Recently, the Uttarakhand High Court ruled that the Ganga and Yamuna, and their tributaries, have rights as a “juristic/legal person/living entity”. An interesting judgment, I thought, and I decided to spend some time reading about it. I came to a point where I found that the recognition of the rivers’ rights is based on its value for “socio-political-scientific development”, and due to the spiritual significance of the Ganga and Yamuna, especially for Hindus. The understanding that follows this is that rights do not stem from an intrinsic identity or status of the rivers but more from their use for humans, making the judgment human centric (Kothari 2017).

Do we really ever place an intrinsic value on the environment when it comes to politics? Where environment fits in in the political context is something that I have tried to trace through this paper, with a focus on the manifestoes of four major political parties in India. This paper is not a normative comment on political party manifestos in India or a judgement on whether they need to be greener than present or not. It is an analysis of where aspects of environment find a place in the manifestos and what role do they play in the political document.

For the purpose of this paper, I analysed the 2009 and 2014 national manifesto of Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Indian National Congress (INC), Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M) and the 2014 manifesto of Aam Admi Party (AAP). The paper analyses the context of the presence of “environment” in the manifestos as: (a) an extension of economic development, (b) a reflection of nationalist values and (c) as a result of external developments on sustainability. It will first illustrate what space the term “environment” occupies in the manifestos and the changes it has seen from 2009 to 2014. The paper then goes to explain the three aspects and reflects upon the nature of green politics in India.

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Occupied Space: Spaces occupied by “Environment” in Manifestos

A manifesto for a political party is a public declaration of policy and aims. The space that all terms and subheadings involve reflects the priorities that the party may hold. I did a quick analysis to see after how many sections, does one arrive at a section dedicated solely to environment or ecology.¹ Table 1 shows the results, with the second column showing in percentage how much of the manifesto is read to come across a section dedicated solely to environment or ecology. Apart from AAP, all the other party manifests mention a heading on ecology only in their last five to seven pages of the manifesto is read. In other words, the priority given to environment in the manifestos is quite low.

Table 1: Where Does “Environment” Find Space in Manifestos?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party (for 2009 elections)</th>
<th>Percentage of manifesto read before coming to a section on “Ecology”/ “Environment”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>85.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INC</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI-M</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political Party (for 2014 elections)</th>
<th>Percentage of manifesto completed before coming to a section on “Ecology”/ “Environment”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BJP</td>
<td>85.71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INC</td>
<td>81.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPI-M</td>
<td>93.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AAP</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, an interesting thing to note is that with the 2014 elections, even though a section completely dedicated to these terms comes later in the manifestos, environment in particular ways still features earlier. In the 2014 BJP manifesto, the very first page of the manifesto is dedicated to a 17-lines pledge, of which the third line mentions, “inclusive and sustainable development”. The INC 2014 manifesto also shows a similar trend. It has a page layout of landmark legislations, of which point 8 says, “The Indian National Congress, which has firmly dedicated to the cause of protecting our nation’s environment and forests, created the National Green Tribunal Act,
2009 to establish a special fast track court to hear disputes related to these issues.” Before 2014, in none of the party manifests did environment feature earlier on in the document as a separate sub-heading or in any other way.

Figure 1 is a pictorial representation of the most popular terms used in all the manifests combined. As can be seen, the terms “environment”, “ecology” and “sustainability” are not represented in the image due to the almost negligible usage of these terms. The terms that dominate are the expected ones—“national”, “Congress”, “government”, “development” and “Education”.

Figure 1: The Most Popular Terms in Manifestos

The Anthropocentric Angle: Environment as an Extension of Economic Development and Agriculture

The previous section looked at the direct mention of the term “environment” through separate headings. However, the term “environment” or “ecology” also features indirectly under other headings. The trend that I observed was its implicit presence under the headings of “economy” and “agriculture”. Environmental issues many times become vehicles to carry forward a particular politics and hence become one of the important planks through which a party’s broader socio-political goals are articulated (Sharma 2012).

CPI-M’s 2009 manifesto mentions, “making the Environment Impact Assessments (EIA) process transparent, accountable, and independent of vested interests”. Similarly, in the 2014 BJP manifesto, environment clearance
finds place under the subheading of “Industry—Modern, Competitive and Caring”. It states, “decision making on environmental clearances will be made transparent as well as time bound”. Environmental clearances and EIAs are both beneficial tools to be used to evaluate the likely environmental impacts of an economic project before adopting it. So environment does feature in instances such as these but only because economic development is considered significant.

In fact, AAP in 2014 reflects this thinking explicitly with one of their subheadings titled “Economy and Ecology”, which begins with, “AAP envisions a balanced development model for India that fosters a dynamic, equitable and ecologically sustainable economy” and further lists eight points of which only one point mentions “where human and ecological capital are continually enriched”. Further, section 9 of the manifesto titled “Facilitating robust economic growth with holistic well-being” that states “integrating economic and environmental policies, to render them increasingly consistent over time; in maximising the well-being today, without compromising the ability of future generations to do so”. These statements from the AAP manifesto clearly indicate the party’s focus on environment only to the extent that sustained economic growth is necessary.

A theme that emerges from this integrated approach of economic development and environment protection is an anthropocentric view of nature. The political sovereignty that the state possesses reproduces a world in which humans are elevated over nature and in which nature is reduced to a mere resource (Backstrand and Kronsell 2015). Therefore, other than as a part of economic development, traces of environment also feature under the heading of “agriculture”, thereby reflecting the importance of protecting nature as a part of protecting the livelihood of humans.

The 2009 BJP manifesto under the subheading of “GM seeds” under the heading “agriculture” states, “No genetically modified seed will be allowed for cultivation without full scientific data on long term effects on soil, production and biological impact on consumers” (emphasis added). Hence, while long-term effects on soil are a concern, it is only a concern for the activity of agriculture and not for the degradation of soil itself.

The 2009 manifesto of INC also makes a similar claim under the subheading of “agriculture” when it states, “A renewed emphasis will be placed on wasteland development and afforestation”. It is this connection between the metaphysics of humanity’s place in the world and political sovereignty that is one of the reasons behind the ecological predicament modern society has
created for itself (ibid.). Under the same anthropocentric theme, environment also finds space under development activities in an attempt to reduce poverty.

The CPI-M 2009 manifesto invokes the sustained interventions by the party that led to the enactment of the Forest Rights Act, 2006. It was this Act, the manifesto states, “which included the other traditional forest dwelling communities as beneficiaries, included expanded rights to minor forest produce, right to development projects in forest areas within a limited area” amongst other things.

Similarly, in the 2014 INC manifesto, tribal and forest dwelling communities are proposed to be “engaged more centrally in forest management and ensure they get benefits from the forest produce, including bamboo and other non-timber produce”. This thinking runs parallel to the belief that poverty is the worst form of pollution and is a major cause of environmental degradation. When such thinking enters mainstream discourses relating to development, poverty and the environment, it is deemed important to submit to the development agenda for environment protection, which in turn is believed to be necessary to alleviate poverty (Desai 2016).

Through the subjects of economic growth and social development, the environment is invoked to carry forward this kind of development, which is considered important through the anthropocentric view of nature by the state. Thus, the effect that takes place is that agendas do not always get translated into concrete political solutions to environmental problems. Nature only becomes a vehicle to bring larger economic and social agendas into the purview, which is thought as significant, and becomes an entity that requires protection only because the economic and social agendas are important.

Sanctity And Pollution: Hinduisation of Environmental Concerns

Another theme that commonly ties the manifests together when it comes to “environment” being invoked is the narratives of Hindu nationalism and patriotism. Traditional environmental terms tie in nicely with the religious repertoire of sanitation, pollution, sacredness, purity and purification, and politics, especially right-wing politics, find a comfortable link with protecting the environment (Sharma 2012). This is how Hindutva’s political agenda often articulates itself via weaving environmental issues into popular discourses (ibid.).

One way that environmental issues find way into the political discourse is through the concept of purity. A common running theme shows India in the light of a holy land whose earth, air, water, hills, forests and fauna all are
sacred. And all that is sacrosanct needs to be kept pure. The pollution of water, air and the environment is inextricably tied to the pollution of Hindu identity: the pollution of external and internal nature thus stems from the same violation of a natural and culturally rooted order (ibid.). A reflection of this ideology can be seen in 2009 manifesto of the BJP, which states the following:

Ganga occupies a special place in the Indian psyche...It is a pity that even after six decades of independence Ganga continues to be thoroughly polluted and is drying. The BJP will ensure cleanliness, purity and uninterrupted flow of Ganga, and will take all measures, legal and administrative in this regard.

Another way in which tradition and patriotism find way into political agendas is through the concept of “heritage”. As opposed to the modern environmental sense of pollution, which relates to material conditions of our natural surroundings, the right-wing discourse sees pollution as the 'defiling' of our natural, social and cultural worlds by perceived unwanted, unwelcome or alien elements. It is this heritage or our country’s uniqueness that this discourse seeks to protect.

One such result of this ideology can be seen in the 2014 BJP manifesto, where apart from a section dedicated to “flora, fauna and environment—safeguarding our tomorrow”, a separate subheading is attributed to the Himalayas, which claims that a National Mission on Himalayas will be launched. It is interesting to note that this subheading is found under the section of “preserving our cultural heritage” as opposed to the expected heading of “environment”.

The INC too in its manifesto of 2009 declares the Ganga as a “national river”. With this, the manifesto informs of the Ganga River Basin Authority for ensuring that development needs are met in an ecologically sustainable manner. The tying together of heritage, patriotism and Hindutva traditions in politics becomes a way of bringing the personal into the political. This variety of environmentalism with metanarratives of Hindu nationalism, Hindu superiority and national purity becomes a platform for the parties to extend their appeal beyond their defined constituency and to forge an expanding public sphere.

The Global Web: Influence of “Sustainable Development” in the Manifestos

The modern understanding of the term “sustainable development” is derived from the Brundtland Report of 1987, which by joining two positive sounding terms—sustainable and development—sought to resolve at a stroke the conflict between an economy based on everlasting growth and a planetary
environment of permanent high quality (Adams 2009). It was only after this
global exchange of ideas that India saw not only a reflection of this new
buzzword in policies but also inclusion of environment pollution in election
manifestoes. Initially led by Congress-I in 1980, all major parties during the
seventh general elections in 1980 and the years after that have had something
to say on environmental protection (Singh 2007). This term thus features in
almost all political manifestoes.

International UN conventions thus have had an impact on policies, political
mandates and agendas within India, which is reflected in my reading of all
the manifestoes considered in this paper. To give an example, in the BJP
manifesto of 2009, it is stated that the party endorses the principle of “common
but differentiated responsibilities” as enshrined in the UN Framework
Convention on Climate Change. Similarly, the INC 2009 manifesto commits
“itself to strengthening people’s movements whose objectives will be to
protect and preserve our bio-resources and ensure their sustainable use”.
It also mentions that the Congress led-United Progressive Alliance (UPA)
government unveiled a National Action Plan for Climate Change.

Even though sustainable development features so generously in most of the
manifestoes, it should still be kept in mind that the concept in itself does
not provide the policymaker with a set of action-oriented goals, thereby
risking action-guiding capacity (Backstrand and Kronsell 2015). This has led
many observers to conclude that goals and visions need to be decided in
a more reflexive, deliberative, interactive and inclusive manner, involving
diverse groups of societal actors. Another outcome of this use of sustainable
development narrative is the absence of an understanding of social dependence
on ecological foundations. In the ambit of global economic and political
governance, ecological considerations or understanding environment–
society relations are sidelined. As a result, when World Bank has a strong
environmental message, this has been done in the framework of sustainable
development framework, which assumes unlimited growth and denies the
basic realities of environmental equity and resource necessities (ibid.).

The Case of Limited Representation: The Role of the Middle
Class
The natural question that followed after I did my analysis was why does
environment still occupy only a limited space in the manifestoes? I found
an interesting answer to this in the form of the role of the Indian middle
class. Political parties in a majoritarian democracy choose those policies or
outcomes what are most preferred by a median voter, which is known as the “median voter rule” (Lahiri 2015). In most countries, the middle class forms the median. In India today, the middle class is still not the median voter, but they are nevertheless the opinion makers. The role of the middle class gets even further heightened in the sphere of “new politics” (Harriss 2007), which is the term given to a more genuinely participatory rather than representative democracy, answering people’s needs and interests by addressing their problems directly. In this “new politics”, there is a stronger tendency for wealthier and particularly for more educated people to be involved, as research suggests. The middle class then becomes a larger part of the new politics, which results in a “stratification of associational activity”, where this middle and upper class is mostly concerned about problems of urban environment—unsafe and inadequate water supply, poor air quality and sewerage—issues that directly find a place in party manifestoes or political agendas (ibid.).

Apart from this stratified associational activity, environmental concerns do not find space in the consciousness of the middle class. But when issues do come in the open with demonstrations or protests, they are generally the people at the margins—peasants, tribal communities, fishermen or “empty-belly” environmentalists in Ramchandra Guha’s (Lahiri 2015) words. However, in the INC 2009 manifesto, I was pleasantly surprised to see the following statement: “The Indian National Congress commits itself to strengthening people’s movements whose objective will be to protect and preserve our bio-resources and ensure their sustainable use.” This concentration on people’s movements is something that I did not find in any other manifesto that I read for the purpose of this paper, and it was a refreshing change.

Raghav Sharan Singh (2007) argues that the environment is not a concept that can be conceptualised by some decision maker, bureaucrat, administrator or politician; this has to done by the people. Maybe in India, the opinion-making middle class has still not been able to conceptualise the environment. The Indian middle class today is neither rich nor poor, nor ecological refugees, nor ecosystem people (Lahiri 2015), which has given political parties cues for framing environmental policies and adapting them suitably into their manifestos.
Conclusion

Thus in India, while environment has found place in the manifestos of political parties, it has largely been invoked under a larger theme of economic growth and development, Hinduism or sustainable development. Hence, the decisions that emerge out of these are rarely homogeneous, and they emerge as a part of political advantages or of commercial and business concerns. The middle class’ role as the opinion maker is one understanding of the limited and streamlined representation of the environment in manifestos. But even then, the environment, for the sake of environmental concerns, has not found much space, which reflects the anthropocentric nature of our politics. Having said that, it is important to understand that to mobilise people for environmental concerns alone is difficult due to the abstract nature that most environmental concepts have, and this makes it easier to understand why concepts of Hinduism or economic development become ideas on which environmental concerns then ride. Until a truly green party is formed, the way the environment is represented will continue to be the same.

End Notes

1 For this calculation, I marked the page number on which a heading of “environment” or “ecology” began and then converted it into percentages. For example, if it occurred on the 42nd page of a 49-page manifesto, I converted the score of 42/49 into a percentage, thereby arriving at a figure of 85.71%.

References


Kothari, Ashish and Shrishtee Bajpai (2017): “Can the Ganga Have Human Rights?” The Indian Express 1 April.

