

Decoding Manifestos

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What they say about the things that really matter

Election manifestos are an indication of what a political party intends to do if elected to power. Even if such intent is not necessarily implemented, manifestos are still important to understand the party's mindset, and of course, as a tool for the public to use for advocacy.

From this point of view, the Aam Aadmi Party's manifesto is head and shoulders above that of the Congress and the BJP, but even that disappoints on a number of counts. However, it would only be fair to clarify at the very outset that this does not analyse the Left Front manifestos, and omits certain aspects of social justice, which would be necessary for a more complete picture.

Three crucial challenges facing India today are of achieving responsible, accountable political governance, ensuring economic and social well-being (especially for the vast numbers of the still-poor), and doing all this without destroying the ecological base that makes life possible. Several decades of a particular model of 'development', including two decades of its globalised version, have not achieved this. Indeed, they have weakened India on all these fronts.

On the governance front, corruption and inefficiency in the public sector are still rampant, self-rule institutions of the people remain weak, and the increasing hand-over to private corporations has brought about a totally unaccountable elite into the corridors of political power.

On the socio-economic front, deprivation of various kinds (food, water, shelter, clothing, sanitation, health-care, education) afflict at least 70 per cent of the population, who should therefore be counted as poor, if one takes lack of basic needs to mean poverty. Here too, the hand-over to the private sector has mainly benefited the country's rich while taking public services out of the reach of the poor.

The increasing percentage of health-care costs in the household expenditure is but one indicator of this. Also on this front, the inequities between the rich and the poor, reflected in the fact that 10 per cent of the former owns more than half of India's wealth, is a major concern.

Finally on the ecological front, every major survey shows that we have embarked on a reckless, unsustainable path that could be equated with suicide; even as conservative an organization as the World Bank admits that environmental costs knock off most of the percentage points from India's GDP growth.

Do the Congress, BJP and AAP manifestos reflect this understanding, and do they offer hope for any major change towards a more sustainable, equitable future? Let us look at what they say on some of the above issues.



Governance

Accountable, responsible political governance is impossible without the empowerment of the people. This means that the first tier of decision-making, indeed the most crucial hub of power, needs to be the local community: the gram sabha in villages and the mohalla or neighbourhood sabha in cities.

Though every party swears by decentralisation, none goes the full distance in providing legal and financial powers of self-governance. AAP comes close; in spelling out its vision of swaraj, it promises untied funds for developmental activities that the local body decides on, community consent for payments made under government work, and an eventual role in formulating legislation.

The Congress, too, offers provisions for Panchayats to get more untied funds and have the power to decide on how to use resources raised by themselves. Otherwise, it limits itself to generalities like "Gram Sabhas are strengthened and legally mandated to secure responsive and responsible local governance".

The BJP promises "extensive devolution of functions, functionaries and funds" to panchayati raj institutions, but is silent on specifics, and says nothing about decentralised urban governance.

An absolutely crucial aspect of decentralised power is having a say in what happens to land, natural resources, and other variables on which people's lives and livelihoods are dependent. Again, it is only the AAP that specifies that the consent of gram sabhas will be needed for land acquisition, and for the use of minerals, forests and water under its jurisdiction.

Interestingly, in 2009, the Congress did empower communities to say no to diversion of forest lands for projects (under the Forest Rights Act), but its consistent failure to implement this is reflected in an absence of any such provision in its manifesto. The BJP, too, is silent on this.

Socio-economic security

On the socio-economic front, one of the biggest failures of economic globalisation in the last two decades has been the virtual stagnation of jobs in the formal sector. Each of the parties promises steps to significantly enhance job opportunities.

The BJP does well to stress labour intensive manufacture, the small and medium sector, handicrafts and artisans, though its record of handing things over to big corporates in Gujarat does not inspire much confidence.

AAP states that job creation will be the primary goal of its economic policy, and offers to stem ruralurban migration by a "concerted push in traditional industries, small-scale enterprises, and agricultural sector, with better infrastructure availability, easy access to formal credit, appropriate technological interventions, and support for fair pricing". For the youth, though, including the urban youth, it has only a bland promise of 'honest enterprise' without any specifics.

The Congress promises a 'Jobs Agenda' within 100 days of forming the government, and also stresses small and medium manufacturing industries; but it appears to have learnt little from the jobless growth of the last two decades, repeating worn-out strategies like industrial corridors, urban clusters, exports enhancement.

Unfortunately while these promises are valuable, there is no corresponding assurance about regulating mechanisation and automation in all sectors, as this has led to the lay-off of millions of workers in the last couple of decades. Nor is there any commitment that the forcible displacement of people from traditional occupations and livelihoods in forestry, fisheries, agriculture, pastoralism, crafts, and so on, will be halted and replaced by active support so that such people have the option of staying on with enhanced, dignified livelihoods in these sectors.

Again, it is the AAP that comes closest to this, by virtue of its commitment to make gram Sabha consent necessary for land acquisition, displacement, and use of natural resources. But even this party does not mention the need to support producer-run companies and cooperatives that have shown themselves to be effective in generating meaningful livelihoods and economic returns in many parts of India.

One tool that communities are increasingly using to resist forcible land and resource acquisition is the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Strangely, the Congress which pushed for this law, continues with an ambivalent attitude towards its implementation: it talks of stringent implementation of FRA for scheduled tribes (forgetting to mention that the Act is also for other forest-dwellers), but then dilutes this by promising only the involvement of forest-dwelling communities in 'management' (not governance, which FRA mandates), and giving 'benefits' of forest produce (not ownership, which also FRA mandates).

The AAP promises effective implementation of FRA including the need for gram sabha consent for use of forest land and resources. The BJP manifesto is deafeningly silent on the FRA. The scourge of economic inequality is ignored or sidelined by all the parties; none offer to curb the runaway salaries, wealth, and privileges of the rich, none have a roadmap on how to reduce the rich-poor gap.

So much for the commitment, which all parties make, to the following in the preamble of the Indian constitution: "equality of status and of opportunity."

Ecological sustainability

Finally, on the ecological front, all three parties have a common failing: they do not acknowledge that India (and the earth as a whole) has limits to the amount of nature and natural resources that can be used without endangering this or future generations (not to mention other species).

How parties are wooing the young voter Who will spare a thought for the environment?

They all lay their economic bets on high GDP growth, refusing to accept that on a finite planet, infinite growth is a contradiction in terms. While such economic folly is to be expected of the Congress and BJP (given their policies when they have been in power), it is somewhat surprising that AAP too toes a similar line.

Not only does the latter have members in its executive body who are aware of these contradictions, but an extensive civil society process that it carried out six months back resulted in recommendations for alternative paths of achieving well-being without resorting to GDP growth as the central economic peg.

These appear to have been ignored.

Throughout its tenure, and especially in the last few months, the Congress showed scant respect for the environment, as can be concluded from its record of forest land clearance. There is nothing in the manifesto that gives us any confidence that it won't continue the same in a third term. In fact, it proposes to replace a Cabinet Committee on Investments set up in 2013 to over-ride ministries that hold up clearances, with an even more powerful, permanent Investment Facilitation Committee under the PM.

This Committee will ensure "rapid approvals", another name for by-passing environmental assessment procedures which necessarily take time.

The BJP follows the same logic, promising to "frame the environment laws in a manner that...will lead to

speedy clearance of proposals without delay" and "single-window clearances".

The AAP makes no specific mention of this issue, though its promise of gram sabha empowerment over land and resources has a bearing.

Other than this overall obvious loophole, each party manifesto has some interesting pluses and minuses on the ecological front. All the parties lay stress on decentralised water harvesting, though none state clearly that this will get higher priority than megaprojects. Renewable energy is happily also a focus in all the manifestos, though only the AAP talks of a "phased shift towards" such resources and mentions decentralised renewables that will enable "local ownership".

Statements on controlling pollution, saving wildlife and forests, etc are present in each of the manifestos, though all are short on details of how to achieve these in the face of the massive industrialisation and urbanisation that India is going through. None talk about restraining overconsumption by the rich and curbing unethical advertising that creates consumerist desires; none mention how we are drowning in hazardous plastic and electronic waste.

Commendably, the BJP talks of "a public transport system, which can reduce the dependence on personal vehicles for transport, reducing cost, time to travel as well as ecological cost." The Congress mentions promotion of public transport but not as a priority over private and the AAP is strangely silent on it.

On agriculture, there is a welcome commitment to conservation, organic methods, drylands in all the manifestos, with AAP adding a promise to "promote indigenous varieties of crops and livestock". But it is not clear if this will be higher priority over the conventional approaches of the green revolution kind, which India has adopted over the last few decades, with disastrous effects on soil, water, and people's health.

There is some ambivalence on genetically modified organisms (GMOs): no party rejects them outright, the Congress omits mention of them and the BJP is the clearest in stating that they "will not be allowed without full scientific evaluation on its (sic) long-term effects on soil, production and biological impact on consumers".

The Congress promotes FDI in retail as a means of benefiting farmers, which is highly suspect. There is no recognition of the crucial role that farmer-producer companies can play along the entire chain from production to marketing/retail -- companies that will be further disempowered if FDI in retail (and other aspects of agriculture) is allowed. AAP and BJP reject this in theory at least.

At an overall glance, the AAP is the only one amongst these three parties that combines 'economy' and 'ecology,' mentions "intergenerational equity," and promises a "distinctive developmental model" that is "equitable and sustainable". But it falls short of a coherent statement on what this means.

Any such model has to be based on local self-reliance for basic needs, socially and ecologically responsible exchange and trade over larger regions, respect for the cultural, ecological, and other specifics of each area, devolution of not only political but also economic power to actual producers and consumers, a strong welfare and facilitative role for the state, among other things.

In saying that it is against 'crony capitalism', AAP keeps open the possibilities of the enormous corporate conglomerations and wealth accumulation that the Indian economy has been prone to (both domestic and foreign); it also continues to place faith in foreign trade as a key driver. These internal contradictions in the AAP manifesto are a sign of its lack of coherent thinking on economic and ecological fronts, despite the efforts of several hundred experts and experienced people who prepared such coherent policy papers for it.

Nevertheless, at least we see in it some glimpses of an alternative model of well-being, and given the number of AAP members who have led or been involved in genuine peoples' movements, perhaps it can be helped further towards such a model. For the Congress and BJP, the overwhelming sense is of business as usual, which can only lead India to further political, economic and ecological decay.

First Published: **indiatogether**, 16 April 2014

For a shorter version of the same: in The Hindu, BusinessLine, an anti-environment political discourse, 19 April 2014