

Green Issues in Electoral Politics in India : An Analysis

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Today the world is distressing unprecedented, unfortunate and severe crisis of human survival due to pandemic COVID-19. This health disaster has adversely affected not only human life and health but business, trade, economy, society and politics as well. The crisis has posed serious threats to all walks of life, consequently decisive socio-economic and political changes are markedly visible at the national and global level. This pandemic period has also emerged as a booster for the revival of environment and ecology of the globe. This calamity has taught many lessons to the mankind including 'growth and development in the harmony with the nature'. The eco-development of the economy, society and politics is the urgent need today. In the light of these developments, an academic investigation and analysis of Indian politics with particular reference to focusing green issues in elections in India is of contemporary significance. The present paper is an attempt in this direction.

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1. Introduction

Elections are gateway of democracy. Free and fair elections provide life-saving blood to a democratic system. Elections lead to the rise of leadership which eventually shapes the destiny of a nation. The promises for welfare of people, ensuring fundamental rights, providing education, health, employment and fulfilling the prerequisites for socio-economic development of the nation which are written in the constitution of India have been translating into reality by the different successive governments which are elected by the people of the country. It is also noticeable here that much is to be done to achieve the credentials of pledges made by constitution builders. The study and analysis of the electoral politics of India throws light on the fact that environmental issues are missing in the political discourse of the nation. Various studies on elections in India (1951-52 to 2019) highlighted the fact that green issues have not been conspicuously focused in the electoral scenario of the country. In this perspective, a change is visible in the electoral politics in India in the second half of this century as environmental concerns started getting attention of people, political parties and media. Since 2014, green issues including pollution of the Ganga and availability of potable water to all became vocal in the electoral debates and campaign in comparison to earlier Lok Sabha and state assembly elections.

2. Green Challenges in India : The Present Scenario

The environmental issues such as- water pollution, availability of potable water, air pollution, loss of bio-diversity and deforestation, soil health and challenges of food security etc. have posed serious intimidations in India. It was observed in a study conducted in 2017 that at least one in eight deaths in the country was because of the air pollution. Similarly, the Central Pollution Control Board observed in its study (2018) severe ground water pollution due to mixing of fluoride, nitrate, heavy metals and uranium. The study also highlighted pollution of 351 river stretches caused by the disposal of untreated wastes including industrial effluents. Further the disastrous trend of cutting trees and removal of natural forests has led to the desertification. The growing imbalance in ecology and climate change resulting in natural calamities like extreme rainfall, cyclones, floods and droughts are worrying occurrences. In fact, as

observed in various studies piloted on these subjects, pointed out pollution causing more deaths in India in comparison to cancer, tuberculosis, AIDS and diabetes and other chronic diseases. In the recent years, calamity of flood in Assam, Chennai and in many other states, water stress in Maharashtra, Bundelkhand, Rajasthan and in Himachal Pradesh and air pollution in New Delhi cautioned that environmental problems are at alarming level.

The severe air pollution of New Delhi in November, 2019 was shocking experience for all of us and it compelled policy makers to rethink and reorient policies and programmes related to environmental protection. The heavy smog and low visibility due to acute air pollution in Delhi generated a serious debate in social and political circles over this issue. It was for the first time in country that educational institutions were forced to close due to the air pollution. The report of Greenpeace International in 2019 stated that India has 15 out of 20 most polluted cities of the world. Similarly, according to Lancet Planetary Health 2018, 1.24 million deaths in India were caused by air pollution. The study also enumerated that out of 6,70,000 deaths, 4,80,000 were caused due to the use of solid cooking fuels.

Apart from this the policies of the government in regard to waste management are not satisfactory and the poor waste management is accelerating deterioration in environment. An expert on this subject, Sameer Lahiri highlighted in his article that in India 62 million tonnes of waste is generated in cities and towns every year. Out of which, merely 43 million tonnes is collected, 11.9 million tonnes is treated and 31 million tonnes is dumped in landfills. The report of the National Green Tribunal observed that 18000 tonnes of solid waste was generated in Prayagraj during *Kumbh mela* and the nearby waste management plant was not functional. It shows the negligent approach of government and administrative machinery over environmental matters.

The report of NITI Aayog on 'Composite Water Management Index: A tool for water management' (2018) indicated that approximately 600 million people of the country witness high to extreme level of water stress, and about 2 lakhs people die every year due to the consumption of polluted water. It is relevant to mention here that the action plan of cleaning of the Ganga called '*Namami Gange*' run by present Narendra Modi government also doesn't seem to be effective

in real sense. In another report prepared by IITs titled 'Ganga Rejuvenation Basin Management Programme' (GRBMP), the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) stated that, 'The NMGC has neither circulated GRBMP to different ministries and departments for consultation and seeking their opinion, nor finalized the GRBMP for initiating the long-term intervention on the Ganga'.

Many experts and environmental groups have been raising their voice continuously regarding the deplorable conditions of environment in the country. In a report presented by the Wildlife Institute of India in May, 2018, Indicated that 16 existing, 14 ongoing and 14 proposed hydroelectric projects on the Bhagirathi and Alaknanda river basins have turned the upper stretch of the Ganga 'ecological deserts'. In this connection the environmentalist, Manoj Misra commented that 'People are unable to make the relationship between healthy rivers and their water security. Water security cannot be achieved without rejuvenation of rivers.' In another case, frightened with the destruction of Kaveri delta which would certainly lead to chemical and radioactive contamination, farmer's leader P. S. Masilamani asked, 'Deltas are nature's gift to agriculture because of the deposition of fertile sediments. What is the logic of initiating hydrocarbon mining in such a food producing area? Why the authorities are unconcerned of the environmental hazards to be created by coal-bed methane'? Similarly, a report was submitted by the Committee on Restructuring the CWC and CGWB headed by Dr. Mihir Shah entitled 'A 21st Century Institutional Architecture for India's Water Reforms' recommended for the formation of Water Commission.

Apart from rivers, plight of groundwater also needs urgent attention. In this direction, the Trinamool Congress party of West Bengal and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) paid their attention and promised to check contamination of groundwater in their respective states. Both the political parties have shown their commitment to work for supply of potable water in areas which are facing water scarcity. They have also promised to evolve an action plan to utilize rain water for domestic and irrigation purposes. The interlinking of rivers in India has been a debatable issue. Although the political parties like Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party India (CPI), Davidra Munetra Kadagam (DMK), Communist

Party India Marxist (CPIM) have supported the interlinking of rivers but many environmentalists opposed this idea.

The decade of eighties (1981-1990) was declared as Water Decade by United Nations. Following this the government of India also opted for development and conservation of water resources. But as observed in many studies this programme could not achieve the desired objective due to the flaw in structural and managerial part of the government.

Similarly as mentioned earlier that deforestation on a massive scale in India not only adversely affected the biodiversity and climate change of the country but has also damaged largely the right to life and livelihood of tribes and indigenous people of India. The Chipko movement of 1970s, strengthened the role of local people in saving forests. Afterwards many movements have been vocal about their rights on forests. The judgment of Supreme Court in February, 2019 evicted the tribes from forest by rejecting their claims under Forest Rights Act 2006. The political parties like Trinamool Congress (TMC), Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)] and Congress stressed to review this decision of the court in the interests of tribal people.

3. Electoral Politics & Green Issues

In spite of the significance and urgency of addressing environmental concerns, these life sustaining matters could not gain much attention in the electoral debate of the country. The negligent approach may be seen from both the political parties and the less awareness of Indian voters as well.

In this regard, the standpoint and role of political parties are like a catalyst. It is ironical that even after more than 70 years of independence, election campaigns are imbued with vote catching issues like caste manipulations, regionalism, communalism, free supply of electricity, free loan, free ration and many more. In this connection a survey conducted by Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR) underlined that water related problems were found in top ten priorities of voters nationwide. The survey further highlighted that in the list of voter priorities, five were associated with water and resource management. The findings of this study concluded with non-satisfactory role of governments whether it is central or state government.

4. Green Issues in Election Manifestos of Political Parties in India

Despite India facing serious environmental challenges such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, frequent floods and droughts, there is still a lack of political representation of the environment as an electoral issue. In Indian politics environmental issues have not been very much focused in electoral politics. The various studies conducted on the electoral politics in India noticed that in the earlier decades of the post independent India environmental issues have not been promised in the election manifestos of the major political parties. Later on the Congress, CPI(M) and the BJP all have started voicing for the environment security and conservation by checking river water pollution, investing in renewable energy systems, making India open defecation free, availability of potable water to all citizens and food security for all etc. The Aam Aadmi Party also has green agenda in its foundations and its active support for environmental movements and groups like the Narmada Bachao Andolan. The BJP in its electoral campaign also promised to institute a permanent task force to protect the tiger and other endangered animals. It is ironical that these slogans could not translate into reality effectively. For instance, the meeting of National Ganga Council headed by the present Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi could not held since its creation in 2016. Keeping in view the significance of life sustaining resources and their deteriorating conditions, this is the high time to bring environmental issues in the action oriented agenda of all political parties.

An attempt would be made here to investigate and analyse the attitude, role and behaviour pattern of different political parties towards environmental issues and their commitments for environmental security through their election manifestoes.

The election manifesto of Bhartiya Janta Party in Lok Sabha election of 2014, highlighted the following points for the safety and conservation of environment-It was perhaps for the first time in the history of the country that a candidate of prime minister himself raised the issue of the Ganga in the election campaign with an emotional appeal made in Varanasi, an important city of Uttar Pradesh. The sustainable development, drinking water, clean and healthy India, agro and social forestry, use of clean energy, solar

energy, and conservation of natural resources etc. were issues discussed in the manifesto.

The Election Manifesto of Congress Party in 2014 Lok Sabha election highlighted its commitment towards sustainable development. It also promises environmental protection and conservation of natural resources which secures health, livelihood and nutritional well-being of all.

The Samajwadi Party, in its manifesto of 2017 election, declared clean UP green UP programme in their agenda. It is known to all that Bahujan Samaj Party did not issue election manifesto in elections.

The Congress Party in its manifesto emphasized air pollution as 'National Public Health Emergency' and promised to tackle all major sources of emission. On the other hand, the manifesto of BJP aspires to reduce air pollution by at least 35% in next 5 years. To check water pollution, both the parties have promised to create a new Ministry of Water. BJP has reiterated to achieve the goal of Clean Ganga by 2022, while Congress has promised to double the budget allocation for cleaning rivers.

Regarding climate change, the Congress Party has promised an action agenda to combat global warming and BJP has promised to achieve the goal of 175 GW renewable energy production by 2022. Additionally, Congress has planned for involvement of local communities in forest management and BJP has offered "Green Bonus" to Himalayan states for forest conservation. Congress party's manifesto also underlined Water Bodies Restoration Mission for repairing and restoring water bodies as well as the Wasteland Regeneration Mission for regeneration and a forestation of wastelands and degraded lands. Moving one step ahead, the Maharashtra Congress party released a separate manifesto for the environment in which the party makes the promise that it will work to preserve biodiversity and natural resources of the state as well as ban the import of waste and restrict the discharge of effluents in rivers. Taking into account all these aspirations of different political parties, it seems like political parties are just making promises and lack a hardcore action plan.

The Aam Aadmi Party headed state government of Delhi presented a green budget in March 2018. Manish Sisodia, Deputy Chief Minister of Delhi stated that "This is perhaps the first time that such a budgeting exercise has been attempted in the country where

the impact of each department's proposals to control pollution were studied in a scientific manner before making budgetary commitments."

There are two political parties namely Uttarakhand Parivartan Party (UKPP), Uttarakhand and the Indian Peoples Green Party (IPGP) of Rajasthan which are committed to raise environmental issues in elections. In the Loksabha elections of 2019, the Uttarakhand Parivartan Party (UKPP) contested from Almora district of Uttarakhand and secured 0.77 percent of the votes casted in the seat.

Similarly in Rajasthan Indian Peoples Green Party (IPGP) raised environmental concerns in the Loksabha elections of 2019 and secured 0.19 percent votes in Rajsamand and 0.58 percent votes in Tonk-Swai Madhopur constituencies respectively. Though there are small steps towards positioning green issues in the electoral politics of India but this need to be encouraged and placed in the discourse of green politics.

But not only political parties, civil society is equally responsible for such scenario. Political parties reflect the priorities of voters and due to lack of awareness, even after suffering through the environment related problems, green issues are not in their priority list. Hence, the only positive signal is that political parties have begun to understand the importance of environmental protection and have started to involve such issues in their manifestos.

In dealing with environmental challenges, the citizenship responsibility for pressurizing political parties and the government is vital. The citizens of Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh launched a movement in assembly elections of the states with the slogan 'No Water No Vote'. Consequently, this movement forced the political parties of the concerned states to withdraw marginalizing water issues in many constituencies. It is also noticeable as stated by the United Nations (UN) in its report that although the green laws have been framed almost thirty eight times in the last four decades but the execution part is still weak. In this regard while referring to the Indian scenario, Sunita Narayan, the noted environmentalist and the Director of Centre for Science and Environment said that, "We are perfect in the policy department but implementation is a problem. We have weak deterrents. The system of accountability has been weakened, so monitoring is a huge problem. You cannot fix things if you disregard/disable institutions in power."

5. Green Parties : The Global Scenario

Green Party is a formally organized political party which emphasizes on environmental causes and believes in social justice and opposition of ecological violence. The six guiding principles of Global Greens may be mentioned as - ecological wisdom, social justice, participatory democracy, non-violence, sustainability and respect for diversity. Several countries like UK, Germany, USA, Canada have witnessed the flourishing of green parties.

The Green Party of US has successfully entered the legislature and has been influencing US politics on green issues. As Green Party's official website declares 'In all 2017 elections, Greens won 44 out of 164 races.' Acknowledging the climate change, key issues in Presidential elections of 2020 have shifted from economy, healthcare and immigration to real solutions for ecological imbalance. Further, CNN hosted a climate town hall event in which top 10 Democratic candidates answered questions from audience regarding environment.

The Green Party of Canada was founded in 1983. It has launched 'Mission : Possible - Green Climate Action Plan' which aims to avoid climate catastrophe. It includes a 20-step Climate Action Plan to check global warming. In UK, the polling company YouGov has found that there is a sudden rise in environmental concerns recently and 27% voters in the General elections of 2019 consider environment as one of the three most important issues. In spreading awareness regarding environmental catastrophe, the role of protests by Extinction Rebellion and strikes led by Greta Thunberg has remained immensely important.

Europe has become a fine example of what is called an ecologically aware continent. As a survey by Ipsos MORI suggests that 77% of European voters consider policies regarding global warming as a deciding factor for who to vote. Laurence Tubiana, the CEO of the European Climate Foundation said, "Climate action is not a partisan issue and it is clear that it has now become a key election issue for voters." Furthermore, Breena Holland in her work 'Allocating the Earth' has developed a "Capabilities approach" to political ecology. She has recognized environment as a "meta-capability" which is a precondition for all other capabilities.

Many western countries have seen a fair share of Green Parties in the political field, but the concept of Green Party is not functional in India. Though Suresh Nautiyal founded a Green party but India but it could not expanded its reach in public. In India there is a greater need of political parties that consider the needs of the nation's environment and conservation of natural resource as their major responsibility.

6. Eco-Democracy : The Strappingly Needed Action Programme

For last many decades the ecological balance of the world is being continuously damaged by the irresponsible human behaviour and activities and unplanned developmental policies adopted by various nations. Sustainable development is the only possible remedy to save the earth from environmental catastrophe. In such a grim situation an integrated and synchronized approach and action plan at each level the government, administrative machinery, media, NGO and people's participation is the need of the hour. Collaboration and co-ordination between governments (Central, State and Local) is the key for effective functioning of policies related to environmental protection and sustainability.

Mahatma Gandhi's thought supported the idea of green democracy. Gandhi wanted to establish Eco-Swaraj for India. It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. In his Book Hind Swaraj, Gandhi emphasized how the Indian will attain freedom from British imperialism and will create a more equal society. Noted environmentalist defines Gandhi's Swaraj as a collective kind of autonomy that recognizes living harmoniously with nature. Kothari further writes, "one has to be respectful of nature and recognize that other species and earth as a whole also have rights in their own entity." Unfortunately in post independent India the principles of Swaraj have never been fully realized.

The constitution of India also declares that environmental conservation is the supreme duty of the citizens but without developing environmental sensitization among the masses this is not possible. This is the utmost requirement to develop eco-sensitivity in each and every section of the society and in the government. The environmental movements in India like - Chipko Andolan, Narmada Bachao Andolan and various other movements run by the

tribals and indigenous people time to time to protect their forest and natural resources also helped in developing eco-consciousness among the masses regarding environmental issues and sustainable development. The several environmental groups in the country also raised their demands for the sustainable management of the lifesaving resources and conservation of the environment through changes in government policies. Ironically, in spite of all these developments, the issues of ecology and environment could not take place commendably in the electoral discourse of India. With the objective to study the preferences of voters in the elections in India, a survey was conducted in 2018 by the Association for Democratic Reforms covering 2.73 lacs population, observed that only 11.5% of the voters considered water and air pollution are priority issues in elections. Seeing the seriousness of the environmental threats in the country, green issues need to be much debated and discussed in the elections. Further, the development of the awareness on these issues will also be helpful in framing and execution of appropriate environmental policies and programmes by the governments run by the different sets of political parties. In this connection it may also be suggested here that in India green political parties are the utmost requirement today.

The policies of the globalization and liberalization and free market economy should be in tune with sustaining environment and ecology of the nation. Eco-democracy needs to be the focused agenda of discourse and action plan of the government, political parties and the society as a whole. We all should 'Awake' and 'Conserve Nature' until it is too late. The concept of green democracy establishes inseparable relationship between environmental protection and democracy. The Democratic values such as inclusive representation and participation in democratic process, accountability, commitment are prime areas in Earth System Governance. In this context the pillars of democracy - equality, justice and brotherhood may be studied and analyzed as equal distribution of life sustaining natural resources, ecological justice and harmonious relationship between human beings and environment. Amongst all these the concepts of ecological peace and sustainable development are vital.

The development of eco-democracy where all the citizens have safe and dignified right to live along with fundamental duties towards conserving life giving resources should be the present and

future of India and the world. The practices and values of nature worship, respect and reverence for the nature prevailed, thousands and thousands year back, in Vedic period of Indian civilization need to be revived and inculcated in the minds of our children, our youth and all through eco-education. Electronic, print and social media today may play a decisive role in spreading awareness and developing green sensitivity among people in this direction.

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