



# This is not the future we want

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## **NITI Aayog's strategy for 2022 is replete with environmental and livelihood related contradictions**

- In what appears to be draft zero of the BJP's election manifesto, NITI Aayog released the 'Strategy for New India @ 75' document in 2018.
- This high-sounding and aspirational strategy aims to achieve a 'New India' by 2022, when the country celebrates its 75th year of Independence.
- The strategy has many progressive objectives.
- It follows the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Inclusion, sustainability, participation, gender equality and other buzzwords find mention.
- A cursory reading would evoke widespread appreciation.
- There are positive directions vis-à-vis the environment, such as a major focus on renewable energy, organic farming (with the zero budget natural farming model developed by Maharashtrian farmer Subhash Palekar being singled out for national application), increasing forest cover, and reducing pollution and waste.
- A chapter titled 'Sustainable environment' states: "The objective is to maintain a clean, green and healthy environment with peoples' participation to support higher and inclusive economic growth through sustainable utilization of available natural resources."
- It focuses on air pollution, solid waste management, water pollution, and forestry.

### **Many missing issues**

- Some other issues do find mention elsewhere, such as arresting land degradation and soil erosion, and water conservation.
- But many are missing, such as the urgent need to conserve a range of non-forest ecosystems.
- The increasing presence of toxic chemicals around us finds no mention.
- Most importantly, the absence of an integrated, comprehensive view on

how ecological issues can be integrated into all sectors indicates that this is still not core to the mindset of our planners.

- There is total absence of an understanding that the current form and goal of economic growth is inherently unsustainable.
- For more than three decades, governments have been promising that with environmental safeguards, growth can be made sustainable.
- There is no indication that this is anywhere near achievable, much less achieved.
- In 2008, the Confederation of Indian Industry indicated that India was already using twice of what its natural resources could sustain, and that more than half its biocapacity had already been eroded.
- So it is alarming that the most important “driver” for the lofty goals of the strategy is economic growth.

### **Alarming features**

- One of the biggest ecological and social disasters in India is mining, especially the large-scale open-cast type.
- NITI Aayog ignores this when it proposes a doubling of the extent of mining.
- The only concession is the suggestion to bring in “cutting-edge” technology to “limit environmental damage”, as if that will solve the fundamental need to deforest areas.
- There is also no focus on dryland farming though most farmers are engaged in this.
- There is positive mention of organic farming models for replication, but nothing on the amazing work of dryland farmers (such as the Dalit women of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana) showing productive, sustainable, biodiverse agriculture with millets and women as the fulcrum.
- One of the most alarming features of the document is its stress on rapid, single-window clearance of infrastructure and other projects.
- Any decent ecological assessment of a project needs a year of study (over all seasons), so the 180 days limit it suggests will mean short-cuts.
- This rush also means compromising on crucial processes of social assessment, public hearings, and participatory decision-making, as already seen in the last few years.
- There is nothing on the need to seek consent from local communities, though this is mandated under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.
- Governments in the last few years have a dismal record of safeguarding

the environment and the livelihoods of Adivasis and other communities.

- They have found ways to bypass constitutional and policy safeguards these vulnerable sections are supposed to enjoy.
- Without a strong, unambiguous commitment to upholding these protections, and putting communities at the centre of decision-making, India @ 75 is going to be an even more unequal, unjust, and conflict-ridden society than India @ 50.

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