its manifesto offers nothing on strengthening democracy. The Congress notes the alarming reduction of citizens' spaces in recent years and promises several actions. This includes reviving federalism, including empowering regions through constitutional means such as statehood for Jammu and Kashmir and Puducherry, Schedule 6 status for Ladakh, greater powers to Delhi Council of Ministers relative to the Lt Governor, and so on. It promises to return autonomy to academic institutions, including those of higher education; guarantee freedom of the media; ensure the independence of the judiciary through the creation of a National Judicial Commission; as also the independence of constitutionally mandated institutions such as the Election Commission, the Human Rights Commission, and the Comptroller and Auditor General. It also offers actions to revive an active Parliament. All these institutions have been considerably weakened in the past 10 years.



The cover of the Congress manifesto. | Photo Credit: By Special Arrangement



Opposition MPs protest against inflation and the decision to increase GST on food items, near the Gandhi statue at the Parliament complex in New Delhi on July 20, 2022. | Photo Credit: Arun Sharma/PTI

An interesting addition to the institutions of democracy in the Congress manifesto is the establishment of an independent Environment Protection and Climate Change Authority, “to establish, monitor and enforce environmental standards and to enforce the national and State Climate Change plans”. Such a constitutionally mandated institution, independent of the government, has been a long-standing demand of civil society organisations. It was most recently reiterated in the People’s Manifesto for a Just, Equitable and Sustainable India 2024, brought out by the Vikalp Sangam platform of 85 organisations and movements.

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India's democracy is also incomplete without a strong foundation of direct decision-making powers on the ground; indeed this should be its most important component. The 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments for rural and urban self-governance in the early 1990s were a crucial step in this direction but very incomplete in concept and implementation. Taking these further, the Congress says it will ensure gram sabha powers for all panchayat functions and enhance their authority in panchayat, forest, and land laws. The only concession the BJP gives to village governance is more fiscal autonomy to panchayats, which is of course important. Both parties miss out on giving more powers over lawmaking to village and urban assemblies.

In sum, if the goals of equality, justice, and ecological sustainability are crucial for India's present and future, then the Congress manifesto's focus on empowerment, decentralisation, democratic freedoms, and citizens' rights, despite some crucial omissions and internal contradictions, fits the bill much more than the BJP's approach of top-down charity.

Ashish Kothari is an environmentalist based in Pune.

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