

National Elections in India Are Good Time to Consider a Path Based on Justice, Peace, and Environment Protection

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Introduction

The national election time in India has started and in June India will have a new government in place based on these election results. These are widely regarded as very important elections for the country.

While ideally elections are about considering and debating the various paths of socio-economic development, politics and governance, continuity and change, in practice a comprehensive view on various important issues seldom emerges in various election debates. To make up for this, various groups prepare documents on the most desirable agenda needed for various sectors (for example health or education) or for various regions and more rarely, a comprehensive agenda for the development path covering the entire country. One such comprehensive documented prepared as a very humble contribution by this writer is presented below, with full recognition that such this can only be regarded as a small beginning to which many others will have to add and improve.

Clearly there is increasing need for a program based on justice, equality, peace, and environment protection which can reduce distress of people immediately and provide many-sided relief to them but which in addition can also provide the base for longer-term sustainable development.

India has the most people in the world today in the world compared to any other country, over 1.4 billion. While India has about 17 per cent of the world's population, it has less than 3% of the land and only slightly more of the freshwater resources. Its share of known reserves of oil and gas is also very small, making it dependent on importing a big share of

its needs. India also suffered under almost 200 years of highly exploitative colonial rule when its development needs and priorities were subjugated to those of the colonial power, denying great opportunities at a time when availing these would have benefited the people a lot. It is these disadvantages that India must overcome to find a satisfactory life for its people while also protecting the environment. Hence the need for justice and equality, for social harmony and unity, for peace and stability are clearly very important needs for the country. It is within this broad framework that an alternative path for India should be planned. Today India stands at a very important juncture of history, faced with very serious problems and critical challenges, and at the same time India also has significant opportunities if only these can be grasped.

India and World

Any comprehensive understanding of India's possible pathways in the near future should be linked to a wider understanding of the most essential features of present day world. India should of course plan its future in accordance with its needs, but this has to be seen in the wider context of the world's most serious issues and problems so that the path India chooses is also in conformity with the world's most urgently felt needs. This is true for all countries of course but this is all the more true for a country like India where one-sixth of the world's people live.

The two most important features of the present day world are: (i) the deepening of a many sided ecological crisis in critical ways so that it has now become a survival crisis threatening the life of countless species and endangering humanity as well, and (ii) the reality as well as possibility of many conflicts, invasions and wars (including the third world war) in a situation of more and more destructive arms race including huge arsenals of weapons of mass destruction which can destroy the entire world.

These two problems may appear separate but are related in significant ways, not the least because the kind of international effort needed to resolve the first listed survival issues will simply not be possible in a situation of conflicts and wars.

In the context of this wider situation of the world, India must pioneer a path which, while solving India's basic problems of poverty and deprivation, should at the same time show the way forward for resolving the most threatening problems of the world. If India can achieve this, it will be a truly historic achievement which will win admiration all over the world, increasing respect for India and leading to demands for a wider role of India in world affairs without India asking for this. Above all, if India achieves this, then this will be a huge contribution to reduce mass distress and disasters in the world, now and in the future, bringing relief to hundreds of millions of people. Can India achieve this?

Need for Alternative Path

For such an achievement to be possible, India should try to establish broad consensus on three overwhelming priorities:

- (i) very significant, durable reduction of poverty and inequalities, ensuring basic needs of all,
- (ii) protection of environment with special emphasis on checking survival threatening problems such as climate change, water depletion and loss of bio-diversity and
- (iii) peace and social harmony at all levels while ending all discrimination.

If the government supported by enthusiastic people's participation and a broad consensus can really ensure that these inter-related tasks become topmost priorities, then India can truly pioneer a brave new path which can solve India's most pressing problems at the same time as providing important contributions and lessons for resolving the most threatening world level problems.

With a limited resource base India's quest for meeting the basic needs of its people and providing them satisfactory livelihood on a sustainable basis is a huge challenge. If this can be met while also protecting environment and keeping down GHG emissions, this will truly be a very commendable achievement.

India is a nuclear weapons power which shares borders with two other nuclear weapons powers. India has been extremely prone to terrorist attacks from across its borders. It has already fought five and a half wars with neighboring countries, with aggression generally coming from the other side of the borders. It has coped with several secessionist movements and insurgencies. India has seven major religions (plus many more religious sects and religions with smaller number of believers), around 6400 castes and 1600 languages.

The much-discussed idea of India is that despite all these outward differences, all people can live without discrimination in India with security and equal opportunities. This is the basis for peace based on equality and justice (as distinguished from peace based on threats and submission). There needs to be an all encompassing commitment to peace based on justice, reflected as much in non-discrimination and equality at all levels in India as in attitudes and policies towards neighboring countries. Of course, national security and borders should be fully and firmly protected. But we should also remember that unity of country based on equality of all can also be our most powerful defense.

Of course governance reforms including significant reduction of corruption and crimes (and related criminalization of politics) and improved transparency are essential preconditions for success of this agenda based on justice, equality, harmony and protection of environment.

But what has been happening in recent times is far removed from the real needs of the country. Today we have a system of crony capitalism tied closely to inequality and injustice based globalization, with a big role also for some of the most infamous multinational companies and institutions. Highly favored are those MNCs which are known to be very aggressive in trying to dominate food and seeds sector, using very hazardous technologies. To pave the way for such corporate led growth, the Planning Commission has been shut down arbitrarily. The environment is threatened more than ever before with aggressively marketed and ecologically destructive projects of big corporate interests. The richest and most corrupt forces can also be very aggressive and violent, in turn leading to terrible violations of human rights and civil liberties. Inequalities of wealth and income, after declining significantly in the post-independence years, have again increased sharply during the last three decades or so.

In such adverse circumstances it is all the more important to hold high the banner that another path exists — a path that can make India a pioneer in reducing poverty, inequalities, environment ruin and GHG emissions, while promoting peace and harmony at all levels. While preparing such a program in greater detail, we should not allow ourselves to be misled by just a narrow-based approach. There have been times when GNP growth has been impressive but inequalities have increased and so have the problems of weaker

sections, while environmental ruin too has been acute. Our concern should be for reducing distress of all, all life-forms, on a durable, sustainable basis.

It is with this spirit that major policy issues need to be clearly discussed with an emphasis on what has gone wrong, what are the risks ahead and what corrections need to be made. We need mutually consistent policy options for various sectors, leading to an overall policy framework which can work in real life conditions and is also in conformity with the creation of a better, safer world.

While preparing a policy framework to some extent we need change but to some extent we also need to recognize what is of value at present and we need to protect it.

Economy and Trade



The highest priority should be accorded to meeting the basic needs of people on a sustainable basis. To ensure sustainability first of all environment should be well-protected and natural resources should be used very carefully. Also the economy should have a sound base. The basic needs of people include the following – adequate availability of balanced food satisfying nutrition norms, clean drinking water, satisfactory availability of clothes and housing to ensure protection from weather extremes as well as dignity and basic comforts, access to education which opens up opportunities of progress as well as strengthens basic human values, access to means of protection of health, medical care, safety and hygiene.

Livelihood of small and medium farmers, artisans, workers, other vulnerable employees and self-employed persons should be well protected and linked more closely to meeting the basic needs of all people. Special skills should be well-protected.

Economic inequalities should be reduced significantly as a matter of policy with emphasis on improving the prospects of people in the lowest layers of economy while also preventing excessive concentration of economic power in the hands of any person, group or corporate interest.

In several critical areas of the economy the public sector should continue to play an important role. The private sector obviously should also have an important role but subject to the condition that no industrialist or company can dominate the economy, its one or more important sectors, to acquire excessive power and interfere unduly in the functioning of democratic system and its policy making mechanisms.

Corporate sector should be regulated carefully for responsibilities relating to environment, workers, consumers (or other end-users of their products) and to the wider society. Multinational and foreign companies should be regulated very carefully. Cooperative sector should be reformed and strengthened to accept increasing responsibilities. Certain products

and areas can be reserved for small-scale and cottage-scale entrepreneurs, cooperatives, small farmer groups and self-help groups, particularly of women, with emphasis on meeting basic needs of villages and small towns as well as generation of more diverse livelihoods there. Entrepreneurs and innovators at all levels, particularly those in small and medium enterprises, should be encouraged in various ways, including corruption-free business conditions which reward talent and innovation while discouraging, curbing cronyism and corruption.

Economic planning should retain an important role in ensuring the availability of goods and services which meet the basic needs of people, reducing inequalities, protecting livelihoods, keeping unemployment and inflation at low levels, providing essential infra-structure and avoiding foreign indebtedness. The Planning Commission (including state planning organizations) should be re-established with some important reforms to strengthen it and the process of five-year plans (including state plans) should be re-started.

In foreign trade imports of all non-essentials including luxury goods and gold should be minimized. Steps which reduce excessive dependence on imports in meeting essential needs (in terms of consumption goods as well as capital goods and intermediates) should be emphasized, while the sovereign government's powers to reduce or stop those imports which are harmful for health, livelihoods or other vital interests should be reaffirmed. Similarly patent laws should be in line with national interests. India should play an important role in reform of the WTO, the World Bank and the IMF with the aim to make them more transparent and responsive to the real and economic justice based needs of world. Steps should be taken in time to avoid any possibilities of heavy indebtedness, balance of payments problems and heavy dependence on uncertain 'hot money' inflows. The type of linkages due to which any international economic crisis affects us quickly and excessively unsettles our national economy should be avoided.

There should be a relentless campaign against the substantial 'black' part of the economy so that illegally held money can be recovered and used for constructive development tasks. This includes efforts to bring back black money deposited abroad using various secretive devices. This should be taken up in cooperation with other countries and organizations dedicated to this work. India should not merely rely on the lead provided by developed countries in this context but should instead seek to lead the developing countries in this context.

Budgets should emphasize mobilization of adequate resources to meet the basic needs of all people. Luxury consumption and high profit areas should be taxed adequately, while the tendency to give heavy concessions and huge exemptions to corporate sector and richest people must be given up. There should be adequate budgeting for social sector and in addition the increasing privatization and high profit orientation of critical social sector components like health and education should be checked.

Agriculture, Animal Husbandry, Forests, Fisheries and Rural Development

High priority should be given to rural areas. The distorted thinking which necessarily equates development with very rapid urbanization and migration of displaced villagers to mega-cities should be rejected. Villages should be the main base of India's development. Even though land availability per family is declining with the passage of time, more diverse livelihoods can be provided in rural and semi-rural areas by encouraging village and cottage

industries, including khadi, and protecting artisans' livelihoods. These can include traditional improved industries as well modern industries, subject to the condition that these are not destructive for environment and public health.

Land rights of all small and medium farmers should be well protected, while also providing encouragement for their mutual cooperation and the strengthening of rural communities. Their land should not be lost due to indebtedness or related distress conditions. Fertile agricultural land should as far as possible be saved for agriculture and chances of displacement of farmers should be minimized. Special care should be taken to protect the land rights of tribal communities and to ensure the proper protection of laws enacted for this purpose. If displacement cannot be avoided in some cases then as far as possible the efforts should be to provide land in place of land. High priority should be given to make available cultivation land to as many landless farm workers as possible, as well as strengthening their livelihoods base in other ways, including wider and more creative use of existing schemes like rural employment guarantee. Housing land with legal rights should be available to all rural households who are still deprived of it.

Ecologically protective, low-cost, location-specific technology which seeks to make best use of local resources and conditions should be emphasized, an approach which includes organic farming, protection of traditional seeds and biodiversity, soil and water conservation, increasing green cover and forests. Organic farming should avoid the pitfall of avoidable expenses like costly certification and should be based on self-reliance and low costs, including mutual certification by farmers of each other's crops. Farmers' seed rights should be well-protected and seed-banks of traditional diverse seeds should be set up with the close involvement of farmers including elderly farmers and women. Increasing control of big companies including multinational companies or their subsidiaries over seeds and other critical areas should be checked. G.M. crops (including gene-edited crops) and the related technology should be strictly banned keeping in view their many-sided, serious and irreversible adverse impacts and hazards. Protection of various forms of life should be emphasized. All subsidies meant for agriculture should be given directly to farmers.

Water conservation as well as protection/regeneration of greenery provide the base for survival in the form of meeting basic needs of life and supporting basic rural livelihoods. Some existing provisions like rural employment guarantee can be strengthened for this. In terms of resource use, concentrating attention on smaller watershed programs as well as proper maintenance of existing canals will yield much better results instead of various new big and medium projects of dams and canals. Of course this will also be ecologically much safer and will help to avoid a lot of displacement. Safety of existing dams should be a significant area of concern. Indigenous mixed tree plantation work which resembles natural forests should be emphasized and cutting of existing green trees should be minimized as much as possible. Indigenous trees which provide fodder and fruits should be emphasized in addition to trees with better soil and water conservation properties.

Protection and regeneration of natural mixed forests should get very high priority. The practice of raising monoculture plantations of commercial species of trees in place of natural forests should be given up forever. The role of forests in providing diverse forms of valuable foods and nutrition should be recognized and protected. Forest based livelihoods of tribal communities and other communities living in and around forests should be protected and promoted. Their co-operatives or groups should be the main beneficiaries of minor forest produce based sustainable livelihoods, which should emphasize also the protection of trees. These communities should never be displaced or evicted in the name of protection of wild

life and forest; instead as far as possible they should get livelihoods in this protection.

Animal husbandry should be encouraged with special emphasis on regeneration of pastures and fodder trees as well as protection of indigenous species of farm animals. Protection of indigenous breeds of cows and bullocks should get special attention. Sex-selective technology used for having only female calves, also called sexed semen technology, should be banned. Fair price should be ensured to dairy farmers. Their co-operatives should be strengthened with special emphasis on the poor. Milk powder imports and oilcake exports should be discouraged. Pastoral groups particularly nomadic and semi-nomadic groups facing hard times should be given a helping hand.

Availability of essential food items in public distribution networks should be linked to strengthening of small and medium farmers in all rural areas. All raw food items needed for public distribution system as well as various nutrition programs should be procured from local farmers at a fair price. As far as possible self-reliance in essential diverse food items at the local level should be ensured with internal trade filling in unavoidable gaps. Food miles should be reduced in this and other ways. Special care should be taken to ensure that the public distribution system is used to strengthen local farmers. Rules of WTO or any other international rules which stand in the way of strengthening local food or farming systems should be resisted. In public distribution system millets, pulses and oilseeds should also get a proper place.

Steps should be taken to free various kinds of produce from the grip of a few big traders and speculators so that farmers get justice and sudden escalations in price for consumers are also avoided. Direct contacts between farmers and city-based consumers for healthy, organic food can be encouraged by allocating space in specific city markets to clusters of villages, subject to certain conditions so that the weaker, smaller farmers can get more benefit.

Any obstruction by international agencies, WTO or others, in a well-organized system of food security and food self-reliance based on farmers' secure livelihoods and sustainable fulfillment of basic food needs of people, should be resisted strongly.

Industrial Development

The country should aim, to the extent possible and practical, for self-reliance to a significant extent in all essential consumer and capital goods.

While private, public and cooperative sectors all have important roles, domination by any single industrialist or use of unfair means and corrupt practices to surge ahead of others in one or more sectors should not be allowed. Public sector should be strengthened and reformed to fulfill its wider social responsibility while maintaining high standards of efficiency and entrepreneurial ability.

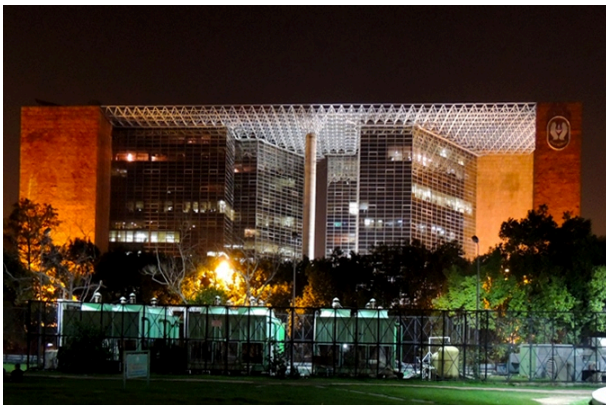
All industrial units need to abide by properly framed regulations related to pollution, environment, displacement, health, safety, workers' welfare, quality and consumers' concerns.

Special protective steps including reservation of certain items in production and procurement need to be provided for cottage and small scale units with special emphasis on khadi and handlooms.

Activities of multinational and foreign companies should be regulated carefully.

Banking and Insurance

Image: LIC Zonal Office Night View from Connaught Place Park (Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0)



The important role of nationalized or public sector banks and insurance companies (mainly Life Insurance Corporation of India) should be protected. These should be reformed and strengthened to improve their efficiency, basic financial soundness and social responsibility and to minimize the possibilities of corruption and irregularities.

Private and foreign banks and insurance companies can have only a limited role, and should not be allowed to damage the special position of national institutions like the Life Insurance Corporation of India.

The extremely serious problems of so-called 'non-performing assets' should be sorted out by ensuring due payment of enormous sums owed by influential borrowers. Without any fear or favor very strong actions should be taken against anyone found guilty of corrupt practices or colluding with them.

Infrastructure, Energy, Minerals

Public sector companies should continue to have an important role in creation of strong and adequate infra-structure for development of country. While infra-structure should be adequate, unnecessarily expensive and grand projects should be avoided. Care should be taken to minimize the problems relating to environment and displacement. There should be to steady progress of renewable energy sources to replace fossil fuels in overall energy mix.

Special care should be taken to reconcile development and environment protection objectives in the area of energy, as both are important. For rural areas in particular decentralized mixed renewable energy systems can play an important role.

Mineral wealth should be used in the wider interests of people with special emphasis on the rights and welfare of communities living in mineral rich areas. Instead of trying to take out minerals as quickly as possible or maximizing corporate profits, various middle level options and technologies which protect communities and environment should be explored. Domination of decision making by corporate interests should be resisted strongly. Foreign and multinational companies should not have any leading role in development of minerals. Minor minerals should be extracted in consultation with gram sabhas, minimizing any harm to environment, while mining mafias should be kept away and resisted to prevent any

criminalization of mining work.

Health

A strong foundation of good health can only be established by good nutrition and fulfillment of other basic needs.

In addition essential and safe health services, medicines, vaccines and investigations should be accessible to all as per their real needs. Adequate budgetary provisions should be provided for this. To utilize this properly, tendencies of extracting very high and unethical profits in the supply of medicines and medical care (including investigations) should be strictly curbed, or else the higher budget can be gobbled by profiteers. Important changes in medicines policy are needed to make available all essential medicines at a fair price, with special emphasis on supply of generic medicines, while those medicines and vaccines with high risks and side-effects should be discarded. The public sector should fulfill an important role in this. The government should accept the responsibility of health care, medicines and vaccines. As far as possible, all medicines should be provided free in primary health centers and all government hospitals, perhaps excluding the very rich patients.

Special medical courses designed to ensure adequate and satisfactory availability of doctors and all medical and health staff in rural areas should be taken up.

Several distortions in health budget spending need to be corrected so that integrated and balanced health planning can emerge which is linked to the real needs of the country and not to artificial priorities thrust upon by vested interests.

While indigenous medical practices should be encouraged, there is need to ensure rationality and standards so that undesirable trends (like mass marketing based on dubious rationality) can be checked.

Doctors and other medical personnel coming forward with the objective of serving poor people particularly in remote villages should get the necessary encouragement from the government. Irrational rules unfavorable to serving in real-life rural conditions should be changed.

Tendencies towards unjust patent laws, domination by multinational companies and excessive privatization should be resisted at a wider level.

Holistic view of good health and health improvement, combining physical, mental and spiritual health, should be emphasized.

There should be continuing campaign to reduce the consumption of alcohol, tobacco and all substance abuse.

Education and Children

While emphasizing right to education for all, the education budget should be increased significantly. At the same time the tendencies of rapid privatization and extraction of high profits should be checked. Improvement of government schools should get the highest priority, while those schools which aim to sincerely pursue important educational objectives should also be encouraged. Children of weakest and vulnerable households (like migrant workers and nomadic groups) should also be included with a system of evening

schools/bridge courses and later integration with the mainstream.

Tendencies towards introducing sectarian approach in education (or linking it to the dominance of one faith or religion) should be curbed. Instead a secular approach to moral/ethical education should be introduced with emphasis on universal values such as not causing distress to anyone, equality of all human beings, rejection of all kinds of discrimination, compassion for all forms of life, honesty, hard-work and a spirit of service. Cooperation and not competition should be emphasized, in studies, sports (team-spirit) and other activities. Health education including a firm message against all intoxicants and also emphasizing importance of physical work should get due importance.

Child labor and all forms of exploitation of children should be eliminated. Trafficking of children should be curbed strongly and missing children should be traced with a sense of urgency. Trafficked and exploited children when rescued should be rehabilitated properly. Creative programs for street children should be implemented and various homes for disadvantaged children should be improved.

Special care should be given to ending discrimination against girl child and improving her education opportunities.

Youth should have adequate opportunities for livelihoods linked to creating a better world and they should be adequately informed about such opportunities of employment as well as self-employment. Their creativity should get adequate avenues as much in villages and small towns as in big cities.

High education and research should be linked to the country's real needs. The trends towards making it very expensive and increasing student debts or limiting it to the rich should be curbed. A mix of social relevance, linkages with real needs, creativity, a sense of new initiatives and innovation should guide the pursuit of higher education.

Science and Technology

Progress in science and technology should be linked closely to the country's real needs. Technical skills not only in institutions of higher learning but also in rural areas, in farms and workshops and factories should be recognized, encouraged and provided adequate avenues. Technology and engineering skills should not be linked to any narrow interests but instead should be directed towards serving the country's high priority needs. Scientific research that can be linked to important initiatives and success particularly in environment protection, sanitation and waste-management should be emphasized. There should be emphasis on learning from past mistakes, looking more at local needs and conditions. A highly decentralized approach with close involvement of farmers, villagers and women, emphasizing traditional crop varieties and biodiversity protection, is needed in villages.

Old Age, Disability and Pensions

Senior citizens should have a place of respect and dignity and to facilitate this better social security particularly pensions are very necessary. Extensive pension reforms should be taken up to create a system of universal and adequate pensions.

All disability-related discrimination should end. Adequate care should be given to meeting the special education, health and other needs of disabled persons, providing them access to all social places and facilities, apart from arranging adequate pensions. 'Disability as well as

'old age' should be defined in a comprehensive way so that any deserving and needy persons are not left out of rights like social security. Prevention of and early treatment for accidents, injuries and diseases likely to result in disabilities should be emphasized.

Society and Religion

All forms of discrimination based on caste, religion, gender, color, ethnicity etc. should be curbed strictly in keeping with the constitutional precepts. Apart from implementing legal provisions this should also be taken up as public campaigns.

Continuing efforts should be made, and not just at the time of tensions, to maintain inter-faith harmony. Strict action should be taken against those responsible for spreading sectarian violence and tensions.

Everyone has a well-established constitutional right to follow his or her religion, but definitely not to insult other religions. All religions are equal in the eyes of the State, and governments should carefully follow secular precepts avoiding any discrimination.

However there should be adequate room for social reforms and narrow thinking should not stand in the way of changing or removing those customs or traditions which clearly harm society and cause distress. Social reform movements against child marriage, dowry system, discriminatory practices, liquor and intoxicants, pornography, superstitions, various exploitative practices under the influence of superstitions etc. should be encouraged.

Community and family ties at all levels should be strengthened and social cooperation for creative, philanthropic and reformist work should be encouraged.

Harmful practices in the celebration of festivals, such as excessive use of hazardous, polluting firecrackers, should be curbed by public campaigns mostly and by legislation where necessary.

The effort should be to protect good traditions while fighting clearly harmful ones.

A campaign against the increasing consumption of liquor and tobacco products in various forms as well as against drug addiction should be a very important component of the social reform effort. The increasing location of liquor shops in villages must be checked.

Social reforms should seek to involve all sections of community and, as far as possible, should avoid creating new conflicts.

Scheduled Castes, Tribal Communities, Denotified Tribes, Nomads and OBCs

The existing reservations should continue till real equality in all important respects is not achieved. A big effort should be made to provide some land to the large number of dalit (or other) landless farm workers and provide other assistance to help them to emerge as small farmers cultivating their own land. The ban on manual scavenging must be backed by adequate rehabilitation opportunities. Artisan work relating to bamboo, leather etc. should be improved so that new opportunities emerge and better, cleaner work-conditions are available.

Land rights of tribal communities should be carefully protected and land allocated earlier illegally should be restored under the due process of law. The implementation of recent

Forest Rights Act needs to be substantially improved and any possibilities of large-scale displacement should be checked. Rights of minor forest produce should be strengthened and new opportunities opened up in processing work. Livelihoods based on protecting forests and wild life can be substantially expanded. PESA law for decentralization should be implemented in the right spirit.

Nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes and groups deserve sympathetic understanding. Both options of improving their present life pattern and satisfactory rehabilitation are open. Denotified tribes need to be helped to come out of various kinds of stigmas and problems, and new opportunities must be opened for them.

In all categories the most oppressed and neglected groups deserve special attention and help. Particularly among OBCs there is a need to be careful that the genuinely oppressed, left-out and neglected castes get more help.

Labor

Hard-won rights of workers and trade unions should be protected. Reforms or codification should not be used as a pretext to reduce or undermine these rights. Occupational health and safety need much more attention. The rights of unorganized sector workers deserve more attention and funds. Social security of these workers should be ensured in a big way. Women workers deserve special attention in terms of protection and care. Laws which protect rights of workers should be implemented in the right spirit. Within the organized sector also the rights of contractual workers deserve more attention, as also the need for regularization.

Women and Gender Issues

There is a clear need to provide equal opportunities to women and end all gender-based discrimination. A system of (at least) 33 percent reservation for women in state and national legislatures and 50 percent reservation in the decentralized system should be in place in the near future. Reproductive health and rights should be well protected. The ban on female foeticide and infanticide should be implemented strictly. Apart from providing essential facilities, special incentives should be offered to encourage girl students. Security of girls and women should get high priority and urgent steps have to be taken at several levels to ensure secure living and working conditions for women.

Various reasons due to which violence against women has continued to remain at high levels should be identified carefully and remedial action should be taken. The rise in sexual violence is a matter of deep concern and the causes should be carefully identified so that effective action can be initiated on the basis of proper identification. Rapid proliferation of liquor, other intoxicants and pornography needs to be checked. Deeply entrenched attitudes of society which when inter-acting with these recent trends can prove very dangerous also need to be identified and checked. Strong laws to protect women are needed, but at the same time any misuse of these laws should be checked.

Land and property rights should be jointly in the name of wife and husband, and the rights of single women should also be ensured, but inheritance laws should not be such as to transfer ownership of a village's cultivation land outside the village.

Efforts for a better understanding of women's perceptions of various development issues

should be made.

No one should face discrimination or injustice on the basis of gender or sexual orientations.

Other Forms of Life

It is important to avoid an excessively human-centric view of life as life forms other than human beings also need care and compassion. Many of these are today endangered and also face much cruelty due to the absence of this care. Most of the life forms who have been farmers' friends – ranging from indigenous species of cattle and camels to earthworms and sparrows, are urgently in need of protection today. Indigenous species of cows and bullocks deserve special care due to their many sided utility, but other farm animals should not be neglected. Communities living near forests should get strong livelihood support in activities relating to protection of wild life and their habitats. Similarly communities like fishers, boatmen, can be involved in the protection of fish habitats and protection of all aquatic life, while snake charmers can be useful in protection of reptiles due to their special knowledge. Use of chemical pesticides and weedicides should be minimized while GM crops should be banned. Stray dogs and other stray animals also need better care but not in such distorted ways as to threaten public safety. Cruelty to animals in the name of laboratory experiments should be reduced as much as possible.

Protection of Environment, Checking Climate Change

Protection of environment is of the highest importance not only for preparing the base of sustainable development but increasingly for sheer survival of various life-forms including human beings. Protection of environment and reduction of pollution should get priority at all levels, including reduction of air and water pollution, soil and water conservation, protection of forests, reducing the spread of various toxic products and wastes etc. New forms of pollution, such as those associated with high hazard technologies the irreversible risk of genetic pollution should be given adequate importance in the environment protection agenda.

Protection of rivers should learn from past failures and concepts of ecologically adequate river flows as well as free river flows should get more appreciation in policy, along with adverse impacts of dams and barrages.

While a strong legal base is certainly needed for protecting environment, people's movements and their close involvement in environment protection are equally important. It is important to evolve environment policies which involve people instead of alienating them. Environment protection work should provide new livelihoods to people, instead of displacing them or taking away their livelihoods.

A ban on destructive mining at any place, for example, should at the same time provide for protective and regenerative work at the site which will also provide employment. Special care should be taken for protection of eco-sensitive areas of special importance like those in the Himalayas or in coastal areas.

While the task of environment protection has always been important, its importance has greatly increased in times of extremely serious world-level threats like those of climate change. India like all countries needs to give adequate importance to reduction of greenhouse gas emissions as well as to adaptive steps to cope with climate change related

problems. These can become issues of very high priority in the near future. Also India should contribute adequately to world level justice based efforts to check climate change which should persuade developed countries to contribute substantially to efforts to check climate change, accepting historical responsibility for high greenhouse gas emissions. Changes in various sectors particularly agriculture and energy should be linked more closely to climate change related factors. Vast rural areas of India can become one of the most important frontiers of checking climate change with emphasis on small farmer organic and eco-friendly farming, protection of forests and a huge program of regeneration of degraded forests, linked to livelihoods of landless rural households and tribal communities. Mitigation and adaptation aspects of climate change should get equal importance and can often be combined in very creative ways.

Protection from Disasters



Flooding in Odisha (Licensed under Creative Commons)

Increasing harm from several natural disasters is already a serious concern, while the threat from disasters can increase substantially in times of more aggressive climate change. Therefore according much higher priority to protection from natural disasters has to be a very important part of policy framework now and in the times to come. To be effective this effort has to learn from past experience and be willing to correct serious mistakes made earlier, as is evident from the increasing damage even after vast amounts had been invested in flood protection. So both increasing budgets and correction of distorted policies are important for protection from disasters. Planning for reduction of loss of life in an earthquake, cyclone or tsunami should get very high priority, as also various measures to provide protection from prolonged or acute droughts.

Protection from Accidents

Damage and threats from transport (particularly road), worksite, and domestic accidents as well as new threats from high hazard projects have been increasing. Preventive and

immediate response action can reduce the damage including loss of human life to a substantial extent. So a nationwide network of protection and quick response for all kinds of accidents in an integrated way should be created.

Displacement

Efforts should be made to reduce displacement at all levels as much as possible. At the level of policy formation it is necessary to keep in view the need to minimize displacement. To the extent displacement cannot be avoided, all efforts should be made for satisfactory rehabilitation including land in place of land and protection of community ties. Cases of those victims of displacement who suffered injustice in much earlier times should also be considered sympathetically so that they can get justice even through belatedly.

Justice, Police and Crime

Long pending police reforms should not be delayed any longer. These reforms should be aimed at not only increasing the efficiency of the police but also their sensitivity and humanity. Dignity of policemen at lower levels should be protected.

Reducing crimes should have a multi-dimensional approach with special emphasis on reducing the social causes of crimes as well as breaking the nexus between crime and corruption and political power at higher levels.

Efforts to combat terrorism should be much better organized and all support-systems of terrorists whether in the country or abroad should be opposed and challenged on a continuing basis at various levels. Social conditions and grievances which fuel terrorism should be tackled effectively.

The justice system should give special attention to ensuring that innocent people are not implicated in crimes. Special efforts should be made to provide legal aid to the poor and needy, as also to help under-trials. Under-trials who have already served a jail sentence which is equal to the punishment of the offence for which they have been charged should be released.

The justice system is breaking down particularly in rural areas because of long pending cases and repeated visits to courts from long distances which only lead to further dates. Therefore rural decentralization should include some judicial provisions for settling disputes locally but with suitable safeguards.

Jails need extensive reforms to create more human conditions, with special provisions firmly in place for recognition and human treatment of political prisoners.

Housing and Homeless People

Ensuring legal rights to housing land to all households and improvements in housing programs for weaker sections should get high priority in rural areas, as also meeting the special housing needs in disaster prone areas.

The housing needs of urban areas cannot be solved by high profit oriented builders. The government should accept the responsibility for large-scale construction of houses to meet the needs of the poor as well as middle class. The needs of homeless people should get priority and construction of adequate shelters should be ensured. Slums should not be

evicted arbitrarily and instead improving various facilities in slums should be emphasized.

Strengthening Democracy, Improving Governance

There should be very firm commitment to democracy and honest conduct of elections. The government should consult opposition political parties regarding their apprehensions on election malpractices and if there is widespread demand for elections based on ballot papers instead of EVMs, then this should be accepted. The impartiality and integrity of the Election Commission at all levels should be ensured.

Centre-state relations should be guided by constitutional precepts of maintaining very good relations and there should be absolutely no bias against any state on the basis of political parties in power or other basis. There should be timely and adequate transfer of funds to states as per agreements which respect adequate financial rights of states to resources. Recent moves such as GST should not lead to increasing financial constraints for states.

Efforts to reduce significantly the role of big money, illegal 'black' money and criminals in elections and functioning of political parties should get high priority. Political parties should maintain complete records of income, expenditure and all donations which should be transparent and should be accessible under right to information law. Election expenses should be kept low, rules should be carefully followed but routine work should not be interrupted at election time. Election bonds which reduce transparency and promote organized, systemic corruption should be withdrawn.

Right to information should be protected and strengthened, with additional protection for those who expose corruption using RTI or in other ways and for 'whistle-blowers'. Anti-corruption laws and organizations need to be strengthened and improved, while new laws should be introduced in areas where needed.

An effective grievance redressal system which provides for time-barred responses, issues receipts for complaints received and fixes responsibilities (as well as penalties for non-action) should be in place as soon as possible. Important reforms to increase accountability in governance should be introduced.

Exemplary strong action should be taken once corruption allegations have been confirmed. Excessive protection provided to some sections of officials from anti-corruption action should be withdrawn but at the same time tendencies towards witch-hunt without significant evidence as well as motivated targeting of innocent persons should be checked.

Strong action should be taken particularly in cases of illegal transfer of money earned by corrupt practices outside the country, in tax havens or secret accounts.

Decentralization and Panchayati Raj

Decentralization should be strengthened in rural as well as urban areas. Gram sabhas and ward sabhas in rural areas (assemblies of all adult villagers) as well as equivalent units in urban areas should be strengthened as a base where people's real needs can be articulated, discussed and also documented. It is important to strengthen ward sabhas particularly in villages where gram sabhas can be too large to give everyone a proper hearing (or else panchayats can cover smaller areas.)

Some weaknesses of panchayats need to be corrected. The tendency of one or two persons

to concentrate most powers of panchayat raj can be corrected by strengthening of gram sabhas, a more active role for panchayat samitis as well as for all elected ward members and possibly a rotation of the main head-person's post among all ward members. Decentralization at the district level should be strengthened significantly so that the concept of a district level government can emerge which is much closer to the day to day problems and livelihood issues of people.

Decentralization needs to progress rapidly within the basic constitutional principles of equality and non-discrimination, integrity and unity of the country, secularism and socialism (interpreted in this context as reduction of inequalities and ensuring justice to weaker sections).

Urban Development

Urban life should emphasize environment-friendly and secure conditions for all sections of people, with special emphasis on reduction of pollution, access of satisfactory housing to weaker sections as well as middle class, and significant reduction of crime (particularly crime against women and children).

Instead of high concentration of population in big cities, balanced development of smaller towns including kasbas or semi urban settlements close to rural areas should be prioritized. Satisfactory essential facilities should be provided in all these settlements.

Scarce resources should be used carefully to provide essentials to all people instead of squandering scarce resources on grand and expensive projects. There is need for much better planning taking better care of needs of weaker sections, environment protection, decentralized sanitation and solid waste management. There is room as well as need for much creative reform and improvement here, taken up with involvement of people and particularly weaker sections, supporting many creative livelihoods which should be well rewarded for resolving most vexing urban problems.

National Security and Unity

National security is based not just on armies and weapons but even more so on the unity and determination of people to defend national interests. Hence continuing efforts should be made to strengthen unity of people at all levels. Special attention should be given to justice-based unity in border areas, with a willingness to provide all democratic rights (except perhaps for very small periods of special security concerns) and an effective system for redressal of all grievances. Special care should also be taken to ensure such community participation that any victimisation of innocent persons at the time of security operations can be avoided.

Apart from overall improvement of anti-terrorism operations, efforts to break their higher-level linkages whether external or internal should be emphasized.

A high level of preparedness to defend national borders should be maintained, while at the same time improving negotiations with neighboring countries to resolve border issues and ease tensions. Corruption and commissions in arms purchase should be strictly curbed, while moving towards self-reliance and indigenous R and D should be strengthened.

Priority should be given to solving most expensive border disputes like Siachin glacier. The Kashmir issue can be resolved by strengthening democratic processes on both sides of the

border, initiating dialogues and exchange, gradually opening up borders and recognition of these as the legitimate borders by all sides. But all this is possible only if disruptive forces of violence can be restrained.

Foreign Policy and International Affairs

There should be a deep commitment to friendly relations and peace with all neighboring countries without sacrificing national security interests and protection of our borders.

The world is passing through extremely difficult times with the growing threat of irreversible climate change and life-endangering conditions on the one hand, and the stockpiling and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on the other hand. India should play a leading role of responsibility so that effective solutions for these life-threatening problems can get the highest priority and effective, justice-based solutions can emerge before it is too late.

Narrow viewpoints of developed countries on these issues should be challenged by a broader unity of developing and least developed countries. In addition the tendency of developed countries to go on trying to extend their special privileged position and dominate world economy and trade should be challenged and resisted. International trade and finance institutions should be reformed substantially, or what may be more practical ultimately, new international trade and finance institutions should be created which are more suitable for creating a new international economic order based on justice and equality.

India should participate actively, inside and outside the United Nations, for justice based peace and minimizing the possibilities of war and internal strife. Unity and cooperation of all countries should be established to curb strongly all forms of terrorism and its causes as well.

India should support disarmament with renewed vigor so that substantial savings from arms expenditure can be diverted to development needs.

In the emerging world situation there are strong reasons for strengthening the non-aligned movement and India should strive to play a key leadership role in this.

Minorities

Security and equal opportunities of all minorities should be protected and promoted. Communal harmony and national unity should be promoted actively on a continuing basis so that such conditions are created which minimize possibilities of any communal tensions and violence. Those guilty of obstructing this path of peace, goodwill and security should face strict action.

Although minorities are generally taken to be religious minorities, reasons for being identified on other basis (such as region) exist and any such effort of violence against any kind of minority should face strict action and all such tendencies should be curbed.

Sexual minorities should also be protected from injustice, discrimination and stigma.

Social Activists and Organizations

Social activists who seek to help weaker sections, oppressed people and reform society in other creative ways should get encouragement and protection from governments. Any

moves to harass or repress such efforts of social activists and organizations should be checked and protection should be available to them. They should have encouraging conditions and a lot of freedom to advance their work in creative and constructive ways.

Media

Image: Protests in New Delhi and New York City decrying the raid and detention of journalists in India. ([Source](#))



Media should be close to the realities and needs of the country, and should be in tune with the basic precepts and values enshrined in our constitution – equality, secularism, special concern for the weaker sections, national integration and unity, peace and goodwill. Freedom of media is very important and this is also a basic constitutional precept, but it should not be misrepresented to justify increasing corporate control to an extent that media is alienated from genuine concerns of the people and instead promotes narrow interests and viewpoints. Cooperative efforts of journalists should be encouraged. Along with freedom, socially responsible behavior of new social media is important and new technologies should not be misused.

Transport and Tourism

Importance of railways and public transport keeping in view the needs of ordinary travelers should get high priority. Roads should be safe and in good condition, but overspending of scarce resources on non-essential expansion and widening should be discouraged. Safety in all forms of transport should get very high priority.

Safety, hygiene and essential facilities at all places of huge gatherings including pilgrimages, festivals and fairs etc. should be emphasized. Economy tourism, eco-friendly tourism and safety of tourists should get high priority. Tourism should be linked to the better livelihoods of ordinary people.

Culture, Art and Literature

Rich cultural assets and folk arts in various communities should be promoted and encouraged, as well as protected from the onslaught of corporate controlled media, 'cultural imperialism' and pornography. Highly deserving but neglected talent among ordinary folk should be encouraged and helped to realize their full potential. All languages should get encouragement, in the context of education, literature and folk arts. Special efforts should be made to protect endangered languages. Efforts to bring cinema, theatre and literature closer to the real concerns and aspirations of ordinary people as well as pressing needs of society should be encouraged. The rich heritage of previous achievements should be protected and promoted, while at the same time future achievements keeping in view the

various needs of society should get support and encouragement. Freedom, with a sense of social responsibility, of all writers and artists should be well protected.

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