

What we need is a commons manifesto

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

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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.

That is not all. 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.

India's obsession with 100 GW solar electricity targets may fetch high ratings from the international green energy cheerleaders. But that alone will do nothing to fortify ordinary Indians from the impending disasters. 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. They may even make it worse.

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



"Paved surfaces disrupt water flows, reduce groundwater recharge and obliterate biodiversity." Schoolchildren wade through a waterlogged street in Mumbai in 2017. ■ AP

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.

This month, the Union government proposed amendments to the Indian Forest Act, 1927, that will make the draconian Act even harsher. According to Campaign for Survival and Dignity, "These amendments would give forest officials the power to shoot people without any liability; allow forest officials... to relocate people against their will; to hand over forests to private companies for afforestation, and to grab other forests in the name of 'carbon sequestration'." These amendments are a targeted attack on forest dwellers; if passed, they will criminalise the cultures that hold the key to rebuilding our broken relationship with nature.

In February, the Coastal Regulation Zone Notification, which regulates "development" along India's 7,500-km shoreline, was diluted to allow denser construction closer to the sea. The notification cites tourism jobs to justify the construction of temporary facilities within 10 m of the waterline. Mega infrastructure, such as ports and roads, will be permitted anywhere – inside the sea, over dunes, through mangroves and tidal marshes – if they are declared to be "strategic" projects. These are hare-brained policies. 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. Farmers are mobilising against the bullet train, and indigenous people are fighting against the opening up of forests for mines and dams. 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 medieval Tamil word 'Poromboke' refers to communally held commons such as water bodies, grazing lands and community forests. Unlike the free-for-all landscapes referred to in predicting a tragedy of the commons, Poromboke lands are carefully managed to yield value to the community, and subject to strict regulation. Poromboke lands cannot be bought or sold. Barring a few exceptions, they cannot be paved over nor covered by a roof.

Far from advocating for pristine nature or a hands-off approach, open earth economies emphasise management, transformation and value extraction through activities that do not kill the proverbial goose that lays golden eggs. 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. In places like Chennai, which witnessed disastrous flooding in 2015, paved surfaces increased from 47 sq km in 1980 to 402 sq km in 2010, according to a study by the Chennai-based research group Care Earth. Meanwhile, wetlands dipped from 187 sq km to 71 sq km during the same period.

Urban flooding, though, is not only a third world phenomenon. Hurricane Sandy and the New York floods of 2015, the European floods of 2016, the 2017 floods in Mumbai and Houston, the 2018 floods in Japan, and the ongoing flooding of the Missouri in the U.S. all expose the vulnerabilities of urban areas where climate change meets mindless land use change. In all these instances, land had been paved over, unmindful of the need for water to flow and stay.

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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A deal at last?

It will not be easy to find a please-all deal on the Naga conflict



PATRICIA MUKHIM

The Naga Framework Agreement is back in the news after the Centre's main interlocutor in Nagaland, R.N. Ravi, visited the State to tie up loose ends before a final deal is sealed.

A young Naga leader with political acumen recently told me that if anyone could solve the Naga crisis, it is the National Democratic Alliance government because it is perceived as a strong entity, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a no-nonsense leader. This is true to a large extent. A vacillating leadership in Delhi will have neither the bandwidth nor the determination to go ahead with a considered decision, irrespective of the consequences. And consequences there will be, whichever way we look at the Naga conundrum.

Spread across States

Nagas don't live in a single territory. They are spread across Manipur, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The Nagas of Manipur, particularly those in Ukhrul, home of the Tangkhuls, are the most vocal because that is also the home of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (Isac-Muivah) general secretary, Th. Muivah. A large chunk of the youth who have joined the outfit are also from there. They dream of 'Nagalim', a unique homeland where all Nagas can live with dignity. This is of course a utopian idea considering that there really is no basis for that unity. Nagas have always been driven by clan and tribe loyalty. These divisive tendencies cannot be brushed under the carpet to be resolved after the deal with the government is signed. The utopian idea is one that a pragmatic, modern, progressive Naga will not entertain. This mindset is held by those of the former generation who experienced the Naga struggle for sovereignty and lost their family members to the cause.

Today, the struggle, or what's left of it, has morphed into something that leaves even Nagas resentful. There is extortion galore by the so-called Naga national workers, a euphemism for the NSCN(IM) cadres and the other subgroups that have emerged over the years. There is not a single item entering Nagaland that is not taxed by these armed groups. The idea of a Nagaland that would be

free from this perverse and arbitrary taxation is what young Naga entrepreneurs are expecting. Is that a possibility?

It is interesting that the formation of the Naga Club in 1918 was the first collective expression by different tribes inhabiting Nagaland and the hills of Manipur to come under a common umbrella. The Naga men who were drafted by British rulers in the Labour Corps as soldiers, porters, builders, etc. felt the need for a united front after they returned from battle in the First World War. The word Naga itself is shrouded in multiple interpretations. Consciousness about borders and boundaries came with the arrival of the British who practised statecraft in the way they knew best – through a policy of divide and rule. Unable to win over the tribes who raided them time and again, the British designed an instrument called the Bengal Eastern Frontier Regulation Act (1873) to keep them at bay. The tribes were not allowed to venture beyond this line. That was their



first idea of borders. The labourers and porters enlisted by the British during World War 1 and sent to France felt lost and alone and longed for a fraternal bond. They agreed that after returning to their homeland, they would work towards solidarity among the different Naga tribes. The British were convinced that the Nagas needed a common identity, especially after Christianity came to the Naga hills. In the Naga Club's centenary year, ironically, differences have emerged between its members and the Naga Students' Federation.

Complex politics

The politics of Nagaland is complex. Tribal loyalties have not vanished because of a unifying religion, Christianity. Corruption is widespread, as is evident in the absence of motorable roads. There is not much visible by way of 'development' either.

Against the backdrop of this complexity, where identities are contested, and ghosts of unresolved tribal differences lurk, the Naga Framework Agreement was signed in August 2015. It was a bold and ambitious step for the then one-year-old Modi government. Since 2015, Mr. Ravi has held consultations with every known Naga political group, first to try and understand their genuine concerns and later to seek their wise counsel on the best possible solution to the long-standing conflict. We wait and watch for the final outcome now that Mr. Ravi says substantive issues have all been ironed out.

Patricia Mukhim is Editor, The Shillong Times

SINGLE FILE

Temple and state

Calls to 'liberate' temples from the state goes against the social justice ethos of the Dravidian movement and the law

MANURAJ SHUNMUGASUNDARAM



The constitutional wall that separates the state from religion has continuously shifted. Recently, in the landmark cases of *Shayara Bano* (2017) and *Indian Young Lawyers Association* (2018), which dealt with triple talaq and women's entry into the Sabarimala temple, respectively, the Supreme Court looked at the balance between religious freedoms and fundamental rights. Through these cases, and others preceding them, the Supreme Court established itself as an arbiter of prickly religious issues.

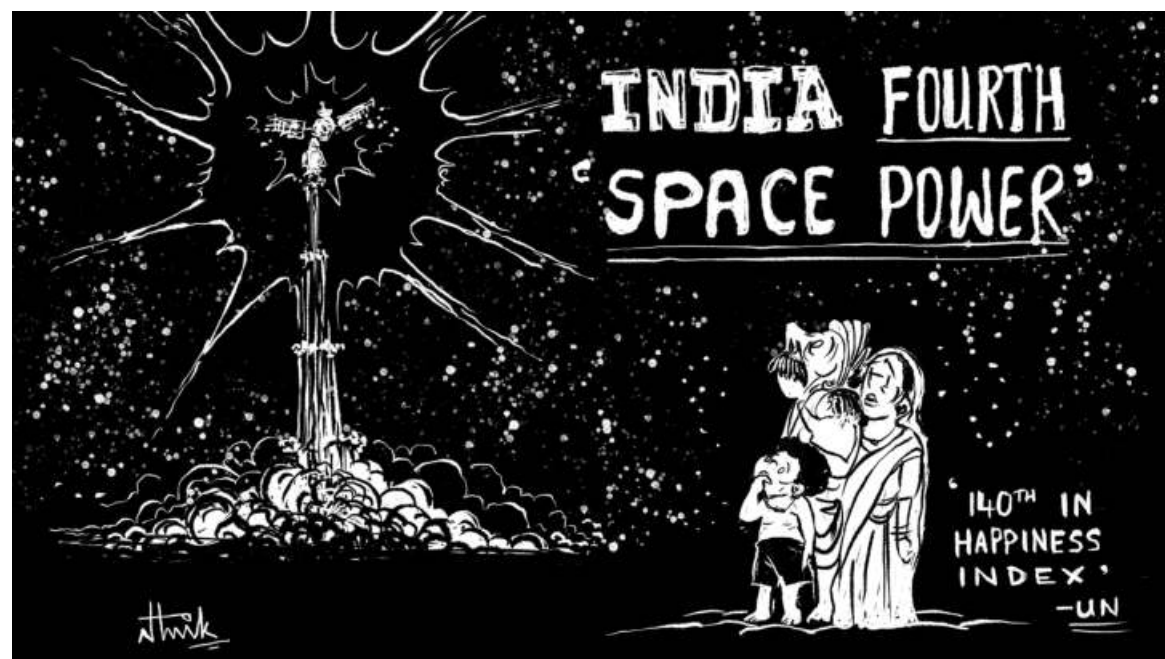
Nevertheless, in recent times, social conservatives have not stopped demanding that the state stay away from any interference with the 'temple'. Rajya Sabha MP Subramanian Swamy filed a writ petition before the Supreme Court to quash all "State HR & CE [Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments] temple laws as unconstitutional" and BJP National Secretary H. Raja has endorsed the liberation of temples from "the clutches of government."

The issue portends serious social repercussions in Tamil Nadu. State control and administration of Hindu temples is seen as an integral reform of the century-old Dravidian movement. It was under the Justice Party's rule that the first set of temple reforms took shape. In 1925, the government constituted the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Board, which was vested with the power to control and supervise the administration of temples and appoint officials for proper administration. Around the same time, Periyar's Vaikom movement sparked a revolution on temple entry and worship by the backward castes.

In 1970, the M. Karunanidhi-led Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government amended the HR&CE Act to allow appointments of priests. For the first time, this challenged hereditary priesthood. Though this law ran into legal hurdles, it provided the belief to men from all castes that they too could enter the sanctum sanctorum. Ultimately, the 2006 law passed by a subsequent DMK government completed the reform process. The first backward caste priest was appointed by the Tamil Nadu government in July 2018.

The support among Hindu conservatives towards "liberating temples" goes against the social justice ethos of the Dravidian movement as well as the law. In *N. Adithayan* (2002), the Supreme Court held that "the vision of the founding fathers of Constitution to liberate the society from blind and ritualistic adherence to mere traditional superstitious beliefs sans reason or rational basis has found expression in the form of Article 17." The HR&CE Board only serves to reiterate the constitutional guarantee of equality before law of all citizens. Therefore, it is now up to the Court to reiterate the core constitutional principles and ensure that any right to "propagate and disseminate religious beliefs" can only be subject to "public order, health and morality and other provisions of Part-III", as held in *N. Adithayan*.

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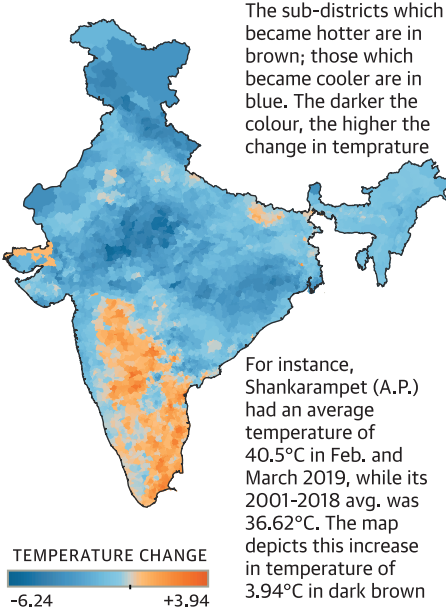
DATA POINT

Hot down south

Most places in south India experienced a hotter February and March this year compared to the average temperature for those two months between 2001 and 2018. In contrast, most places in other States experienced a relatively cooler climate. By Vignesh Radhakrishnan

Blowing hot and cold

The map shows the difference between the avg. daytime temperature in February and March in 2019 and the avg. temperature in those months between 2001 and 2018 in all the sub-districts



The sub-districts which became hotter are in brown; those which became cooler are in blue. The darker the colour, the higher the change in temperature

For instance, Shankarampet (A.P.) had an average temperature of 40.5°C in Feb, and March 2019, while its 2001-2018 avg. was 36.62°C. The map depicts this increase in temperature of 3.94°C in dark brown

State-wise analysis

The table shows the % of sub-districts in each State that have become hotter or cooler during the day-time in February and March 2019 compared to the 2001-2018 average. For instance, 60% of the sub-districts in Kerala experienced a temperature increase of 0.1°C to 2°C, while 40% of them saw a temperature decrease of 0.1°C to 2°C in the daytime. Tamil Nadu experienced the biggest rise in temperature: 11% of its sub-districts saw an increase of more than 2°C, while 77% saw an increase of 0.1-2°C.

Source: MODIS (LPDAAC-NASA). Processed by Raj Bhagat Palanichamy using Google Earth Engine

State	% cooler			% hotter	
	> 4°C	2.1 to 4°C	0.1 to 2°C	0.1 to 2°C	>2°C
A.P.	0	11	51	36	3
Arunachal	0	6	94	0	0
Assam	0	2	97	1	0
Bihar	0	5	78	17	0
Chhattisgarh	3	69	27	1	0
Delhi	0	44	56	0	0
Goa	0	0	100	0	0
Gujarat	1	51	46	2	0
Haryana	0	34	66	0	0
Himachal	28	71	1	0	0
J&K	14	64	21	0	0
Jharkhand	5	45	48	2	0
Karnataka	0	0	29	66	5
Kerala	0	0	40	60	0
M.P.	17	55	27	0	0
Maharashtra	0	6	61	32	0
Manipur	0	0	100	0	0
Meghalaya	0	0	100	0	0
Mizoram	0	0	100	0	0
Nagaland	0	0	100	0	0
Odisha	1	50	49	0	0
Punjab	0	16	84	0	0
Rajasthan	13	54	31	1	0
Sikkim	0	25	75	0	0
Tamil Nadu	0	0	12	77	11
Tripura	0	0	100	0	0
Uttarakhand	4	74	23	0	0
U.P.	3	23	73	1	0
W.B.	0	23	72	4	0

FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO MARCH 28, 1969

Shipment of foodgrain rushed to East Pakistan

Martial Law administrators to-day [March 27, Karachi] rushed huge shipments of food to stave off starvation in troubled East Pakistan where riots, murder and arson provided the major ammunition to topple the regime of President Ayub Khan. Army Chief Gen. Yahya Khan, who was appointed Martial Law Administrator when Mr. Ayub resigned on Tuesday night [March 25], ordered 3,110,000 tons of foodgrains to be sent to East Pakistan, Radio Pakistan announced. Martial Law authorities also sanctioned the release of 194,000 tons of sugar in East Pakistan. Radio Pakistan reported to-day [March 27] that the East Pakistan Martial Law Administrator had asked the people to contribute 634,17,000 mounds of foodgrains, to meet the food crisis in the State. Pakistan, on the third day under Martial Law was showing signs of all round activity with markets, usually sensitive, registering buoyancy.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO MARCH 28, 1919.

Sir George Lloyd's speech.

Replying to the address of the Ahmedabad Municipality on Wednesday, [March 26] H.E. the Governor of Bombay [Sir George Lloyd] said he was very keenly desirous of seeing the initiation of early steps of self-government in India and asked them to remember that there was no hope for a wider form of self-government in India unless those responsible showed administrative capacity in handling their local affairs. His Excellency said it was absolutely necessary to form standing committees to deal with various branches of work, but ample powers should be devolved upon them for this prompt dealing of the questions entrusted, leaving the general body to decide the broad issues of general policy and upon broad outlines of reform.

POLL CALL

NOTA (None Of The Above)

NOTA is an option given to voters to exercise a negative vote by not choosing any of the candidates who are contesting in a local, Assembly or general election. It came into force in 2013. The NOTA symbol is of a ballot paper with a black cross mark. While the Supreme Court envisaged it as a way of cleansing the political system, NOTA's scope remains limited at the State and national level. Even if the maximum number of votes cast in a constituency is for NOTA, the candidate winning the next highest number of votes is declared the winner. At the local level, there have been attempts to expand its scope – last year, the Maharashtra and Haryana State Election Commissions announced that if NOTA garners the most number of votes, then none of the candidates would be declared the winner and a fresh election would be held instead. In the 2014 general election, 1.08% of the electorate chose the NOTA option.

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