

**ENVIRONMENT**

# **Under Modi, India Has Witnessed an Unprecedented Chomping of the Earth**

When a government justifies environmental 'sacrifice' for 'development' purposes, it is not answering: whose development, at whose cost?



Narendra Modi and the Statue of Unity. Credit: Twitter/BJP



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On October 28, in his ‘Mann ki Baat’ broadcast, Prime Minister Narendra Modi praised Adivasis and their fight for rights. He said that India’s foremost freedom fighters were tribals, and recalled Adivasi heroes like Birsa Munda.

Touching. Anyone listening would be moved by the homage to India's oldest communities. Until you hear how, three days later, he unveiled the Sardar Patel statue in Gujarat, for whose land acquisition and resource use, the livelihoods of 70 Adivasi nearby villages were compromised. They boycotted the ceremony and held a bandh.

To add to the irony, the statue is built on an island in the Narmada river, downstream of the Sardar Sarovar Project dam. Pushed by Modi first as chief minister and then as prime minister, the dam is responsible for the displacement and dispossession of several thousand more adivasis. As Narmada Bachao Andolan's Medha Patkar asked in an **open letter to Sardar Patel** on the day of the unveiling, would the Sardar have condoned such injustice?

A month earlier, the United Nations conferred the Champion of the Earth Award on Modi and French President Emmanuel Macron, citing their International Solar Alliance, and Modi's push to eliminate single-use plastic. India's recent enhancement of solar energy, and actions on some kinds of plastic, are indeed welcome. But what these hide is a much bigger pushback on environmental safeguards by the BJP government.

This builds on a trend the Congress had already set, in particular since the 1991 'reforms' pushing India into the arms of the global economy. But the BJP's forays into environmentally illiterate processes has been with greater single-mindedness than the Congress was able to muster. As noted by the Centre for Science and Environment in a quick analysis immediately after the UN award was announced, the last four years have seen:

- Significant increase in **allowing 'development' projects** inside wildlife protected areas, bypassing necessary impact studies, from 260 in 2009-13 (under UPA) to 519 in 2014 – 18 (the BJP phase);
- Proposed policy changes (e.g. a new Forest Policy, and Coastal Regulation Zone notification) that favour take-over of land, forest,

water, coasts by corporate entities;

- New projects that are mere greenwash, having no teeth or clarity, e.g. the National Clean Air Programme which has no specific targets for cities;
- Attempts to weaken several crucial institutional structures, such as the National Green Tribunal (indications are that if BJP had its way, it would have shut the Tribunal down by now).

One can add more examples. One of the government's brainchildren is the Sagarmala project. Much like the inland River Linking scheme (to which the Congress was also a party), this project too will be **ecologically and socially disastrous**, threatening coastal ecosystems and dispossessing fisher communities. Meanwhile, BJP's favourite river, the Ganga, faces an even **higher pollution load** than it did in 2014, despite some 4,000 crores spent ostensibly for cleaning it up. And much of the celebrated solar push is from mega projects, by big corporations, with their own serious social and ecological costs, rather than decentralised energy production recommended by environmentalists and many energy experts.

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In countries like India, the natural environment is the daily lifeline of the majority of its population: forest-dwellers, fishers, farmers, craftspersons, pastoralists, urban poor. So when a government justifies environmental 'sacrifice' for 'development' purposes, it is not answering: whose development, at whose cost? This is consistently ignored by politicians and economists sitting in Delhi. Oxfam's latest report **Reward Work Not Wealth** shows that 1% of India's population owns about 60% of its private wealth, and that in 2017 the wealth of India's richest 1% increased by over Rs 20.9 lakh crore, equivalent to total central budget in 2017–18! Inequality is steadily growing; such 'development' has fattened the rich, at

the cost of the poor.

At the same time, the three-decade old phenomenon of ‘jobless growth’ has intensified, according to Azim Premji University’s **State of Working India 2018**. Much of the wealth generated by rapid growth, has simply bypassed over 90% of its workforce stuck in the informal economy. The BJP has made it worse; demonetisation has led to the loss of 3.5 million jobs, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy. Meanwhile crony capitalism continues, with the government bending over backward to **excuse the enormous debt** that corporations (including Adani, Tata, Essar) owe to public sector banks; and new scams like **crop insurance** (favouring Reliance) coming to light.

It is therefore no surprise that large sections of the dispossessed are in agitation mode. The last year has seen several mass protests against anti-poor policies: 30,000 farmers marching into Mumbai in March; 1.5 lakh farmers and workers in a Kisan Mazdoor Sangharsh rally to Delhi in September; thousands more joining rallies under the auspices of Ekta Parishad and Samvidhan Samman Yatra of National Alliance of People’s Movements; and one lakh participants of a pan-Indian coalition of farmer movements are expected to demonstrate in Delhi in end-November.

Dalit movements have upped the protest against horrendous attacks on them in the name of the cow, as they find themselves still at the bottom rungs of a religion-ordained hierarchy. In Karnataka and elsewhere, craftspersons have held satyagrahas, protesting the imposition of GST on already fragile livelihoods. Though Modi was able to push through the Statue of Unity, his even more wasteful project, the Bullet Train (estimated to cost as much as the total 2017 Railways Ministry outlay), is facing opposition from over 1,000 farmers who have gone to court against the acquisition of their land.

If this mass discontent is not resulting in rebellions to overthrow a blatantly pro-rich and anti-poor state, it is because we are not yet seeing

common cause. And we have all been seduced by a superficial model of democracy, believing that it's all about voting the 'right' party into power, rather than exercising power in our own local communities and collectives.

But even the partial democracy we have is currently under threat. Organisations like INSAF, Hazards Centre, Greenpeace India, Amnesty, and several individual activists, advocates, academics have been targeted because they ask uncomfortable questions. New terms like 'urban Naxals' get coined to give legitimacy to this witch-hunt.

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**Alos read: [Gadkari Not on the Side of the Angels Where Ganga Is Concerned: Jairam Ramesh](#)**

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In May the University Grants Commission told universities that academics in public funded institutions are subject to rules applying to government servants, which means they cannot criticise state policy. The Centre has written to all states to track NGOs that indulge in 'anti-national' (a euphemism for any form of dissenting) activities. Virtually all spaces where civil society could participate in the state, such as expert committees or planning bodies, have been shut off, or filled with 'yes-men' (yes, mostly men) who won't dissent. And Prime Minister Narendra Modi has perfected the art of encouraging all this by keeping silent, including on some of the most horrendous crimes against women, Dalits and Muslims.

The above is not an argument in favour of other major opposition parties. When it comes to blind faith in economic growth, ignoring environmental and human rights concerns, there is not so much to distinguish them from each other. But the toxic combination of ecologically illiterate decisions, authoritarian and anti-democratic steps, and communal politics that the BJP has displayed in the last four years, may be unprecedented.

If the BJP comes back to power in 2019 and does not change its spots, we are in for a period that may surpass the harrowing couple of years of the Emergency in the 1970s, pushing India into dangerous waves of internal

conflict, division and suffering. People’s movements and all those who care for fundamental democratic freedoms, peace, and a healthy environment – including youth, particularly the youth – need to gather forces to safeguard the fundamental values our constitution is premised on.

*Ashish Kothari is with Kalpavriksh, Pune.*



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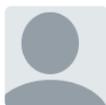
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**Surya Pratap** • 17 hours ago

This is the reason I fear, if this party stays in 2019.. We need to catch the ministry, who are the people working in it, who is responsible for clearances, we must get the right to know

^ | v • Reply • Share



**satish sharma** • 10 days ago

Most of the wire correspondents always criticise the govt but they dont have the other solution of the problems .It is very easy to criticise any one without having concrete solution of the problems .This is correct that whatever promises they have claimed before coming to power are still not been full filled .Like Black money Employment etc etc

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Lots of solutions that we've been offering for years, both to this and previous govt. Hundreds of alternative solutions to problems documented on [www.vikalpsangam.org](http://www.vikalpsangam.org), and in recommendations made to govt ... but who listens?

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ENVIRONMENT

# Delhi's Air Quality Remains Very Poor, Slight Reprieve Expected

Increased wind speed may improve the air quality over the next few days.



Pollution in Delhi. Credit: PTI



## The Wire Staff

ENVIRONMENT 1 HOUR AGO

**New Delhi:** Delhi's air quality remained in the very poor category on Wednesday, though authorities expressed hope that a slight improvement may be observed in the next few days due to increased wind speed.

The Central Pollution Control Board recorded an overall air quality index (AQI) of 332, which falls in the "very poor" category.

An AQI between 201 and 300 is considered poor, 301 and 400 very poor and 401 and 500 is severe.

Mundka recorded severe air quality, while 24 areas reported very poor air quality. Eight areas recorded poor air quality, according to the CPCB.

The overall PM<sub>2.5</sub> (fine particulate matter in the air with a diameter of less than 2.5 micrometre) level was recorded at 186 µg/m<sup>3</sup> and the PM<sub>10</sub> level at 360 µg/m<sup>3</sup>, it said.

In NCR, Ghaziabad recorded worst air quality in severe category at an AQI of 404. Faridabad and Noida recorded very poor air quality while Gurgaon recorded poor air quality.

The Centre-run System of Air Quality and Weather Forecasting (SAFAR) said the overall air quality over Delhi continues to remain in the very poor range.

"It may improve a few notches tomorrow (Thursday) but will remain in very poor category. Moderate surface wind speed is the only weather factor not allowing pollution to accumulate significantly and working positively to an extent. Rest of the weather conditions are unfavourable for the air quality," it said.

According to the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, the maximum ventilation index was likely around 5000 sqm/second on Tuesday.

A ventilation index lower than 6,000 sqm/second with average wind speed less than 10 kmph is unfavourable for dispersion of pollutants, IITM said.

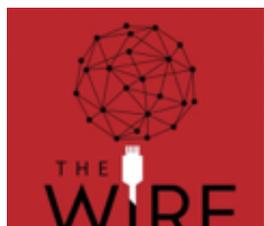
A Central Pollution Control Board taskforce has identified 21 hotspots of high pollution levels in Delhi-NCR and directed the respective area municipal corporations to take “focussed actions”.

The taskforce has also asked authorities to carry out inspection in Loni Bhopura, in Ghaziabad, from where repeated complaints of violations of norms associated with pollution-causing activities have been received, according to minutes of a meeting of the taskforce held in Delhi Tuesday.

The taskforce has identified 15 hotspots in Delhi. They are: Anand Vihar, Bawana, CRRM Mathura Road, DTU, Dr. Karni Singh Shooting Range, Dwarka-Sector 8, Jahangirpuri, Mundaka, NSIT Dwarka, Narela, Okhla Phase-2, R K Puram, Rohini, Shadipur, Wazirpur.

Many of the hotspots are already experiencing severe pollution levels.

In NCR areas outside Delhi, six hotspots have been identified. They are: Sector-16A in Faridabad, Vikas Sadan in Gurgaon, Vasundhara in Ghaziabad, Knowledge Park-III in Greater Noida, Sector-125 in Noida and RIICO Industrial Area-III in Bhiwadi.



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