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## Modi as India's PM is a cause for worry for environmentalists

Narendra Modi as India's prime minister will be a development disaster. In Gujarat, his tenure as chief minister has seen worsening or stagnation of the health and livelihood prospects of the poor, and widespread ecological damage. In a recent campaign speech in Goa, he declared that as prime minister, he will re-open mining (never mind that it is stayed by the Supreme Court due to its severe impact on water, environment and livelihoods). And his aggressive pushing of a statue of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, at a staggering cost of ₹ 500 crore, is a scary indication of a megalomania with grave national implications.

The UPA's record on environmental and livelihood concerns has been poor, with 250,000 hectares forest land sacrificed for mining, industrial and infrastructural projects, and with stagnation in employment generation. But even this could be overshadowed if Modinomics is given free rein.

That development cannot be successful at the cost of the natural environment is evident from the widespread social impacts of ecological destruction. Even the World Bank, a promoter of such unsustainable development, recently admitted that environmental damage like air pollution knocks 5.7% points off India's economic growth.

Effectively, if other damage is added, there is zero or negative economic growth. Not to mention the incalculable socio-cultural impact of displacement, dispossession, disease, premature death, malnutrition, and loss of employment. The UPA's economic policies ignored all this, and so will Modinomics.

In a recent report, labour and environmental activists Rohit Prajapati and Trupti Shah laid bare the Modi government's record in Gujarat: Inflated figures of employment created chronic underpayment, deliberate dispossession of farmers to create cheap labour for industries, and the dubious distinction of having 30% of India's 'major accident hazard' industries as also its most 'critical polluted areas'. Other analysts have brought out the abysmal state of health and education, especially among the state's adivasis and Dalits.

Modi's 'developmentalism' includes sidestepping all norms to make land and water available to corporate houses. It means taking over the land and water of 70 villages to promote the Patel statue as a tourism zone. It involves Project Kalpasar, a 30-km dam across the Gulf of Khambhat, ignoring potentially colossal social and ecological costs, ignoring also the much cheaper, more sustainable, and more democratic alternatives to water security such as those demonstrated by civil society groups in Kachchh and Saurashtra. Given all this, it will not be a surprise if, as PM, he instructs the Union ministry of environment and forests to dilute or sidestep environmental laws to enable corporate take-overs.

The UPA at least brought in some progressive legislation and schemes, under the influence of civil society. Will Modi be open to such influence? Activists in Gujarat report an atmosphere of intolerance and authoritarianism that discourages dissent. Activists peacefully protesting against the Patel statue, or a

proposed nuclear power station in Bhavnagar district, or industrial expansion into ecosystems that fisherfolk, farmers, adivasis are dependent on, have been dealt with by heavy police bandobast and repression. The largest number of RTI activists killed or injured in India belong to Gujarat.

Those who will cheer most if Modi becomes PM are the corporate sector and a part of the upwardly mobile middle classes. To them, people's struggles for justice, movements by the poor to resist displacement and land acquisition, and environmental activism, are all 'hurdles' to profits and further enrichment. Unfortunately a large section of the population may also vote for him, dreaming of joining the 10% of India that own 53% of its wealth. But for those who worry about the 'jobless' growth of today's development model, about half of India still deprived of basic needs, and how future generations are being robbed of their right to a healthy environment, Modi's ascendance to India's top position is a cause for nightmares.

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The views expressed by the author are personal

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