

Election manifestos of BJP, Congress and AAP: Comparative reading on Environment and natural resource management

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Now that the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) has made its manifesto for the 2014 Parliamentary elections in India public on April 7, 2014, we are in a position to make a comparative reading of manifestoes of three most prominent parties in fray at national level, namely the BJP, Congress and Aam Aadmi Party (AAP). While manifestos are largely ritualistic exercises, they are also the most important documents that declare the intentions of the political outfits, besides the other statements of the party leaders and track records of the parties and their leaders. These documents need to be read both in terms of the promises that they make as also the roadmaps that the parties provide to achieve the promises.

Overall impression In that respect, the overall impression that BJP manifesto (let us begin with a comment on BJP manifesto since all the opinion polls are giving the party an edge over others, though it is well known that opinion polls are largely doctored exercises that have proved wrong so many times) gives is one of an arrogance: both in terms of the content and the timing of the document. The BJP manifesto reads more like a laundry list of feel good factors, without any roadmap as to how the party hopes to achieve the listed objectives. The fact that the party came

out with manifesto even as the voting in first phase of the elections was already underway, signals that it is not bothered to tell people why they should vote for them. There is little in the track record of the party in the states it is in power for over a decade, like Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, to show that it is serious on these issues in these states.

Congress manifesto, also of 52 pages like that of the BJP manifesto, provides much more details about the specific issues they list, but it is not written in particularly imaginative style, nor is it making any attempt at taking care of the negativity that has been generated around its performance over the last decade. In that sense, Congress's manifesto makes for somewhat bureaucratic and boring reading. It also lacks in providing the big picture and a big vision.

The **AAP manifesto** at 28 pages is more interesting as it is not written as a marketing product pamphlet. It starts with the section on Jan Lokpal, their main plank and tries to answer why people should vote for AAP. The major highlight of the whole manifesto is that the party wants to give Gram Sabhas and mohalla sabhas a decisive say in all matters at their respective levels and in overall governance. This is a major departure from other two manifestos, besides their reliance on tackling corruption & Crony Capitalism with more seriousness and convincingly than other two parties. However, while it is more elaborate than the BJP and Cong manifestos in describing how the party seeks to change the governance in India, it seems less comprehensive. Another lacuna of the AAP manifesto's PDF file is that it is not searchable, unlike the other two manifestos.

Having taken an overall view, let us look at some specific issues that we are concerned about.

Natural Resource Management The BJP manifesto seems to have poor understanding of the scope of 'Natural Resources'. The manifesto lists only coal, minerals and spectrum among natural resources. The most important natural resources of land, forests, rivers, water sources and biodiversity are not even listed. It seems the party is only interested in directly marketable (as in equity market) commodities that their industry friends are interested in. Interestingly, the section starts with Gandhi's famous quote on need vs greed, but there is no reflection of this principle in what is said here.

The Congress manifesto talks about "establishment of a clearly defined policy for fair, transparent equitable and time bound development of natural resources. The Indian National Congress will immediately put in place a Special Purpose Vehicle for this." The fact that this comes in industries section does not sound very confidence inspiring.

The AAP has a section on natural resources that does include water and forests among natural resources along with major minerals and provides Gram Sabha pivotal role, without whose consent, decisions about exploitation of such major natural resources cannot be taken. The ownership of the minor natural resources remains with the gram sabhas in AAP scheme of things.

Environmental governance The BJP section on this issue has interesting heading: “Flora, Fauna and Environment – Safeguarding Our Tomorrow”. However, the section or the rest of the document does not tell us anything how they are going to improve environment governance in India or do they even see this need. On the contrary, by stating in Industry section that it intends to “Frame the environment laws in a manner that provides no scope for confusion and will lead to speedy clearance of proposals without delay” and talking about single window and speedy clearance elsewhere, it is clear what is their understanding is and where they intend to go. This can only be disastrous for India’s environment and environmental governance.

The Congress Manifesto claimed that it intends to set up National Environment Appraisal and Monitoring Authority. However, as Supreme Court judges promptly remarked, this is actually the order of the Supreme Court and Congress had no business of putting it on their manifesto. Moreover, Congress lacks credibility on this, since, when Jairam Ramesh, as environment minister proposed this, he was actually removed and his successor did nothing to implement this. Moreover, the environment ministry under UPA II actually filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court saying that it is not possible to set up such an authority with any teeth. The appointment of Union Oil Minister Veerappa Moily as Environment Minister, forgetting about conflict of interest and the actions that Moily as been taking subsequently including pushing the disastrous Yettinahole Diversion Project to benefit his parliamentary constituency in Karnataka takes away any credibility the party may have had. It is true that National Green Tribunal is the only major contribution of UPA on this issue, but that too is largely due to Mr Ramesh as his successor ministers tried their best to scuttle the functioning of NGT.

The AAP manifesto talks about reforming “Ministry of Environment and Forests and its agencies so that they can empower and facilitate Gram Sabhas to be effective custodians and managers of their local natural resources.” This is certainly welcome. However, there are insufficient details as to how this will be achieved. Their clubbing of Ecology and Economy in one section sounds promising at one level, again how this will be implemented without allowing ecology to be subservient to economic interests is not described.

Rivers It is well known that Inter Linking of Rivers (ILR) is high on agenda of BJP and Mr Modi. However, for some unclear reasons, they have played down ILR, saying, “Inter-linking of rivers based on feasibility.” Possibly they do not want to raise the hackles prematurely. However, the Narmada Kshipra link that was recently inaugurated and the track record of the BJP in Madhya Pradesh and elsewhere seems to suggest that BJP state governments are working at cross purposes with the national ILR plan.

The BJP manifesto says, “BJP commits to ensure the cleanliness, purity and uninterrupted flow of the Ganga on priority”, but this is not helpful, since no roadmap is given how this will be achieved. Moreover, this intentionally ignores the three biggest threats that the Ganga and other rivers face: The dams & hydropower projects, the urban & industrial pollution & encroachment. The BJP manifesto is silent on all these three threats to the river. Even on the issue of River Pollution, the only thing the party manifesto condescends to inform the readers is that “a massive ‘Clean Rivers Programme’ will be launched across the country driven by people’s participation.” No details again. Even on the issue of seemingly unsolvable urban water pollution, the only solution party can offer is more sewage treatment plants, choosing to ignore that the existing STPs are non functional most of the places. Interestingly, BJP manifesto has a section on North East India (unlike the other two manifestos) and mentions the flood problem of Assam and promises tackling the river, but without any details as to how.

It is worth noting in this context that when BJP’s PM candidate Mr Modi visited North East India in general and Arunachal Pradesh in particular he did not mention ILR or large hydropower projects in that region, knowing that local sentiments are totally against them. However, Mr Modi, while proposing his national energy plan in Madhya Pradesh in March 2014, said that North East India is heaven for hydropower projects! The manifesto again is expectedly silent on this issue!

The Congress manifesto says that “The National Ganga River Basin Authority has begun the ambitious task of cleaning the Ganga River. We will use similar models of creating empowered, well-funded agencies to clean other major rivers in the country”. Now this sounds mindless and incredible! NGRBA, five years after it was notified, has been the most ineffective, non transparent institution that has achieved no change in the state of the river. How can such an institution be used as a model for other rivers? The authors of the Congress manifesto seem completely ill informed on this score.

The AAP manifesto seems to have nothing on Rivers: a major omission of the manifesto.

Water The BJP manifesto promises piped water supply to all households! Irrespective of if all households need it or not or is it feasible or appropriate or not. The BJP manifesto claims that there will be 50% gap between demand and supply of water in India by 2050. This is totally off the mark, according to Govt of India's National Commission for Integrated Water Resources Development, country's water requirement will match the available resources in 2050, even considering high growth trajectory, we are going far below that level currently. The BJP manifesto writers seem to have no clue about the realities, or they are just trying to push greater market for water companies. There is one promise in this regard that is welcome: "We will promote decentralized, demand-driven, community-managed water resource management, water supply and environmental sanitation." However, how they will promote this is not given. Moreover, this promise remains unconvincing considering they also talk about river linking.

The Congress manifesto talks about adding 1 crore ha in gross irrigated area in 12th Plan, two years of which are already over! It clearly looks impossible, but more importantly, it does not say how they will achieve it. Both Congress and BJP manifestoes talk about water conserving irrigation techniques, which actually seems to be scam ridden and affected by crony capitalism. Congress manifesto also talks about increasing irrigation efficiency and water use efficiency in general, but without any roadmap. More worryingly, the UPA government has pushed the proposal to allow Jain Irrigation (the biggest private supplier of drop and sprinkler systems) to set up the National Bureau of Water Efficiency! Crony capitalism?

The AAP manifesto talks about giving priority to watershed development to reduce pressure on big irrigation projects, but fails to take an informed and prudent stand on performance of big irrigation projects. This is certainly a major let down of AAP manifesto.

Urban Water Issues There is nothing noteworthy in BJP manifesto in this regard, even as it plans to prioritise Urban Development. It has no clue about how to tackle Urban Wastewater as it only talks about more STPs when existing STPs are not working, including in Modi's Gujarat.

The Congress manifesto talks about continuing the problematic Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission under which over Rs 70000/- crores have been spent, mostly on Urban water issues, without any attempt at democratic governance, local water options, demand side management or recycle and reuse of treated sewage. This is creating havoc on surrounding areas with displacement of tribals, destruction of forests and pushing unjustifiable dams. But it seems Congress is least bothered about it. The problem is so acute that some 18000 people in Thane to be displaced by Kalu dam meant for Mumbai have decided to boycott the polls, since the dam is

being taken up without any clearances and when all the gram sabhas have passed resolutions against it. The writing is clearly on the walls for the Congress.

The only positive aspect in this regard in AAP manifesto is the proposed empowerment of Mohalla Sabhas. Let us hope they are able to show how this will work.

Climate Change It is interesting to see that Climate Change is an issue recognised by BJP and Congress manifestos, but what they say there is disappointing in both cases. BJP manifesto talks about launching a National Mission on Himalayan Ecosystem, but there is already one existing, which is supposed to be under implementation for some years, but no one seems to know what it is doing! BJP Manifesto also talks about program devised to arrest melting of Himalayan glaciers, sounds strange, since no such program is known.

The Congress manifesto promises of continued implementation of National Action Plan on Climate Change when the plan and its mission stand discredited, along with the Prime Minister's Council on Climate Change. These are the things that make the Congress manifesto sound so bureaucratic.

AAP manifesto seems silent on climate change.

Renewable Energy It is welcome to note that BJP manifesto talks about promoting small hydro with local support and without displacement. However, it is not welcome that there is no mention of big hydro and big dams. Their promise to push infrastructure development in Arunachal Pradesh without any mention of participatory decision making with the local communities is likely to raise suspicion that this is for pushing big hydro there. The manifesto is also silent about promoting household level solar power projects.

The Congress manifesto is also silent on promoting household level solar power projects. It talks about giving new thrust to small hydro under new and renewable energy sources, but these projects need social and environmental impact assessment, the manifesto is silent on this.

The AAP manifesto is the only one that does talk about pushing decentralized renewable energy plants, which is welcome.

Tribal Development The scary part in BJP manifesto in this regard is that tribal development in India will be pushed on the lines of what has been achieved in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh! If this is the tribal development model for tribals in other areas, tribals all over India need to be very wary of this party.

The Congress manifesto is, strangely, silent on their commitment to implement FRA and PESA.

In that respect AAP manifesto does make such commitment and this is most welcome. This is possibly the only useful thing for tribals among all three manifestos, in addition to the fact that AAP provides separate section for Tribals, for Scheduled castes and also for Valmikis, unlike the BJP and Congress manifestos basically clubbing all under one head.

In conclusion It is apt that the last page of the BJP manifesto says “Time for Modi” and not for BJP! The Congress manifesto on last page shows Rahul Gandhi sitting with urban youth. This appeal will have limited catchment. The last page of AAP manifesto asks voters in Hindi to vote for the honest party.

Let us hope the voters everywhere will do that.

Mr Manoj Mishra, Covener, Yamuna Jiye Abhiyan, New Delhi adds:

the three manifestoes have utterly failed to address the issue of Climate Change and its political, social, environmental and economic challenges and points to a dangerous climate change illiteracy still (despite events like June 2013 Kedarnath tragedy) prevailing amongst our political class.

The fact is that Climate Change and its impacts, demands to be put centre-stage in all political discourses today and a mere lip service as shown in the BJP and INC manifesto (AAP seems oblivious of it) is unacceptable and irresponsible to say the least. This is when the situation demands that it is in larger public interest that a Climate Change filter must govern all our so called developmental planning.
