

LiFE and death: Indian government's climate doublespeak

How India's climate campaign masks environmental destruction, corporate power, and policy contradictions

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Adivasi (Indigenous) people in India already practice LiFE, but continue to be displaced by its 'development' projects @ Ashish Kothari

The climate crisis, already wreaking havoc across the world, requires urgent action. Among those claiming to be at the forefront of this is India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi. With his penchant for labels and acronyms, in 2021 he presented the 'panchamrit' (five elements of nectar) action plan at COP26 in Glasgow. With a global audience listening, he also made a pitch for what he labelled LiFE—Lifestyles for Environment. He called for “a mass movement towards an environmentally conscious lifestyle,” emphasizing the need to change our “mindless and destructive consumption” to protect the planet's environment.

Back home, this vision was activated as 'Mission LiFE'. In a 20-page document¹, NITI Aayog and the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) noted the warning of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that “without timely action, 800 million to 3 billion people are projected to

experience chronic water scarcity due to droughts at 2-degree warming.” They cited Swiss Re that the “global economy could lose up to 18% of GDP by 2050 without urgent action by all.” In its Nationally Determined Contributions to the climate treaty, it was noted that “India will put forward and propagate a healthy and sustainable way of living based on its traditions and the values of conservation and moderation, including through a mass movement for LiFE.” On several occasions, PM Modi has referred to India’s age-old traditions of frugality as a model to learn from.

Mission LiFE includes the following breathtaking goals: “to mobilize at least one billion Indians and other global citizens to take individual and collective action for protecting and conserving the environment in the period 2022-28. Within India, at least 80% of all villages and urban local bodies are aimed to become environment-friendly by 2028.” A table lays out key performance indicators and targets, according to which, by 2025, the following should have been achieved: 650 million ‘Pro Planet People,’ 335,000 ‘LiFE Villages,’ 2400 ‘LiFE Urban Local Bodies (ULBs),’ and 498 ‘LiFE Districts.’

There is no definition of these terms; the Mission LiFE document only has a list of 75 actions that individuals can take. It says that details of project implementation will be given in a set of guidelines, “to be released soon.” Three years later, if such guidelines have been released, they are not available on either NITI Aayog’s or MoEFCC’s websites. Half of the 2022-28 period is over, so a lot should have happened by now, but there is no publicly available information on progress of implementation. I wrote to Niti Aayog twice asking for specific details and put in a question on its Facebook page (on which its post on LiFe is from January), but got no response.

More serious than this opaqueness, however, are the fundamental flaws in the approach of LiFE. For one thing, how does one gauge that a person or village or ULB or district has become LiFE compliant? Out of the 75 actions that individuals can take, how many does one need to have followed to have become a Pro Planet person? All? Half? If I, for instance, use LED bulbs and stairs instead of elevators ‘wherever possible’ (amongst the first few actions in the list) but take 5 flights in a year, am I or am I not pro-planet? What are the mechanisms by which an individual’s lifestyle is being monitored or assessed—self-reporting, some sort of public surveys, or something else? Even more complex, what qualifies a village, ULB, or district to become LiFE-compliant? If, for instance, it conserves and recycles all the water it receives and uses but continues to be energy-guzzling in many ways or continues to promote private vehicles over public transportation and cycling, is it a ‘LiFE ULB’?

If the criteria for an urban body to have become environmentally conscious is that most or all of its activities are sustainable, then I would wager anything I have that not a single one of India’s towns or cities is anywhere near this. The kind of frenetic increases in cement-concrete-glass construction, vehicular (especially private) traffic, energy-guzzling malls and multiplexes, roads and flyovers, and so on, in virtually every town or city—all encouraged (or at least not discouraged) by

government policy—means that they are all actually moving away from any semblance of sustainability. Where sustained public pressure and participation have produced plans to make the city more sustainable, e.g., Pune's Comprehensive Cycle Plan², they remain largely on paper; meanwhile, in the same city, an ecologically illiterate River Front Development plan is destroying large swathes of riverine forest and wildlife habitat. So what magic wand is going to be waved to make 3700 ULBs LiFE-compliant by 2028?

As serious is the flaw in Mission LiFE's statement that "changing individual and community behavior alone can have a significant impact on the environmental and climate crises." A favorite tactic of the world's most polluting corporations is to point the finger at individual consumption while hiding their own enormous impacts. British Petroleum (BP) introduced the concept of 'carbon footprint' and got people worrying about³ how to reduce it in their lifestyles. But the biggest causes of climate change are government and corporate institutions—especially the military-industrial complex and the fossil-fuel industry. According to a recent report by the research group InfluenceMap, which has been tracking the contribution of big carbon-emitting companies, over 43% of global fossil fuel and cement CO₂ emissions⁴ were from just 20 entities (mostly state-owned), the top two being Saudi Aramco and Coal India.

This aspect is completely missing in the LiFE approach, other than saying that if individual behavior changes, so too will that of industries and markets. This is naïve or deliberately diversionary. It ignores the enormous influence of corporate advertising, for instance, that entices and encourages consumerism. Globally, the fossil fuel industry has done precious little to reduce⁵ its climate impact; the record of relevant Indian industries is no better. Additionally, many are involved in massively funding and propping up regimes that deny the climate crisis, such as the current one in the USA. It is not terribly irrelevant to also mention that the entire military-industrial complex (fossil fuel companies included) profits from wars and armed conflict, one major underlying cause of the weak international response to the horrors taking place in Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Congo, Myanmar, and other regions racked by violence.

If the Indian government is serious about reducing wasteful and destructive consumption patterns, a far more effective pathway would be to directly rein in the behavior of corporations and government agencies. But this would mean rocking the boat of crony capitalism that dominates the Indian economy. Some of the current regime's favorite corporate houses (both public and private sector) are at this moment ripping through dense forests in central India for mining, in open violation of environmental and Adivasi tribal rights laws.

Many policies actively undermine attempts by individuals to be more ecologically conscious. For instance, one of the 75 actions is to "practice natural or organic farming," but government support for this is peanuts compared to its massive chemical fertilizer subsidy of about 1.9 lakh crore rupees (approx. US\$ 26 billion). Or, taking a regional example: one of the actions is to "prepare organic manure from cow dungs (sic) and apply to farms", but in Ladakh, there is official encouragement

for homestays and guest houses to replace dry toilets, whose output was used as rich manure, by flush toilets, which are not only reducing availability of such manure but also polluting the groundwater. Some of the 75 actions are even debatable, such as “prefer cloud storage over a pen or hard drive,” when calculations suggest that the latter may be less environmentally damaging⁶.

The LiFE approach also conveniently ignores one of humanity's most pressing issues that intersects directly with climate and ecological collapse: inequality. According to one study, the world's richest 10%⁷ have been responsible for two-thirds of global warming since 1990. This inequality in who is responsible would be true for India too. But Mission LiFE does not directly target the most consumerist classes, and the Indian government has no orientation towards curbing the influence of these classes on its policies. If it wanted, it could, for instance, prohibit advertising that promotes elite and wasteful consumerism or impose an upper cap on salaries—but then that would be anathema to current economic orthodoxy and the divine status that economic growth has in national policies. LiFE's objectives, however laudable, are bound to drown in the ocean of materialist consumption induced by the current 'development' model.

Most troubling of LiFE's flaws is the deep hypocrisy involved. Promoting LiFE while rendering several parts of India lifeless by destroying natural ecosystems and displacing nature-dependent communities is double-speak at its worst. In one fell swoop, for instance, this government is proposing to deforest 13,000 hectares of prime rainforest⁸ in Great Nicobar for a shipment infrastructure-airport-township project (and its ridiculous plan for compensating for this is to plant completely unrelated trees in the completely unrelated area of Haryana).

Can Niti Aayog please tell us how many million people will need to reduce their consumption in order to offset the humongous climate and biodiversity impact of this deforestation? Or of the impacts of 4-lane highways through the Himalayas, in terms of deforestation and construction-vehicular black soot settling on glaciers? India's 'development' model (blindly copied from the West) has been patently unsustainable and climate-unfriendly, especially since 1991, when it moved into a globalized economy, and the current regime has taken this to even greater depths by systematically loosening environmental norms and safeguards.

This model has also displaced and dispossessed millions of Adivasis, fishers, pastoralists, and small farmers—people who, ironically, can already be labeled as what the NITI Aayog document calls 'Pro Planet People.' Forcing these people away from traditionally sustainable lifestyles and doing little to tackle the visibly unsustainable lifestyles of India's richest people also highlights the hypocrisy of India's global climate rhetoric.

Will the government seriously look at these fundamental issues of inequality and elite consumerism, rein in the profit-at-all-costs attitude of capitalist and state corporations, and transform the overall model of development away from its growth fetish? If not, the LiFE approach will remain not only lifeless but also a dangerous diversion from the steps that really need to be taken to be planet-responsible.

References

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