

# Environmental Degradation: Never an Election Issue in India

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## Executive Summary

*As a result of environmental pollution, a large number of people die each year in India. In spite of that, environment-related issues and the impending threats due to environmental degradation hardly find any mention in major public discourses in the country. In the 2019 general elections, as in the case in the past, the political parties have provided space for environment-related issues in their manifestoes but almost none of their leaders have spoken about it in their election rallies. Beyond the political leaders, the environment also does not seem to be an important issue for the people and the media during the elections.*

## Introduction

India is on the cusp of an environmental disaster. According to a Greenpeace International report in March 2019, India is home to 15 out of 20 most polluted cities globally.<sup>1</sup> It is estimated that air pollution kills one in every eight Indian.<sup>2</sup> In December 2018, a study by Lancet Planetary Health on the seriousness of pollution in India, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Indian government and the Indian Council for Medical Research, stated that, in 2017, around 1.24 million Indians died due to air pollution.<sup>3</sup> Of this number, more than 51 per cent of the people who died were less than 70 years old. It also highlighted that about 670,000 died from air pollution in the wider environment and 480,000 from household pollution related to the use of solid cooking fuels.<sup>4</sup> A large number of deaths due to air pollution were recorded in the states of Uttar Pradesh (260,028), Maharashtra (108,038) and Bihar (96,967).<sup>5</sup> If one takes into account the other forms of pollution and environment-related issues such as floods and drought, the number of deaths would be startling.

Despite such a situation, the environment has never been a significant issue either for the political parties or the voters during the elections. During my limited interactions with the Indian voters between December 2018 and March 2019, the key voting determinants in the general elections were unemployment and development, among others. Very few listed the environment as an election concern. Even those who shared their views on the environment categorically stated that, while it is an important issue, it would not determine their vote.

<sup>1</sup> "World Most Polluted Cities in 2018 (PM 2.5)", *IQ Air Visual*. <https://www.airvisual.com/world-most-polluted-cities>. Accessed on 29 April 2019.

<sup>2</sup> "Around 12.4 lakh deaths in India in 2017 attributable to air pollution: Study", *The Economic Times*, 6 December 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/environment/pollution/around-12-4-lakh-deaths-in-india-in-2017-attributable-to-air-pollution-study/articleshow/66972970.cms>. Accessed on 12 March 2019.

<sup>3</sup> "India's polluted air claimed 1.24 million lives in 2017: study", *Reuters*, 6 December 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-pollution-lancet/indias-polluted-air-claimed-1-24-million-lives-in-2017-study-idUSKBN1O51T8>. Accessed on 18 February 2019.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> "Around 12.4 lakh deaths in India in 2017 attributable to air pollution: Study", *op cit.*

## The 2019 Elections and the Environment

In the 2019 general elections, almost all political parties and a majority of the independent candidates included the environment in their manifestoes.

Under the sub-theme, “Forest and Environment”, under “Good Governance” the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) manifesto states:<sup>6</sup>

- i. We [the party] have ensured speed and effectiveness in issuing forest and environmental clearances for eligible projects due to which we have around 9000 sq km [square kilometres] to the forest cover of the country. We are committed to maintaining this pace through the adoption of cleaner practices to make our nation a greener country.
- ii. We have evolved technologically better strategies and devices to map the level of pollution in cities and rivers and have taken effective steps to reduce the level of pollution in major cities, including the national capital. We will convert the National Clean Air Plan into a Mission and we will focus on 102 most-polluted cities in the country. Through concerted action, we will reduce the level of pollution in each of the mission cities by at least 35% over the next five years.
- iii. We have continuously protected and promoted the interest of forest dwellers particularly the tribal communities. We have endeavoured to provide basic amenities, such as roads, telephone connectivity and cooking gas connection in addition to houses and toilets, at the doorstep of people living in remotest forest areas. We are committed to continuing our work in this direction.

The BJP’s manifesto includes providing special financial assistance in the form of “Green Bonus” to facilitate the protection and promotion of forests in the Himalayan states.<sup>7</sup> The party manifesto also highlights its achievement through the Swachh Bharat Mission (Clean India Mission). It promises to take the mission to new heights by having sustainable solid waste management in every village. Through the mission, the party will ensure 100 per cent disposal of liquid wastes with an emphasis on the faecal sludge management and reuse of wastewaters in urban, peri-urban and non-sewer areas.<sup>8</sup> To tackle the water problems in the country, the BJP’s manifesto promises to expedite the river linking programme. The manifesto also promises to provide piped water to every household by 2024. It will also focus on water conservation and taking measures to recharge the ground waters.<sup>9</sup>

The Indian National Congress’ manifesto includes “Environment and Climate Change” and “Climate Resilience and Disaster Management”. It talks about constituting “an independent, empowered and transparent Environment Protection Authority (EPA) to establish, monitor and enforce environmental standards and regulations. The EPA will replace all other bodies

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<sup>6</sup> “Sankalp Bharat, Sashakt Bharat” *Bharatiya Janata Party Sankalp Patra 2019*. <http://www.documentcloud.org/documents/5798075-Bjp-Election-2019-Manifesto-English.html>, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p.20.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 21.

that currently exercise jurisdiction and powers.”<sup>10</sup> It recognises air pollution as a national public health emergency, and promises to “significantly strengthen the National Clean Air Programme in order to urgently tackle the problem of pollution” and also promises that, if elected it “will join hands with state governments to stop, fully and finally, the discharge of effluents into the rivers and to clean all the rivers of India”.<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, the Congress’ manifesto also promises to impose a complete ban on import of all types of waste.<sup>12</sup> The party recognises the water scarcity in India. To address the challenge, it promises to bring all water-related activities and departments under a single authority.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of highlighting their concerns for the environment in their respective manifestoes and their promise to act on environmental issues with a slew of measures, both the BJP and the Congress have hardly elaborated on these issues during their election campaigns. As mentioned earlier, these parties focus on what is deemed important to the people – employment, development, security and agrarian issues, among others.

Surprisingly, the media which is regarded as the fourth pillar of democracy and one that has proactively raised many important election issues, has been conspicuously silent on issues relating to the environment during the 2019 elections. This callousness was perhaps most visible during the second phase of elections on 18 April 2019, when many of the key media groups remained silent on the prevailing drought situation in the Marathwada region in Maharashtra. Some exceptions remain though. In his 22 April 2019 primetime programme, Ravish Kumar from New Delhi Television raised the issue of water scarcity, pollution and other environmental hazards. He also questioned that, as the environment is affecting the lives of so many Indians, why it is not an important issue in the 2019 elections? In his programme, Sunita Narain from the Centre for Science and Environment, highlighted the basic reasons for the deteriorating environment and growing wastes in and around Delhi.<sup>14</sup>

## The Road Ahead

When an issue as important as the environment is side-lined during an important occasion such as the general elections, one can only worry that India is heading towards an environmental disaster. One of the biggest environmental threats India faces today is from household and industrial wastes.

Waste management rules in India are based on the principles of “sustainable development”, “precaution” and “polluter pays”.<sup>15</sup> This is a big issue in urban areas which are responsible for the maximum percentage of the total waste generated in India. According to an estimate, over 377 million people live in 7,935 towns and cities and generate about 62 million tonnes of

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<sup>10</sup> “Congress Will Deliver”, *Manifesto: Lok Sabha Elections 2019: India National Congress* <https://manifesto.inc.in/pdf/english.pdf>, pp. 51-52.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Prime Time With Ravish Kumar, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfp89Fzy-DI>, 22 April 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Lahiry, Samar, “India’s Challenges in Waste Management”, *Down to Earth*, 19 September 2018. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/waste/india-s-challenges-in-waste-management-56753>. Accessed on 27 March 2019.

municipal solid waste per annum.<sup>16</sup> Of the total waste, only 43 million tonnes (MT) are collected, 11.9 MT are treated and 31 MT are dumped in landfill sites.<sup>17</sup> The growing urbanisation means a shrinking space for landfills to dump waste in the cities.<sup>18</sup> This will further aggravate the problem of waste lying in the open in the cities, leading to further pollution and more deaths.

After Prime Minister Narendra Modi came into office in 2014, the Indian government started the 'Clean India Mission' with the objective to "accelerate the efforts to achieve universal sanitation coverage and to put focus on sanitation".<sup>19</sup> While the managers of the mission pride themselves on the number of toilets constructed and the number of villages declared open defecation-free from 2014 onwards,<sup>20</sup> they have been less than successful on solid waste management.

There are two reasons for this lack of success in waste management – the absence of civic-mindedness and administrative laxity. An example of the mismanagement of hazardous waste took place at Prayagraj where the Kumbh Mela was held from 15 January to 4 March 2019. According to the National Green Tribunal, during the 49 days of the festival, around 18,000 tonnes of solid waste were generated. This adds to the already existing solid waste which stands around 60,000 tonnes.<sup>21</sup> The plant to treat this waste has not been operational since September 2018.<sup>22</sup> The Tribunal also noted that dirty water from toilets has gathered in nearby areas and has percolated through the ground to mix with underground water. The prevailing situation could lead to the spread of an epidemic in the region.<sup>23</sup>

Due to the phenomenon of climate change and the growth in population per capita, the availability of water is decreasing in India. The imminent water stress has been highlighted in June 2018 report by the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog). The report stated that India is facing its "worst water crisis in its history and millions of lives and livelihoods are under threat."<sup>24</sup> The NITI Aayog report found out that "600 million Indians face high to extreme water stress about two lakh (200,000) people die every year due to inadequate access to safe water. The crisis is only going to get worse. By 2030, the country's water demand is projected to be twice the available supply, implying severe water

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> "Prime Time With Ravish Kumar – Will Environment Ever Be An Election Issue?" op cit.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation, Government of India, "Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin". <http://swachhbharatmission.gov.in/sbmcms/index.htm>. Accessed on 29 April 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> "Before The National Green Tribunal Principal Bench, New Delhi: Consideration of Report dated 10.04.2019 IN Original Application No. 200/2014." <http://www.indiaenvironmentportal.org.in/files/file/Kumbh-Ganga-pollution-NGT-Order.pdf>. Accessed on 28 April 2019; and John Kenneth, "NGT alarmed at post-Kumbh mess in Prayagraj, warns of epidemic", *The Hindustan Times*, 26 April 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ngt-alarmed-at-post-kumbh-mess-in-prayagraj-warns-of-epidemic/story-8rsQI9ff7ortTDORx05jCL.html>. Accessed on 29 April 2019.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> NITI Aayog, Government of India "Composite Water Management Index: A Tool for Water Management". [http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document\\_publication/2018-05-18-Water-Index-Report\\_vS8-compressed.pdf](http://niti.gov.in/writereaddata/files/document_publication/2018-05-18-Water-Index-Report_vS8-compressed.pdf). Accessed on 25 June 2018, p 15.

scarcity for hundreds of millions of people and an eventual 6% loss in the country's GDP [Gross Domestic Product]."<sup>25</sup>

Besides, a large quantity of available water is polluted. To clean one of the major rivers of India, the Ganges, the Modi government launched the 'Clean Ganga Mission' in 2015. There was a similar mission in the 1980s.<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, both have failed to meet their projected objectives. The Ganges still remains highly polluted. There are around 97 cities and towns and 4,465 villages on the bank of the Ganges.<sup>27</sup> Of these, about 10 towns contribute to almost 64 per cent of the total pollution in the river. It is estimated that about 2.9 billion cubic metres of discharge enter the Ganges each day. Of this, only 48 per cent is fully or partially treated.<sup>28</sup>

## Conclusion

There is great urgency for the Indian government to tackle the country's environment-related challenges. It needs to devise a comprehensive plan and not just take incremental steps. Some of the policies such as the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (Prime Minister Liquid Petroleum Gas Connection Scheme), the accelerated Bharat Stage 6 clean vehicle standards<sup>29</sup> and the new National Clean Air Programme are expected to have significant health benefits in the coming years.<sup>30</sup>

However, an issue as serious and significant as the environment deserves much more space in Indian elections than in the manifestoes of the political parties. The parties focus on issues that the Indian voters view as important to them. Similarly, the media focuses on these issues as well. Until and unless the people start emphasising on environment-related issues as important considerations in their voting decisions, these issues are unlikely to become part of the parties' election campaign and the environmental challenges facing India are just going to get worse.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> See Mallet, Victor (2017) *River of Life, River of Death: The Ganges and India's Future*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

<sup>27</sup> Ranade, Ajit, "After Kumbh, an Epidemic", *Mumbai Mirror*, 27 April 2019. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/opinion/columnists/ajit-ranade/after-kumbh-an-epidemic/articleshow/69065187.cms>. Accessed on 28 April 2019.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> This will improve the emission quality of vehicles.

<sup>30</sup> "World Health Day 2019: India Accounts for Quarter of the World's Air Pollution Deaths", *Tech 2*, 29 April 2019. <https://www.firstpost.com/tech/science/world-health-day-2019-india-accounts-for-quarter-of-the-worlds-air-pollution-deaths-6386671.html>. Accessed on 29 April 2019.