

Dreams and doubts of a green revival

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With the e-auction of 41 coal blocks—almost all of them in pristine and protected forests—on 18 June, the fears of negating the small gains that have been made on the environmental front have returned. (Photo: Hindustan Times)

NAGPUR : Teeming wildlife; cities breathing fresh air; and clearer rivers. Those were all small signs of hope amid a dire, once-in-a-century pandemic. Nature was supposedly healing. At one point in April, an estimated 4 billion human beings were confined to their homes. There is now even a term to describe this unique moment in human history: the anthropause.

The effects on the environment were no doubt striking. Ambient air quality in many Indian cities drastically improved. In the Himalayas, wild grasses sprung back healthier due to the near absence of cattle grazing in the eclipsing summer. And, migratory birds and animals stepped into urban areas in many parts of the world. But are these signs of a green revival merely a temporary blip? Will the bounce back to status quo be as sudden and striking?

Globally, daily carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions are already roaring back to pre-pandemic levels, according to a recent study published in the scientific journal *Nature*, which also estimates that the forced lockdown measures had plunged worldwide fossil fuel emissions by 17%. India was no exception to the trend.

What's more worrisome is the brewing controversy over the Modi government's hurry in pushing through radical changes to the country's environmental laws with its draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020, which, according to most experts, seeks to further dilute whatever little environmental protection exists in the country, in an effort to accelerate development projects. New research indicates that forest land the size of Nagaland has been diverted for mining and power projects since 2014 alone.

In the new draft, the two most significant changes are provisions for a post facto clearance of projects, even if they had commenced illegally, and an abandoning of the public trust doctrine, a development that many fear is dangerous and sheds any notion that India would learn from the past or from other nations that are taking a greener path towards progress.

"Covid-19 is a disruptive moment that provides us a window to reset our path," said Navroz K Dubash, a researcher at the Centre for Policy Research and currently a lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Sixth Assessment). "But, for that, ideas have to be ready...for, there are lobbies fighting hard to hark back to a status quo. There are no easy fixes."

Whatever decisions we take to make a desired transition to a more sustainable environmental path, Dubash said, should not happen on the backs of the poor. "We can't take environmental gains on the back of livelihood losses," said Dubash, a member of the group that developed India's low-carbon strategy for inclusive growth. "Deindustrialization isn't an option for clean air. China's ability to reduce air pollution in the past few years is evidence that it can be done."

It's a tricky thing, Dubash acknowledged. There is a lot of talk in the West about a "green stimulus" or a further push towards a lower emission future. France, for instance, has put conditions on airlines as part of its bailout package. The argument in India is that there is not much fiscal room.

One lesson from the unprecedented events of early 2020, Pune-based environmental scientist Shripad Dharmadhikari said, is that growth and ecology can't be reconciled without changing our thinking. Ultimately, what happened to India's air, water and forests over the past few months offers paths to imagine new possibilities.

Air quality gains

We saw a dramatic improvement in ambient air quality across India during the lockdown due to a complete halt to construction, transport, and industry," said Bhagwan Kesbhat, founder of the Mumbai-based environmental group Vatavaran. His observation is backed by data compiled by 'Urban Emissions', another not-profit group researching air pollution in India.

Nagpur, for instance, recorded a sharp drop in Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂) and Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) levels. Mumbai, too, showed a drop in particulate matter and other pollutants. India has enlisted 122 non-attainment cities that don't meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards under the National Clean Air Programme, where the plan is to reduce air pollution by 20-30% over the next few years. Most of these cities showed improvements in their air quality, albeit temporarily. Post-covid, Kesbhat said, the target must be met since studies suggest high covid-19 mortality rate in regions and cities with more air pollution. "Empirically, economic slowdowns have always been followed by higher environmental destruction due to high growth ambitions," Delhi-based environmentalist Chandra Bhushan said.

"We often mistake signs for a recovery," said Bhushan, currently president and chief executive officer (CEO) of the International Forum for Environment, Sustainability and Technology (iForest).

"We visualize something that may not be backed by impeccable scientific evidence," he said. For instance, rivers are cleaner but their water quality is nowhere near good; skies are bluer but the particulate matter is still largely above the World Health Organization's prescribed standards. "The lockdown tells us our base pollution levels, but we need solid research," he

said. "I see this is as an opportunity to wean us away from the overuse of fossil fuels, which would also go a long way in addressing climate concerns.

"We must move to more structural changes on multiple fronts," Dubash said.

Let's take MGNREGA: What assets do we create that are climate resilient? Can we dovetail the state climate action plans with the MGNREGA expenditure? Or the power sector: Have we thought through about our future energy sector trajectory?

"We are ramping up our coal sector and equally championing green energy and we are talking about going in full steam on both," Dubash said. "We need a concrete plan for future energy use."

Third issue: Cropping choices in agriculture, which is locked into the technology-institution-political nexus that will have to be shaken loose.

"We need to establish a new post-covid normal and not hark back to the old normal," Kesbhat said. That means a strict protocol should be in place, backed by statutory provisions, to implement the National Clean Air Programme formulated in January 2019.

Cleaner rivers

Several rivers are flowing better, cleaner, though their waters are not yet potable. In a thorough analysis published on its website, the New Delhi-based South Asia Network of Dams, Rivers, People (SANDRP) said the state of a number of rivers in India—including the Yamuna, the Ganga, Hindon, and the Cauvery—improved in this lockdown due to reduced human activity.

Bhim Singh Rawat, a SANDRP volunteer who tracks the Yamuna basin, said that while the lack of industrial effluents entering the rivers due to a closure of industries was a major reason, there are other factors contributing to this situation, including good winter rainfall, high snowfall now melting with summer, reduction of irrigation water demand, stoppage of sand mining and reduction of cultural activities, including puja, bathing and cremations.

"The organic pollution level gets diluted in the Yamuna but it is the chemical pollution by industries that destroys the river's self-cleansing properties," Rawat said.

And though the wastewater continues to flow through the sewers into the river unabated, the mere halt to toxic effluents for such a short span has helped the Yamuna run cleaner than it has in decades, he said. People in the villages along the Yamuna in the upper stretches are bathing in it after a long time. Late May, the Union Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhawat said water bodies across India became clearer during the nationwide lockdown, and called for introspection.

At Varanasi, the Ganga's water reportedly improved in terms of both colour and quality. The dissolved oxygen level was 8.7mg per litre upstream and 8.1mg per litre downstream, good

enough for bathing. Healthy water has a dissolved oxygen level of at least 7 mg per litre. What's more, the Gangetic dolphins—the endangered freshwater mammals—were spotted

from the Kolkata ghats after many decades. The reason: apparently, improvement in water quality of Hooghly.

"If only our state and central pollution control boards did their duty of ensuring that no untreated effluent from industries, and urban sewage enters the rivers, it's not that difficult to achieve cleaner rivers," Himanshu Thakkar, the SANDRP convener and a water expert, said. "Unfortunately, there is no political will to achieve this simple and legally enforceable objective," he said.

The state of forests

Stories of better visibility of wildlife in the forests abounded during the first phase of the lockdown from all over the country as a result of reduced human interference. But soon, it was replaced by growing concern about heightened poaching activities.

This has been the longest period in recent history when protected forests were closed for tourism. In an analysis published last month, the wildlife trade monitoring network, or Traffic, found "a significant increase in reported poaching of wild animals in India during the lockdown period that is not restricted to any geographical region or state."

Reports of poaching incidences for consumption and local trade more than doubled, although there was no evidence of stockpiling of wildlife products for future trade, said the report. "While a near halt in human activities across the globe appears to be having desirable changes on the global environment in ambient air and freshwater quality and unrestricted movement of wild animals, the overall impact of these changed circumstances doesn't appear to be favourable for wildlife conservation," Traffic said in its study. This was despite the fact that wildlife law enforcement agencies and the state forest departments had maintained extra vigil around the protected and non-protected forests, the report said.

"During the early phase of lockdown, we would get alerts on illegal sand mining from within the protected forests, something that was quite noticeable," said Nitin Desai, the central India director of the Wildlife Protection Society of India. This was new, because several protected areas were unpatrolled due to the lockdown and some amount of complicity of the foresters can't be ruled out, he said.

Old way vs new path

With Prime Minister Narendra Modi launching the e-auction of 41 coal blocks—almost all of them in pristine and protected forests—on 18 June in a bid to become self-reliant in energy and restart the economy, the fears of negating the small gains that have been made on the environmental front have returned.

"This is an indication that we will be back to our old ways that brought us where we are; coal is at the heart of major environmental destruction and climate change," said Soumitra Ghosh, a Siliguri-based social activist and independent climate change researcher. "While many other nations are taking an alternative path and talking about renewable energy, we are not even thinking afresh," he said.

Along similar lines, the ministry of environment, forests and climate change accelerated environmental clearances during the lockdown for 30 projects that would cut through forests, snap wildlife habitats, and pollute rivers and air, drawing condemnation from environmentalists.

Now comes the draft EIA Notification 2020. It expectedly evoked opposition from all quarters. Over 50 student leaders from across India wrote to the environment minister, Prakash Javadekar, demanding him to put on hold the controversial notification, and redo it in lieu of recommendations by environmental experts that could put India on a greener path. Others have critiqued the notification as a further dilution of an already weak process. Former Union environment and forest minister Jairam Ramesh wrote to Javadekar asking him not to go ahead with the proposed changes in law. "You have already emasculated the NGT (National Green Tribunal). Now, this notification will be another nail on India's environmental coffin," he wrote in a letter on 30 June.

Some voices, taking a leaf from the lockdown and the subsequent global pause, are calling for a total rethink regarding the path ahead. "What we have to think about, above all, is how to slow down," said Amitav Ghosh, writer and author of many books including *The Great Derangement*, in an interview with Zac O'Yeah.

"Environmental gains (over the past few months) are not clear in the absence of concrete data," Dubash said. We have to think fast, he said, because the window of opportunity closes very fast.

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