MAKING NATIONAL ELECTIONS LESS CONSEQUENTIAL

By Ashish Kothari on March 13, 2014 in Perspectives
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As India gears up for the once-in-5-years political tamasha (and pl. note, tamasha is a respected art form), here's a question most people are asking: which party can deliver on the promise of development, prosperity, clean governance, and secure access to the basic needs of life?

Even as it delivered on some of these promises in its first term, with laws and schemes relating to employment, access to information, and forest rights, the UPA faltered on implementing these, and more seriously, on promoting an agenda of sustainability and equity. During its two terms, nearly 2.5 lakh hectares of forest land were diverted for 'development' projects, and in the last couple of months the Ministry of Environment and Forests under Mr. Moily has run amuck giving clearances to dozens of projects. The stated objective of 'sustainable' development has been systematically torn to shreds.

Will the BJP/NDA be better? There is no indication it will; its PM designate has one of the worst records as far as environment and poor peoples' rights and access are concerned. Gujarat today is an ecological nightmare, and there has been no significant improvement in the dismal record of child and women nutrition and health. Mr. Modi as
Prime Minister will be a development, ecological, and livelihoods disaster.

So what's left? The mainstream Left parties appear to be floundering on how to respond to the multiple crises India faces. Many of the regional parties are gaining in strength, but none stand out in terms of their policies on environment and the livelihoods of the poor. And the new kid on the block, Aam Aadmi Party? It has shown some promise, its move to decentralize governance in Delhi could be a pathbreaker, but it has also shown rash and hurried behaviour. We await its policy statement, which hopefully will reflect the hard work many civil society people put in to formulate draft policies when it asked us for inputs. Perhaps it will be a game-changer, at least as far as mainstream political discussions and processes go.

What however all this brings to us is the urgent necessity of making national and state level politics far less consequential that it is now. And that's the link with the Vikalp Sangam website. Hopefully we will be able to showcase here the widespread and pathbreaking attempts by

extraordinarily ordinary people to assert their voices in decision-making, begin rebuilding local economies, take control over production and markets, ensure access to basic needs, fight for social justice and equity, bring sustainability into everyday lives, make health and learning a part of community processes, and make the state more accountable and transparent. In other words, move towards direct democracy, where power is at the grassroots, and where those delegated to represent local communities (rural and urban) in wider institutions are truly accountable to such communities. It will take time and struggle, but the more this happens, the less powerful become the political leaders and bureaucrats at state and national levels. And the more they will, in response to people's real needs, enact policies that are about justice and equity, ecological sustainability, and genuine human well-being.

And then perhaps, the once-in-5-years political tamasha will become cleaner, quieter, more mature, and less about one-upmanship than about doing genuine service to the electorate.

A hopelessly romantic dream? Perhaps. But I'd rather live with this dream than with the nightmare that our electoral politics currently is.

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This is a fantastic initiative and a great source of inspiration for students like me to work towards a more sustainable future!
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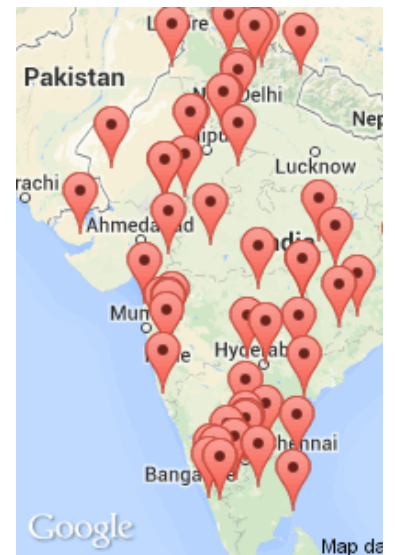> ashish
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