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India must show global leadership on climate crisis by adopting a holistic approach to energy

Ashish Kothari writes: It must re-examine the unsustainable and inequitable ways in which power is produced and distributed.

Written by **Ashish Kothari** | Updated: July 8, 2021 7:51:31 am



People who protest the forcible acquisition of their lands for mega-projects are labeled anti-development — even anti-national.

In classic double-speak, political leaders of Western nations express alarm and make promises about the climate crisis, but do precious little to tackle it. India is not far behind. The latest avatars of climate greenwash are both corporate and governmental: Asia's richest man Mukesh Ambani's has announced Rs 75,000-crore of investment in clean energy and the India-US Climate and Clean Energy Agenda 2030 Partnership was launched at the Leaders' Summit on Climate called by US President Joe Biden.

According to the partnership statement: "The United States has set an economy-wide target of reducing its net greenhouse gas emissions by 50-52 percent below 2005 levels in 2030 ... India has set a target of installing 450 GW of renewable energy by 2030 ... The partnership will aim to mobilise finance and speed clean energy deployment; demonstrate and scale innovative clean technologies needed to decarbonise sectors including industry, transportation, power, and buildings; and build capacity to measure, manage, and adapt to the risks of climate-related impacts."

Sounds great. But Biden's denialism, while certainly a welcome compared to President Trump's climate denialism, falls far short of what is needed. G7 countries are also announcing "net zero carbon" targets which hide the continued reliance on destructive technologies in the pursuit of ever-increasing energy generation. The historical responsibility of industrialised countries in creating the crisis continues to be avoided.



But what about the Indian government and corporate sector that claim to be global climate leaders? The rapid increase in renewable energy (RE) capacity and partnerships like the International Solar Alliance have won appreciation. But this hides four crucial flaws.



First, while substantially increasing RE, India is also expanding fossil fuel extraction and use. In the middle of the pandemic, the government has auctioned 60 new coal mining blocks, and several new thermal power stations are being considered. This includes mining in some of the most biodiverse forests in Central India. In effect, total carbon emissions, which is what impacts

climate, will keep going up even as RE's share rises.

The decarbonising of sectors mentioned in the statement could certainly reduce emissions. But without any targets, is the government serious? For instance, while public transportation has been given more investment in the 2021 budget, there is no discouragement of private cars, and fossil fuel use continues to rise. Yet, it is one part of the partnership that could yield benefits, if intense civil society pressure could force appropriate action.

Second, India includes mega-hydropower in RE, despite the ecological and social havoc it causes. Has the recent flood tragedy in Uttarakhand led to any reconsideration of these plans?

Third, even RE production is mostly of the mega-park type. In late 2020, the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) said that 10,000 sq km in seven states are available for such parks. These projects have serious ecological and social impacts but do not even need an environmental impact assessment, under the faulty assumption that RE is necessarily "clean" and eco-friendly. About 60,000 hectares of Kachchh's ecologically fragile grassland-desert ecosystem have been allotted to energy mega-parks. The government's target of 100 GW by 2022 also included 40 GW of rooftop solar, but poor policy back-up has stymied it.

Fourth, it seems that any amount of electricity demand is legitimate, to be met in all possible ways (including dangerous nuclear power). But this is simply unsustainable, whatever the source of energy. A shift from petrol-diesel to electric cars, for instance, would significantly expand devastating mining across the world. This is also a consequence of thinking of climate and ecological crises only from a carbon perspective, ignoring biodiversity loss and pollution. Unless luxury and wasteful consumption is eliminated, unsustainability and people's displacement are inevitable.

Such an approach also undermines democracy. People who protest the forcible acquisition of their lands for mega-projects are labeled anti-development — even anti-national. The unequal colonial relationship between the North and the South is replicated in internal colonisation when the government grabs land, forests, and water, converts relatively self-reliant communities into cheap labour and does little to help them adapt to climate crisis impacts.

Viable alternatives have been demonstrated across the world. The Delhi government is supporting 150 government schools to generate rooftop solar energy, helping them save Rs 8.8 crore on electricity and earn Rs 8.5 crore from selling power back to the grid. A study in the US shows that rooftop solar can create 30 times more jobs than mega-solar parks. Integrated power micro-grids can provide adequate power for entire villages and urban neighbourhoods, and be locally managed.

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Alternatives to energy-guzzling sectors like urban construction and privatised transportation exist. Groups like SECMOL in Ladakh and Hunnarshala in Kachchh have shown how sensitive architecture can dramatically reduce electricity use. Most important is demand regulation.

Consumer behaviour that uses wasteful and luxury power can be changed and regulated, and power redistributed to those who do not have enough. All this should be part of the National Energy Policy. People's mobilisation will be crucial to make all this happen.

While we all have a right to the energy we need for well-being, we cannot keep demanding more and more, nor can we allow the unsustainable and inequitable ways in which it is produced and distributed. Without us sustaining the earth, the planet will not sustain us. In this, India needs to show global leadership.

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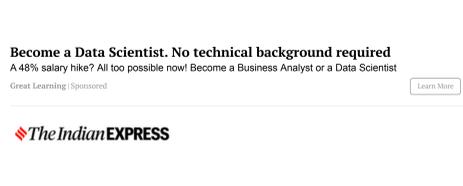
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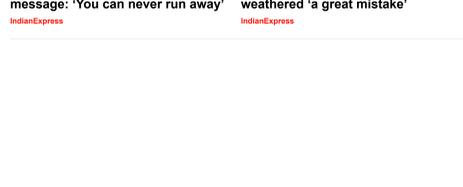
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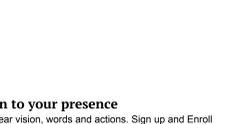
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