



Short Review Paper

Redefining environmental governance in India: Time for green politics

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Abstract

India's electoral politics is dominated by promises ranging from bringing an end to corruption, reducing inflation, ensuring better public health care system, education for all, ensuring women safety, and creation of more jobs for the youth. Environmental issues and problems rarely find a space in the political manifestos. Unless the environmental problems become the new focal points of electoral battles in India, little can be done to safeguard the deteriorating environmental quality and solving grave environmental problems in the new economic superpower of the world.

Keywords: Election, environmental issues, environmental problems, governance, India.

Introduction

The upcoming Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan Legislative Assembly elections and general elections in 2019 in India has generated quite a buzz among the political pundits, media, and local residents. As is the case traditionally, all the political parties have made whirlwind promises of landmark changes, development, reservations and improvement in the quality of daily life for the local people in their electoral rallies and meetings. Unfortunately, the environmental problems do not figure in the electoral agendas of any political party.

Environment and Politics

Traditionally, environmental problems have not been a part of the electoral manifestos of any political party in India¹⁻³. In the past, some electoral parties and candidates did try to champion the cause of environmental issues but they failed miserably. A prime example of this is the People's Political Front (PPF). PPF was formed in 2004 by Medha Patkar, who spearheaded one of the biggest anti-dam movements in India - the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA). NBA gained worldwide attention for its environmental sensitivity and championed the causes of tribal, farmers and women in dam-versus-development debate. However, PPF failed to attract even those voters for whom the NBA was launched at the first place – people who had been displaced and impacted due to construction of Sardar Sarovar Dam⁴⁻⁶. This is largely because the voters are still not sensitive enough to the grave challenges and costs that the degrading environment poses. Let's take a case study of the national capital - Delhi to exemplify this point. Delhi, with a total geographical area of 1483 square kilometer, a total population of 16.79 million and population density of 11,297 people per square kilometer (as per the 2011 census) is one of the most congested metropolitan cities in the world⁷. Delhi consistently ranks as one the most polluted city in the world⁸.

The city contains the country's highest annual average volume of particulate matter (PM) pollution - PM_{2.5} concentrations of 40 µg/m³ and PM₁₀ concentrations of 60µg/m³⁸. Delhi's vehicular population far exceeds the combined figures of Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata⁹. However, none of the political parties who contested the 2015 Delhi Legislative Assembly elections even made a mention of these large-scale environmental problems and their solutions should they come in power, in their respective manifestos. The most welcoming was the now-ruling Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) manifesto where they emphasized on the words "a dynamic, equitable and ecologically sustainable economy" in the Economy and Ecology section of the manifesto¹⁰. The intricate relationship and interdependence of environment and economic growth was duly recognized in the manifesto of AAP¹⁰. The AAP manifesto also duly recognized the critical role of local people in environmental management at the local level.

By promising ownership, rights and responsibility to the local people under "Mohalla Sabhas", AAP showed a wonderful environment stewardship¹⁰. It was also the only political party that included welfare of animal in its manifesto under the domain of social welfare and justice¹¹. Explicit statements about the implication and enforcement of the Wildlife Protection Act in Delhi, deterrent of potential defaulters, and prevention of the encroachment of protected forestland found mention in the AAP manifesto¹⁰. However, even AAP in its last two years of rule has done little to solve the environmental problems of Delhi and fulfill its environmental promises. The continuous flip-flops on odd-even scheme and failure to solve the ever-rising pollution problems since the last two years reflect complete environmental policy paralysis and absence of any comprehensive environmental management program on the part of AAP government in Delhi.

The core issues of environmental problems are still not political priorities in India. Given the current trend of the central government to frame environmental laws in a manner that speedy clearance of large scale industrial proposals occur without delay, the current environmental problems are but expected to compound further. In its Lok Sabha election manifesto of 2014, BJP had promised speedy environmental clearances of the delayed projects, almost negligible environmental delays for large-scale projects and adoption of a single-window system of environmental clearances both at the centre and state level¹².

Coal, minerals and hydropower sectors were envisaged to be opened up for private investments in the BJP manifesto¹². The 2014 Lok Sabha election manifesto of INC also lacked in serious environmental concerns¹³. Similar to the lines of BJP, it also called for a single window clearance both at the state and the central levels¹³ and the setting of a National Environmental Appraisal and Monitoring Authority¹³, but it was later revealed that it was not an initiative on the part of the party but was actually an order of the Supreme Court of India¹⁴.

The INC led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government at the Centre also did little to the environmental cause during its 10 years of rule by diverting approximately 6,00,000 hectares of forest land and over 2.5,00,000 hectares for various mining, infrastructural and industrial projects¹⁵.

Rate of environmental clearances under the aegis of former environment minister, Mr. Veerappa Moily increased by 42% compared to the previous year, with lower than a 4% rejection rate¹⁶.

No one, neither the local people nor the media have a tendency to reprimand the political candidates and the parties for turning away from the previous promises of addressing the environmental issues¹⁷⁻¹⁹ in the last elections or addressing environmental problems, except in cases when such problems turn into full-fledged environmental disasters such as the Kedarnath flood tragedy of 2013²⁰⁻²² or Delhi's smog problem of 2016 and 2017²³⁻²⁵. Will we have to wait for such grave environmental disasters to happen year after year before environment becomes a political issue on which elections would be fought? We should be optimistic that the answer would be in negative.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is apt time that climate and environment protection assume main stakes in India's electoral politics and a new developmental policy is formulated which tackles poverty, governance and environmental dilemmas that lie at the core of the nation in a cohesive and sustainable manner.

Otherwise, it would be too late for the nation to preserve its environmental heritage in the coming years.

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