**Climate change, a passing cloud in Indian politics**

The fifth phase of India’s general election is over and the electoral rhetoric of both the major parties, i.e., the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Indian National Congress, have conspicuously side-lined one of the most critical issues of our times — climate change. This omission is particularly stark against the backdrop of global environmental crises and the pressing demands for sustainable development.

Recent events, such as environmental activist Sonam Wangchuk’s outcry over ecological degradation in Ladakh — underscoring the urgency of integrating robust climate action into national policy frameworks — shows us how critical climate mitigation and adaptation has become and its urgent need to become political, especially for electoral politics. Despite Mr. Wangchuk’s calls for environmental security in the region, which resonated widely among the people of Ladakh, and then, subsequently, on social media, the response from the Modi government has been muted. This lack of response is symptomatic of a larger political reluctance to engage with environmental issues as central electoral themes.

A calculated omission

The reluctance of both the BJP and Congress to foreground climate change in their electoral platforms is not just a matter of oversight but a calculated omission. Integrating serious climate action into their political agendas would entail acknowledging and addressing the trade-offs between rapid industrial growth and environmental sustainability. Such acknowledgment could alienate powerful industrial constituencies and disrupt the economic status quo, which heavily relies on fossil fuels and high-emission industries.

This strategic avoidance plays out in the manifestos, where climate policies, if mentioned, are vague and lack commitment to specific, measurable actions. For instance, the Congress party’s manifesto has a chapter, ‘Environment Protection and Climate Change Authority’ and proposes a ‘Green New Deal Investment Programme’ without clear directives or commitments to specific reductions in carbon emissions. Similarly, the BJP’s manifesto praises past initiatives but fails to propose forward-looking strategies that align with the global scientific consensus, which calls for immediate and drastic action to mitigate climate change impacts.

The absence of detailed climate action plans in these manifestos reflects a broader trend in Indian politics where short-term economic gains are often prioritised over long-term environmental sustainability. That said, we must remember India’s vulnerability to climate impacts, including rising sea levels, extreme weather events, and severe air pollution, which pose significant threats to its population and economy. Moreover, the silence on climate change in electoral discussions sends a disheartening message to educated, middle-class voters, who are increasingly aware of and concerned about global environmental issues. This demographic, capable of influencing policy through public opinion and voting power, I believe, seeks more than just token mentions of sustainability. They demand actionable plans that ensure that India not only meets its international commitments under agreements such as the Paris Agreement but also adopts a leadership role in global climate advocacy.

Why, then, is there such a glaring gap between the needs of the electorate and the political offerings? Part of the reason lies in the perceived political cost of ambitious climate policies. Comprehensive climate strategies may require tough decisions, such as phasing out coal, increasing taxes or prices on carbon emissions, and enforcing stringent environmental regulations — measures that could be unpopular in the short run despite their long-term benefits.

What we have now

Currently, the National Action Plan on Climate Change serves as the overarching guiding body for India’s climate policy efforts that are spread across several policy documents, sector-specific strategies, and laws. In 2023, some very important policy documents and laws covering the energy sector emerged, which included the National Electricity Plan 2023, the National Green Hydrogen Mission and the Energy Conservation (Amendment) Act, 2022. These documents and laws play a crucial role in shaping the energy landscape. That said, one must note that the Indian leadership has shown no commitments in phasing out coal. These policies, however, are top-down in nature; these are being made by the top brass, based on international trends and immediate requirements. India, as a nation, is still lacking a considerable number of citizens who demand corrective policies to ensure climate policies and actions, as a bottom-up approach.

The Climate Action Tracker (developed by Climate Analytics, an independent global climate science and policy institute with an office in Berlin) gives India an overall rating of “Highly Insufficient” in its policies and actions tracking, based on 2030 projections. That said, there is more that the central and various other State governments can do. States or regions that are on the frontline of vulnerability need to develop plans that bring India’s projection below 2-degree pre-industrial levels. A good example of comprehensive climate policymaking in India would be the Mumbai Climate Action plan developed by the Mumbai municipality, in collaboration with the C40 and the World Resources Institute.

In contrast to the complex web of climate bodies in India, we have a silver lining that should mark the beginning of climate jurisprudence in our country: M.K. Ranjitsinh and Others vs Union of India, where in March 2024, the Supreme Court of India ruled that the people of India have the right to be free from the adverse effects of climate change by drawing upon Article 21 and Article 14 of the Indian Constitution. This opens up many government sector bodies working on climate policies and action to much-needed legal scrutiny and makes them answerable to citizens.

The challenge

So, what now? The challenge for India, therefore, is to bridge this gap between electoral politics and climate policy. It requires a shift in political calculations, where long-term environmental and social gains are valued over immediate economic benefits. And, the media and civil society have pivotal roles in this transformation. By consistently highlighting the inadequacies in the current political discourse on climate change, they can drive a narrative that places environmental sustainability at the heart of India’s development agenda.

The 2024 general election presents a critical opportunity for Indian voters, especially the informed and increasing middle class, to demand that their leaders take a more proactive and committed stance on climate change. This means not only voting with an eye towards policies that promise immediate benefits but also supporting those that promise sustainable growth and environmental security. The electorate must push for a paradigm shift in how climate policy is integrated into the broader national development strategies, ensuring that the progress made today does not come at the expense of tomorrow’s security.

As India stands at this electoral crossroads, the choices made will resonate far beyond the immediate political cycle, influencing the global fight against climate change and the future of sustainable development worldwide.