

A clarion call to combat climate change

The Green New Deal acknowledges the responsibility of the U.S. for its historical emissions



SUJATHA BYRAVAN

When almost all news about climate change concerns catastrophic events, there are a few shining lights in the U.S. and Europe. One is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, 29, the newly elected member of the U.S. House of Representatives. The other is Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old Swede whose school strike outside the Swedish Parliament, in a clear-minded effort to force politicians to act on climate change, has inspired students in many countries to walk out of their classrooms and make similar demands. If Ms. Thunberg's voice is inspiring for the way it has roused the youth, Ms. Ocasio-Cortez is daring in her imagination and policies.

The Green New Deal "is a four-part programme for moving America quickly out of crisis into a secure, sustainable future". It takes its name from U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's famous New Deal, a series of economic and social measures launched in the 1930s to end the Great Depression. The Green New Deal audaciously aspires to make sweeping changes to the environment and economy and meet all of the U.S.'s power demand from clean, renewable and zero emission energy sources by 2030, while at the same time addressing racial and economic justice. Thus, in many ways, it is more than just a climate change plan. Ms. Ocasio-Cortez along with Massachusetts Senator Edward Markey introduced the resolution in the House and Senate on February 7.

What the deal says

The resolution acknowledges the 1.5° report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the U.S. Fourth National Climate Assessment. It identifies the worldwide effects from warming, the disproportionate responsibility borne by the U.S. as a result of its historical emissions, and calls for the country to step up as a global leader. It speaks about the fall in life expectancy, economic stagnation, erosion of workers' rights, and



"The Green New Deal is an acknowledgement by politicians that economic growth, the environment and social well-being go together." Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (left) and Ed Markey at a news conference about the Green New Deal, in Washington. •THE NEW YORK TIMES

rising inequality in the U.S. Climate change that will asymmetrically affect the most vulnerable sections of U.S. society and ought to be considered a direct threat to national security.

The resolution goes on to recognise the momentous opportunity available to take action. It states that it is the responsibility of the federal government to create a Green New Deal, which would meet its power demand through renewable sources in 10 years. It calls for a 10-year national mobilisation that would build infrastructure, eliminate pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, as much as is technologically feasible, and reduce risks posed by the impacts of climate change.

These goals entail dramatic changes in manufacturing, electricity generation, education, livelihoods, sustainable farming, food systems, an overhaul of transportation, waste management, health care, and strong pollution-control measures. The resolution also calls for international action by the U.S. on climate change. It recognises that public funds would be needed for these changes and need to be leveraged. It

states that the federal government needs to take the full social and environmental costs of climate change into consideration through new laws, policies and programmes. Importantly, the Green New Deal calls for a federal jobs guarantee for all.

A welcome surprise

How far this resolution will go and whether and how it will be diluted in the U.S. Congress is unclear. Many details of the proposal still need to be worked out. It has been called "ridiculous" by some Republicans and has made some Democratic leaders uneasy as well.

But various progressive elected officials, groups, and some activists have lent their support. Almost all Democrats who have announced their candidacy for the 2020 election have backed the resolution. A poll conducted by Yale and George Mason Universities showed that there was support for the deal among most Democratic voters and a majority of the Republicans. One does not know if this appetite for the deal will be sustained, but if extreme events related to climate change continue, people are likely to view radical change

as essential. If we look at the political situation when Roosevelt passed the New Deal, both Houses of Congress were under the Democrats. On the other hand, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act were passed by President Richard Nixon and were regarded as being radical in their time.

If any country has the "capability" to increase its commitment in renewables, it is the U.S. This clarion call by Ms. Ocasio-Cortez and Mr. Markey is therefore a welcome surprise. The share of fossil fuels in total electricity generation in the U.S. in 2017 was 63%, the share of renewables was 17%, and the share of nuclear was 20%.

The future

It should be noted that until now no U.S. agency or civil society group has publicly acknowledged the responsibility of the country for its historical emissions. The Green New Deal is the sort of resolution the U.S. should have passed after the Kyoto Protocol in 1997. Instead, the U.S. Senate unanimously passed the Byrd-Hagel Resolution, according to which the U.S. ought not to be a signatory to any protocol or agreement regarding the United Nations Climate Convention that would reduce greenhouse gas emissions for Annex-I Parties, the wealthy countries, unless developing countries were also similarly required to limit their emissions.

Meanwhile, Ms. Thunberg's school boycott movement has inspired protests in the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Australia and elsewhere. If this spreads to many more countries, it can help apply pressure on governments and the fossil fuel industry and create a bottom-up movement led by the youth for major changes in dealing with climate change.

The Green New Deal is an acknowledgement by politicians that economic growth, the environment and social well-being go together. While these bold moves by two young women have opened windows to winds of change, how far these can progress and whether they will bring the scale of change needed as rapidly as it is required to deal with the world's dire challenge remains to be seen.

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The PM-KISAN challenge

The top-down, rushed approach of the government in reaching out to farmers is likely to end in failure



APARNA ROY

This year's Interim Budget is being regarded as a big spread for farmers. The government announced its decision to transfer ₹6,000 every year directly to 12 crore farmers holding cultivable land up to 2 hectares through the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) scheme. While this is a progressive step, is it enough to mitigate India's severe agrarian distress?

The agriculture sector employs over 50% of the workforce either directly or indirectly, and remains the main source of livelihood for over 70% of rural households. However, the droughts of 2014 and 2015, ad-hoc export and import policies, lack of infrastructure, and uncertainty in agricultural markets have adversely affected agricultural productivity and stability of farm incomes. Consequently, agriculture growth rates have been inconsistent in the last five years – 5.6% in 2013-14, (-) 0.2% in 2014-15, 0.7% in 2015-16, 4.9% in 2016-17 and 2.1% in 2017-18. This is a major concern. PM-KISAN is aimed at boosting rural consumption and helping poor farmers recover from distress. Although the scheme is valuable in principle, without adequate focus on proper strategy and implementation, it is unlikely to make any meaningful impact.

Inadequate financial support

The merit of cash transfers over loan waivers and subsidies lies in their potential greater efficiency in enabling poor households to directly purchase the required goods and services as well as enhance their market choices. Therefore, the impact of a welfare measure such as PM-KISAN can only be realised through financial support that provides farmers with adequate purchasing power to meet their daily basic necessities. Given that India's poverty line is ₹32 per person per day in rural areas and ₹47 in urban areas, according to the Rangarajan Committee, the income support of ₹17 a day for a household, which is the amount offered by PM-KISAN, is largely insufficient for even bare minimum sustenance of vulnerable farmers. Therefore, to be effective, any cash transfer scheme should first ensure that there is enough cash provided to help bring an affected community out of poverty. For instance, the Rythu Bandhu in Telangana, that the Centre is said to have replicated, provides ₹4,000 per acre to each farmer in each

season, and the Krushak Assistance for Livelihood and Income Augmentation scheme in Odisha offers a direct cash transfer of ₹5,000 for a farm family over five seasons, among other benefits.

Moreover, given the volatile market and price fluctuations in different regions, it is important to index the cash transfers to local inflation. The failure of an ambitious plan of Direct Benefit Transfer in kerosene in Rajasthan is a case in point, where the cash transferred to families has been insufficient to purchase kerosene, as the market price increased substantially.

Implementation issues

While cash transfers to households may appear simple, the scheme requires significant implementation capabilities. In a country where a majority of the States have incomplete tenancy records and land data are not digitised (for instance, in Jharkhand, Bihar, Gujarat and Tamil Nadu), identification of beneficiaries is daunting.

The results of a joint study conducted by NITI Aayog and the Union government's Department of Food in 2016 suggest that the government's pilot programmes to replace subsidised food grains with cash in three Union Territories (Chandigarh, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, and Puducherry) have failed due to data inconsistencies. While 50% of the people received less cash, 17% received more than they were entitled to. More than 40% of the money transferred could not be verified to have reached the beneficiaries. In the absence of updated land records and complete databases, the scheme may end up benefiting only those who hold land titles and not the small, marginal or tenant farmers who are the most vulnerable. Besides, the scheme does not provide a clear design of transfers and a framework for effective grievance redress. In the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, for instance, State governments still struggle to resolve complaints and curb corruption.

PM-KISAN is an ambitious scheme that has the potential to deliver significant welfare outcomes. However, the current top-down, rushed approach of the government ignores governance constraints and is therefore likely to result in failure. An alternative bottom-up strategy and well-planned implementation mechanism would allow weaknesses to be identified and rectified at the local level. The most effective modalities can then be scaled nationally and ensure success.

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SINGLE FILE

The ABC of sustainable consumption

It will necessarily draw in producers and government agencies through their goods and services

SOHINI MITRA



Expert opinion is that the recent Coastal Regulation Zone Notification 2018 disregards the vulnerabilities of coastal regions to climate change. While the hospitality/tourism industries and local economies stand to gain from the changes, the lives and livelihood of thousands of citizens continue to be at risk.

India's vulnerabilities to climate challenges can no longer be ignored. Government, businesses and civil society have the responsibility of constructive action to address this environmental challenge. It is no secret that governments in India do not prioritise climate change mitigation, fearing that it will impede economic growth and efforts to alleviate poverty. On the other hand, several businesses have already established sustainable mitigative measures in their operations. It is time now for civil society to recognise our contribution to climate catastrophes and commit to containing an already precarious situation.

The role for civil society is to establish efficient and sustainable patterns of consuming essential and luxury products and services and, in the process, improve quality of life in multiple dimensions – physical environment, health and finance, for example. If we hope to make a significant difference, there must be a change in consumption-related thinking and behaviour. This requires that we embed the term sustainability deeply in our thinking and vocabulary, so that it becomes the default mode in which we operate. That implies making mobility choices that result in efficient fuel use and lower carbon emissions. It calls for considering alternative sources of domestic electricity. We need to observe and alter the use of cooling devices and power. How do we consume and manage water in homes and communities? How do we deal with household waste and other items that have outlived their intended utility?

Making changes in our consumption habits will necessarily draw in producers and government agencies through the goods and services they make available. Their involvement offers tremendous opportunity for citizens' needs to be heard. We ought to engage with manufacturers and marketers to co-create products and services that support efficient, sustainable consumption. With policy makers and regulators, we must force a shift in the current stance, to address climate challenges with much greater urgency. Civil society should be more assertive about being included in shaping the country's climate policy.

It is difficult enough for individuals to change entrenched habits and attitudes. Mobilising a large number of diverse people to think differently and learn new ways would likely be a herculean task. Yet, it is possible, demonstrated by instances of positive and sustained civic action by the public.

Altering our lifestyles for sustainability has a silver lining – we have a valuable chance to re-orient our lives for substantive improvement. The sooner we act, the more significant the gain.

The writer is Bengaluru-based and interested in climate change



FAQ

A political stand-off

Amid a grim economic crisis, the power struggle weakens Venezuela further

STANLEY JOHNY

What is happening in Venezuela?

Venezuela has been going through a turmoil for the past couple of years amid an economic meltdown and growing Opposition protests. The crisis took a dangerous turn on January 23 when Juan Guaidó, president of the Opposition-controlled National Assembly, declared himself interim President of the oil-rich South American country, directly challenging the authority of President Nicolás Maduro, who began his second six-year term in January. Immediately after Mr. Guaidó's announcement, the U.S., Canada, Brazil and some other South American nations recognised him as Venezuela's legitimate leader. Mr. Maduro rejected the "coup" attempt and said he was the President of Venezuela. European powers gave Mr. Maduro an ultimatum to announce fresh elections, which he rejected. Later, a host of European countries also backed

Mr. Guaidó. The U.S., meanwhile, imposed new sanctions on Venezuela's state-run oil company, PDVSA – all properties of the company subject to U.S. jurisdiction were blocked and American citizens were barred from trading with the company. The sanctions are expected to cost Mr. Maduro's government \$11 billion in lost export proceeds.

Who is the legitimate leader?

Mr. Guaidó says the Venezuelan Constitution allows the president of the National Assembly to take power as interim President in the absence of an elected President. The Opposition doesn't recognise the 2018 presidential election which Mr. Maduro won. The main Opposition had boycotted the election. Mr. Guaidó and his supporters argue that since the election was a sham, Venezuela doesn't have a legitimate leader, and in such a context as president of the National Assembly, he could take power. This is a contested

claim. Article 233 of the Constitution, which Mr. Guaidó has invoked, lists the circumstances, such as the President's death, dismissal or resignation, where the Parliament chief can assume power and call for fresh elections. The current crisis, triggered by economic woes, government repression and a disputed election, is different. Besides, most constitutional institutions in the country, including the armed forces, back Mr. Maduro. So do Russia and China.

How bad is the economic crisis?

Very bad. The country's inflation is estimated reach 10 million per cent this year. Venezuela has also been facing severe food and medicines shortages for months. The nation's GDP, which was growing at near 10% in 2006, at the height of Hugo Chavez's "Bolivarian revolution", contracted 14.3% in 2018. Almost 90% of the country's population is living in poverty, while per capita income has been falling

since 2014. Amid this crisis, about three million Venezuelans have fled the country, most since 2015.

What's in store?

When Mr. Guaidó declared himself acting President, he may have hoped that he could win over at least sections of Venezuela's armed forces. He's unlikely to topple Mr. Maduro as long as the military is loyal to him. Mr. Maduro's government also has some support among the public, especially the poor, the backbone of the Chavismo government. So the attempts to topple Mr. Maduro are not making headway. On the other side, Mr. Maduro continues to face major challenges. The Opposition has strong support both within and outside the country. And the economic crisis is far from easing. This means the turmoil that has gripped Venezuela is unlikely to ease unless the government and the Opposition find common ground on rebuilding the economy and sharing power.

FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 14, 1969

Union Cabinet reshuffled

Without dropping anyone or inducting any new incumbent, the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi has made a major reshuffle of her 23-month-old Central Cabinet on the eve of the Budget session of Parliament. The Prime Minister has divested herself of the portfolio of External Affairs and has transferred the charge to Mr. Dinesh Singh, till now Minister of Commerce. She has also promoted Mr. B.R. Bhagat to Cabinet rank. The Commerce Ministry has been renamed Ministry for Foreign Trade and Supply and Minister of State for External Affairs B.R. Bhagat has been put in-charge of the new Ministry. Mrs. Gandhi was working on the changes since early yesterday [February 13] and conveyed the changes to the concerned Ministers when they called on her or through telephone. The changes which came as a surprise to many of her colleagues were announced in the early hours of this morning [February 14, New Delhi]. There is no change in the portfolios of Deputy Prime Minister Morarji Desai, Home Minister Y.B. Chavan, Food Minister Jagjivan Ram, Labour Minister J.L. Hathi, Defence Minister Swaran Singh and Transport and Civil Aviation Minister Dr. Karan Singh.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO FEBRUARY 14, 1919.

Death Duty in Ceylon.

A Colombo message dated February 9 says: The much debated Bill, which had for its object increasing of revenue from duty on estates of deceased persons has been redrafted and appears in yesterday's Gazette. The only duty which is under the existing law payable after the death of a person is the probate duty under the Stamps Ordinance Bill recently introduced in the Legislative Council, which increased the rate of probate duty. It was referred to a Select Committee and the Committee came to the conclusion that it would be advisable to bring the local law up to date. The present Bill is based on the Finance Act 1894 of the Imperial Parliament as amended by series of other Acts. The important section of the Bill lays down the manner in which the value of an estate is to be arrived at. The value to be estimated by the Commissioner of Stamps is to be the price which it would fetch in the open market, subject to the deduction of reasonable funeral expense, bona-fide debts, and other items set out in the section.

CONCEPTUAL Square-cube law

PHYSICS

Also known as the cube-square law, this refers to the mathematical principle that states that when the size of an object increases, its volume increases by a greater proportion than its area. This principle has been used to explain the anatomy of various living organisms as well as the limits to the construction of certain man-made structures. The bones and muscles of large animals, for instance, are disproportionately larger than those of smaller animals in order to help them withstand the stress exerted by the disproportionately high volume of their bodies. The square-cube law was first proposed by Italian physicist Galileo in his 1638 book *Two New Sciences*.

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