



What we need is a commons manifesto

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How India handles land use change will decide whether it can improve lives without warming the world

- Another election is upon us, and we are preoccupied with some matters that are grave and many that are not.
- But noticeable by its absence in any of the manifestos and declarations by political parties is a debate about the future of human civilisation.
- In October 2018, UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change warned that without radical course correction, the world will exhaust its carbon budget to keep global temperature increase below 1.5°C by 2030, just two general elections away.
- Any increase above that will trigger runaway changes to global climate that could leave large portions of the planet uninhabitable.
- In March, UN's Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services warned that human societies are using up nature faster than it can renew itself and compromising its ability to sustain life on the planet.

A myopic preoccupation

- Scientists reassure us, though, that it is still not too late to avert the worst-case scenarios of ecosystem collapse and a climate-run riot.
- But for that, the world would need to reframe its engagement with climate change and abandon its myopic preoccupation with greenhouse gas emissions and carbon budgets.
- Real resilience will result only from improving the health of the lands they live in and depend on.
- Around the world, governments, multinational charities and technology companies are peddling a simplistic story of false solutions — that crisis can be averted by changing the fuel that powers our economy.

- By themselves, renewable energy systems will not make an inherently unsustainable economy sustainable or correct an unjust social system.
- Last December, during the climate summit in Katowice, Poland, the Environment Minister declared that India was on track to meet its climate goals ahead of the deadline.
- The same government is also changing laws to dilute environmental protection, facilitate corporate land grabs, disempower local communities and criminalise any dissent against its grand schemes.
- Even the government acknowledges that sea levels can rise by 3.5 to 34.6 inches by 2100 and inundate India's coastline.
- How India handles land use change, not climate change, will decide whether it can improve the lot of millions without warming the world.

Grassroots campaigns

- Across the country, people are rising up to protest against certain kinds of 'development' — for example, the Mumbai coastal expressway, and the proposed ports in Ennore and Kanyakumari.
- Although these fights may have positive consequences for the climate, they have never been explicitly about reducing the kinds of greenhouse gas emissions associated with 'development'.
- Rather, they are about how we relate to the lands that sustain us and who gets to define 'development'.
- Even today, agrarian and indigenous cultures acknowledge the importance of open, unbuilt spaces.
- The opposing and dominant world view of the 'developmentalists' is predicated on the value of built infrastructure, and requires the constant colonisation of open land.
- Paved surfaces, the hallmark of built-earth economies, disrupt water flows, reduce groundwater recharge and obliterate biodiversity.
- Such economies impoverish local communities and increase their vulnerability to natural shocks.
- Urban flooding, though, is not only a third world phenomenon.
- For all the rivalry between the political parties contesting the elections, there is a remarkable homogeneity of thought on matters relating to ecology and economy, and lack of thinking about India's future.
- What is desperately needed at this moment is a manifesto for the protection of the commons and open lands, and for the re-creation of

economies that derive value out of healing wounded landscapes and covering open lands with diverse vegetation, water and life.

- For this, we need to defer to the Constitution and ensure that those who are challenging 'development' projects like the bullet train can speak without fear.

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