Environmental issues stay unaddressed

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Prime Minister Narendra Modi was recently awarded the Champions of the Earth Award, following which he proceeded to articulate his vision to combat environmental degradation in an article titled "The Green State of Mind". His call for an ideological shift to an environmental philosophy that drifts away from mere governmental regulations seems more like a gimmick than a strategy to combat climate change. By referring to traditional Hindu texts and a Gandhi-centric lifestyle, the PM tried to suggest that Indian societies are intrinsically built upon an idea of sustainable development, and thus merely need to self-reflect and act accordingly to the shastras to reduce pollution.

Modi further suggested that India needs a greater public dialogue on environmental issues coupled with proactive steps taken towards conservation. This must be done on an individual level and not through policies which barely affect India’s poor majority. Additionally, the PM does not favour restrictions on large projects since that would hinder international trade and development. Ranked 177 out of 180 in Yale University's 2018 Environmental Performance Index, India continues to be one of the world’s biggest carbon emitters. Carbon emissions grew by an estimated 4.6 per cent in 2017 and continue to rise. Despite the existence of several frameworks such as the National Action Plan on climate change in 2008 and India's Intended Nationally Determined Contribution (INDC) pledged under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change meeting in Paris in 2015, there has been no active work towards achieving the set goals. While the 2008 Plan has deteriorated with no accomplishment of the eight national plans it sought to achieve, the INDC is terribly misleading since it projects a large increase in renewable energy without mentioning that India’s reliance on coal energy is scheduled to at least double by 2030. Moreover, the Union Environment Ministry has recently approved changes in the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification that will now exempt realty projects below 50,000 square metres from seeking mandatory environment clearances (ECs). This was done despite the National Green Tribunal (NGT)’s strong objections to the amendments. While such an exemption won’t apply to coastal zones, forests and protected areas, the harm that can be caused by this step remains dangerously grave. In the name of development, the Modi government appears to possess a myopic view of the long-lasting effects that increasing pollution can have on all individuals living within the borders of India. This isn’t the first time that the NGT has openly expressed concern over such an executive decision.

In December 2017, the Tribunal had quashed the Ministry’s notification exempting projects between 20,000 and 1.5 lakh square metres from prior ECs as long as they were supervised by environmental cells. This conflict between the judicial and executive branches of the country raises a key question: Should we focus more on short term projects that accelerate economic growth while ignoring the increasing health issues in peoples’ lives, or should the government be held accountable for failing to reduce environmental degradation?

We’re entering an era of environmental litigation that focuses on holding governments responsible for the non-implementation of their national laws. The PM’s vision of a philosophical shift in the way Indian citizens think about environment is certainly a desirable way to create consciousness amongst the people. However, to ignore the environmental impacts of industrial growth is dangerous. For real change to take place, implementation of existing policies and laws is merely the first step. Stringent implementation of well researched and realistic goals is the only way forward for India to resist the large health and environmental impacts of climate change.

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