

# Is Environment a Rallying Point in the Election Manifestos?

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## Abstract

Environmental Sustainability is significant to the health of natural cycles on earth. India can prove to be pivotal in addressing a slew of global environmental issues by acting locally. Therefore, understanding of the commitments of the National Political Parties of India as informed by their election manifestos is important. The manifestos apprise the voters of the promises and are deemed to report the aspirations of the voters. Drawing inspiration from these facts, the paper aims to study the issues and environment-related commitments in the Indian political landscape through a time-series, qualitative, secondary-data analysis of the election manifestos of the National Political Parties of India over five electoral seasons (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019). It was observed that issues related to environment have grown in volume in the manifestos through the years, but inconsistency of issues is rampant from one season to the next. The data over the years has been divided into several categories for ease of study. Newer environmental issues have found feet but the lack of systemic integration only goes to show the inadequacy of the promises to foster sustainability. Increased focus on environment, expressed as public sentiment and greater inclusion of environmental concerns and promises in the election manifestos, can help develop at least a theoretical environmental outlook for India, which can prove to be an initial step towards actual growth of environmental sustainability.

**Keywords:** Environmental Sustainability; National Political Parties of India.

## Introduction

Anthropogenic climate change has threatened the sustainability of the natural cycles as well as the existence of many organisms on earth. This is a direct consequence of the environmental cause being sacrificed for attaining economic prosperity (Brooke, Bevis, & Rissing, 2019). The balancing of the two is important to attain social sustainability and sustainability of the ecological systems globally, in which India can play a significant role. India is a vast country with 2.4% of the land surface, the second most populated country after China and one of the fastest growing economies of the world (Bajpai, 2019). Therefore, India's environmental policies and actions would not only have a physical impact on the global environmental sustainability landscape but also be a model for developing countries to follow.

The policies of any country are guided by

national and international issues, perceptions and movements. To gauge the commitment of political parties to influence and change the policies to protect the environment and promote environmental sustainability, the election manifestos are an important resource. Many scholarly works have used the data sets from various manifestos to look at "growing importance of issue competition" (Green-Pedersen, 2007). Election manifesto is a document adumbrating the ideology, election promises, intentions and views of a political entity for informing and drawing attention of its voters (Election Commission of India, 2020). Election manifestos had their birth in the verbal promises made by the leaders as part of the hustings. These promises have now come to be documented by the political entities in the shape of election manifestos.

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The manifestos are awarded significant importance in the economically-developed democracies, where the manifestos are published and distributed widely. The wheeling out of manifestos in India, however, has not caught on with the pace of the developed democracies. If election manifestos are read and awarded the due share of importance by masses in India is also debatable but ‘Lokniti Survey’ for Assembly election of 2016, answers in the negative for Kerala and Tamil Nadu, which have among the highest literacy rates in India (Rai, 2019). While the promises and policies are unenforceable in a court of law, political parties honour at least a few, if not most of their promises and the promises delivered are low in number in case of coalition governments (The Week, 2019). The extent of fulfilment of the promises might vary from a case-to-case as well as country-to-country basis, but the importance of manifestos as documents indicative of the actions of the political parties if elected to power, cannot be easily dismissed.

The study elaborates on the environmental issues and proposed policies which have been recorded in the election manifestos of the National Political Parties of India<sup>2</sup> over five electoral seasons (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019). It has been observed from an analysis of the OECD countries that “the number of environmental outputs increased if the government parties adopted more pro-environmentalist positions” (Knill, Debrus, & Heichel, 2010). The election manifestos also give a sense of the policy preferences of the voters or the voter base a political entity is appealing (Budge, Klingeman, Volkens, Bara, & Tanenbaum, 2001). Therefore, the study also gives a picture of the extent to which the environmental issues are a rallying point, as manifestos are indicative of—the extent of impact on environment effected through government policies and the expectations of the voters in the environmental domain.

### Methodology

The study involved qualitative secondary analysis of the election manifestos, which are published in English, of 7 National Political Parties of India (as of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2019) from the national elections since 1999. The manifestos available online and in the DELNET libraries were perused. The parties or

period for which the manifestos are not available were not included. The information on environment, in the manifestos, were colour-coded according to categories. All the information was sought to be accommodated in the categories, which emerged out by grouping of the information. This sorted information is presented in the study according to the timeline without differentiating the issues according to political parties, along with the issues which have not found any mention in the manifestos. The study also briefly comments on the voters’ expectations for protection and conservation of environment in India.

### Findings & Discussion

Election manifesto during late 20<sup>th</sup> century was unusually succinct, for the few political parties which released it. The space given to matters concerning environment, in the manifestos, has since increased through the years. In 1999 electoral season, promises made were of revitalizing the river cleaning programmes (focussing mainly on Ganga and Yamuna), anchoring a relevant legal framework in the shape of National Environmental Policy, strict punitive action against illegal lumbering, discouraging poaching of wildlife by establishing a Wildlife Anti-Poaching Authority, curbing vehicular pollution and activities beneficial to the forest-dwellers. This has in 2019 electoral season grown into expansive and wide-ranging environmental promises (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Environment-related promises through the years (in green).**

Category	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
Biodiversity and Ecosystem Protection					
Clean Technology					
Costal and Wetland Conservation					
Curbing Pollution and Audits					
Environmental Legislation					
Forest Produce Support					
Global Warming and Climate Change					
Green Budgeting					
Himalayas					
Rights of Forest Dwellers					
River Revitalization					
Wasteland Restoration					
Waterbody Restoration					
Watertable Management					

### Source : Author’s analysis.

Any mention of an environmental issue or plans related to a category in any of the manifestos for a given year have been marked as promises for that

The National Political Parties of India on 1st January, 2019 (All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI (M)), Indian National Congress (INC) and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP)).

year.

In 2004, the issues had graduated to a variety of promised initiatives for waterbody restoration, plans for rainwater harvesting and groundwater recharge, community participation for cleaning rivers, strengthening of environmental protection laws, rights of forest dwellers, wasteland development and management, addressing erosion and pollution and use of clean technology. Likewise, in 2009 the issues remained broadly similar with introduction of Himalayas and its sustainability and bolstering costal protection laws. However, one of the most important issues included in 2009 was the emphasis on the fact that India should not yield to international pressure to reduce emissions at the cost of economic enrichment, in light of Copenhagen Summit. Several additions to environmental issues in the form of Green budgeting and forest produce support, took place in 2014. All these issues have continued in 2019 manifesto, much in the same spirit although the party-specific manifesto analysis would not reveal the same trend.

Issues under 'Biodiversity and Ecosystem Protection' have over the years encompassed setting of Wildlife Anti-Poaching Authority (1999), constitution of separate Taskforces for protection of wild cats, elephants and bird sanctuaries (2009), preservation of bio-resources (2014, 2019), stringent punitive action against destruction of forests and poachers (1999, 2009, 2014), anchorage of a comprehensive plan for fragmented ecosystems of Western Ghats (2014), formulation of land and water use policy with measures for ecosystem conservation (2019) and management and minimization of human-wildlife conflict, awarding adequate compensation for loss of human lives (2019) and punishment for cruelty towards animals (2019). 'Clean Technology' as a term finds mention since 2004, but it has not been much elaborated. Fostering technology to reduce carbon emissions (2009), promotion of Carbon Credit system (2014), encouraging R&D in Environment Technology (2014) and bringing awareness about carbon foot print (2019) have been the promises towards 'Clean Technology'. With regard to 'Costal and Wetland conservation', strengthening of laws (2009) and revoking of the recent changes in Coastal zone regulations (2019) seem to be the major promises.

In light of 'Curbing Pollution and audits', development of mass transit and public-transport system (1999, 2004, 2014), checking water pollution

in rivers and other water bodies (2009, 2014, 2019), indexing pollution in cities (2014, 2019), making Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) transparent (2004, 2009) and strengthening of National Clean Air Programme (2019) were the basic promises. 'Environmental legislation' has issues related to strengthening of laws concerning environment like illegal lumbering and mining, conducting environmental appraisals, etc. (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019) and giving more responsibility to the locals (municipalities, gram sabha and tribals) (2019). While supporting the economic and environmental sustainability of Forest-based produce has been added to the agenda in 2014, the welfare of forest dwellers (or the settlements close to the forests) has been promised through the years, although in varying degrees.

The promises towards prevention of global warming have been 'the unveiled National Plan for Climate Change' (2009, 2014), control of emissions through efficient technologies and regulations (2009, 2014, 2019) and promising emissions cuts internationally in line with Indian Economic considerations (2009). The concept of 'Green Budgeting' which would be critical to look at the country's triple bottom line was introduced in 2014 and was promised in 2019 also.

'Himalayas' entered the manifestos through focus on melting glaciers (2009, 2014), National Mission on Himalayas (2014), Himalayan Sustainability Fund (2014), creation of a central university for studies in Himalayan Technology (2014) and financial assistance as 'green bonus' for conserving forests in the Himalayan states (2019). 'River Revitalization' has had its focus around cleaning rivers (1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019), checking soil erosion (2004, 2014, 2019), setting up or revamping river authorities (2009, 2014) and addressing the problems of floods and harnessing the water with focus on Brahmaputra (2019). 'Wasteland restoration' related promises are afforestation and social/farm forestry (2004, 2014) and wasteland regeneration missions (2019). 'Waterbody restoration' promises have mainly revolved around rejuvenation of local water bodies by community participation/unemployed farmers (2004, 2019). 'Rainwater harvesting' has been emphasised since 2004 and legislation has been the only suggested means.

The evolution of issues in recent years is

attributable to increased understanding of development and its sustenance which are related to many environmental facets like clean water availability, decreasing pollution, etc. The understanding of the issues from analysis of the manifestos, however, suggests a grave absence of continuity in promises in respective party manifestos and the lack of innovation and integration in the whole system. While the environmental issues have been flagged, the issues are wanting in contextualization on a pan-India level according to local needs. Community participation has found mention at various instances but robust steps leading to such a participation are not elaborated. Smart cities have been mentioned in the latest years without any mention of integrating biodiversity and systemic sustainability. Energy Policy has also not been aligned with the environmental policy. Energy in India has a huge environmental cost as polluting fossil fuels like Diesel and Petrol are backbone of road transport and electricity is overwhelmingly reliant on coal for energy production; this demands an increasingly expansive environmental cost in energy and allied sectors to be checked. Also, surprising is the fact that Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not find any mention in any of the manifestos in relation to environmental sustainability. Although, India has come thus far since its independence in 1947, no Green Party has emerged in India unlike in Europe. Also, the environment-related movements in India have not percolated into the daily lives of the people and environment continues to be a far under-rated subject.

For a systemic integration of environmental sustainability, participation of private players in the environmental domain must be incorporated in the agenda along with amalgamation of environmental legislation with non-environmental legislations. Designing of indices to track progress on all the actions undertaken, biodiversity and ecological studies for afforested tracts, calculation of economic costs of ecosystem services, offsetting of negative environmental externalities through contextualised and localised programs, increased innovation in planning and implementation, 33% of forest cover for all districts, invoking traditional motifs for increased environmental action and promotion of urban biodiversity programs, could be a few steps towards increased focus on environment.

## Conclusion

Election manifestos are an important resource for understanding the waves of change and policy reform both through the perspectives of political parties and the voter base. The importance given to environment in the election manifestos of National Political Parties of India since the break of 21<sup>st</sup> century has gradually increased. This growth, unfortunately, is accompanied by the inconsistency in issues, which appear in an election and disappear the following season. Also, environmental prosperity as a concept has not taken root and is in no measure given precedence over economic prosperity. Although, many new ideas and promises appear regularly, only a few are continuously pursued. Therefore, consistency with the promises as also inclusion of new ideas and policies from other countries would go a long way in ensuring attention towards environmental sustainability in the manifestos of political parties. The study has attempted to give qualitative aspects of the environment-related aspects of manifestos without differentiating the issues according to political parties and holds potential for further work by quantification of data and differentiation and reporting on the basis of political parties and their respective ideologies.

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