

How Environment-friendly Are Election Manifestos?

NEHA SINHA

Even as India is hit by an environmental crisis, manifestos and policies are paying lip service to growth at all costs, including the cost of environmental damage.

Neha Sinha (nehabnhs@gmail.com) is with the Bombay Natural History Society.

As citizens go about the business of voting, environmental crises are looming. Odisha was battered by Cyclone Fani even as large parts of India face drought, and several Indian cities continue to top the charts for air pollution. Despite these lived realities within the traditional electoral issues of employment and growth, where does the environment fit in?

Stated to be aiding the march of “growth,” the incumbent National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has made a slew of legislative

and policy changes, including changes in the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017, the National Waterways Act, 2016, notifications regarding environmental clearances (Menon and Kohli 2017), coastal regulations, and proposed changes in the national forest policy. These were broadly referred to as “mainstreaming” or decentralising environmental clearances for hastening growth. An analysis of these changes, as well as the election manifesto of the

Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), uncovers an engineering and instrumental view of nature. This narrative, for instance, suggests that forests that are felled can easily be replaced, and coastal areas—despite their vulnerability to extreme events—should be densified

and built upon. In many ways, this narrative pits *vikas* (development) as a noble and lofty goal in spite of what its



blinkered pursuit may do to the environment. It also suggests that subsequent environmental damage can easily be repaired.

A Gardening View of Forests

Nowhere is the idea of environmental damage leading to instant repair or restoration more apparent than in the BJP's manifesto. The section on forests states:

we have ensured speed and effectiveness in issuing forest and environment clearances for eligible projects due to which we have added 9,000 square km of forest cover of the country. (BJP 2019: 26)

Environmental clearances involving forests usually lead to clearances for projects that cut forests down. These could be projects related to mining, irrigation, industrial expansion, roads and so on. Interestingly though, the BJP makes a direct link between granting clearances (and thus clearing forests) as being the reason for adding 9,000 square kilometres (sq km) of forests. This logic begs the question: in order to create new plantations of forests, is it necessary to cut down old forests? Clearly, this is counter-productive. While afforestation or reforestation is seen as a desirable act in this vision, it is also not seen as desirable in "itself," in that it is not being pursued in the manifesto unless it follows a clearance. Further, this is a sequence the party intends to continue. The manifesto adds: "We are committed to maintaining this pace through adoption of cleaner practices to make our nation a greener country" (BJP 2019: 26).

This vision has been articulated by the BJP before as well. Former environment minister Prakash Javadekar remarked in 2015 that forestlands that are felled should not be called "diversion of forests" but rather, should be referred to as "reforestation" (Mazoomdar 2015). This reveals something of a gardening view of forests, implying that forests are like horticultural parks that can easily be curated and created. Ecologically speaking, forests take a long time to be formed, decades at the very least. Further, forests are also a major habitat for wildlife as well as environmental services, which gets destroyed when the original forest is cut down.

On the question of forests, the Congress manifesto says it will increase forest cover in India from 21% to 25%. Towards this aim, the party promises to change the definition of forests to a more "modern scientific standard." What the modern standards could be are hinted at in a subsequent point, in which the manifesto says it involves local communities in the selection of species. Selection of native species which are appropriate for the biogeography of an area is an important input for creating forests, and so are scientific inputs. However, there is an inherent contradiction in the larger manifesto. In its section on job creation, the manifesto calls for the afforestation of wastelands. "Wastelands" is an archaic term used for grasslands signifying a view that the area is "wasted" in its natural state. This is also a term used to wrest control over these lands (Vanak et al 2013). Yet, these are natural ecosystems that need scientific recognition, and restoration. A new report on biodiversity finds that one million animal and plant species are faced with extinction partly because of massive loss of natural ecosystems (Diaz et al 2019).

Coasts for Constructions

In the coasts, like in the forests, an engineering view of nature is being favoured by the government. Constructions on the coasts are being encouraged, which will build over an array of natural habitats and leave open the question of climate hazard. The NDA government has recently changed the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) through a notification enabling constructions (PIB 2018; MoEFCC 2019); and the party manifesto, too, calls for greater constructions and development on the coast.

As per the new CRZ notification 2019, densely populated rural areas with a population density of 2,161 persons per sq km as per the 2011 Census, are now allowed to construct on the coast. Such areas shall have a no development zone (NDZ) of 50 metres from the high tide line (HTL) as against 200 metres from the HTL stipulated in the CRZ notification, 2011.

Tourism, another major contender for construction and densification on the coast, will be allowed in what was previously the NDZ. The notification says

"temporary" tourism facilities like shacks, toilets and changing rooms are now permitted on beaches in rural areas of CRZ III (PIB 2018; MoEFCC 2019).

This is seen as one livelihood pitted against another—fisherfolk have protested that the new permission for tourism construction will jeopardise their fishing activity (Viswanathan 2018).

The other issue is that of environmental safeguards. The new notification, like the CRZ 2011, calls for a hazard line which is a line that warns against natural hazards like shore accretion.

The 2019 notification says:

A "Hazard line" shall be demarcated by the Survey of India, taking into account the extent of the flooding on the land area due to water level fluctuations, sea level rise and shoreline changes (erosion/accretion) occurring over a period of time, and shared with the coastal States and Union Territories through the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management. (MoEFCC 2019)

However, the very purpose of this line as an environmental safeguard is in question as it is reduced to a disaster management tool rather than something that restricts or regulates construction; even as hazard may enter areas demarcated for construction (Jojan 2018).

The 2019 notification says:

The Hazard line shall be used as a tool for disaster management plan for the coastal environment, including planning of adaptive and mitigation measures.

In the CRZ 2011, a host of developmental activities were banned between the hazard line and stipulated distance from the landward side. The BJP manifesto echoes the policy changes, by stressing that it will double port capacity in five years, and that it will ensure completion of the Sagarmala project. The Sagarmala project is meant to build coastal highways in India.

On the contrary, in its manifesto, the Congress promises to undo these moves, stating:

Congress promises to protect the coastal zones of the country. Recent steps that diluted the coastal zone regulations will be reversed. The coast will be preserved without affecting the livelihood opportunities of fishing communities. (INC 2019)

Thus, what the BJP perceives as an opportunity for growth is seen as a dilution by the Congress, although this may reflect political rivalry rather than actual

intent. Even the CRZ 2011, brought into place when the Congress-led UPA was in power, was accused of paying lip service to environmental concerns. This included allowing activities which did not need to come up specifically on the coast, such as the Navi Mumbai Airport (Sharma 2011). This reveals a greater problem: the neglect by simultaneous governments of not just environmental protection, but also the safety considerations that can arise due to this neglect. We are now looking at a largely construct-at-all-costs scenario. This is similar to the approach towards forests, which indicates a willingness to negotiate environmental damage as a by-product of growth.

Nature Is Negotiable

Thus, there are two views of nature that emerge from the incumbent government: first is that nature—whether forests or coasts—can be engineered or altered at will, and natural areas are, in themselves, spaces open for negotiation and complete change. The second view is that the results of these changes or destruction can be “handled.” Even natural hazards are not an impediment for this negotiation.

Environmentalists have been sounding an alarm over issues of over-construction and commercialisation of the coast as

well as the primacy of keeping forests as they are (Kukreti 2019). For coastal highways or port projects, feasibility studies ought to be done to understand projected traffic, and biodiversity areas should be avoided. Forests are habitat and oxygen generators, and efforts should be made to conserve them in the first place, rather than to cut them in order to grow them again.

While questions of air pollution and climate hazard continue to rise, it seems that the election is still not an arena to battle out these critical questions of safety, health and well-being. Indeed, a callous view of these life-sustaining aspects is being taken precisely because these services cannot be bought in a free market.

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