



Explained: India's environmental issues behind cop 26 commitments

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The United Nations Climate Change Conference 2021 (COP 26), Glasgow, has initiated discussions to combat the long ignored impacts of climate change.

Glasgow commitments are equivalent to 2.2 gigatonnes reduction of carbon dioxide or combined emissions of Germany, Japan, and the UK. India is the third largest contributor of GHG emissions (in CO2 equivalent). New Delhi pledged to achieve net zero emissions by 2070.

But India's pledge seemed to be rather politically motivated than environmentally targeted. Seventy per cent of China's energy imports is through maritime trade traversing the Malacca strait. To reduce the impact of New Delhi's naval plans at Nicobar island overlooking this strait, China is investing 700 million USD in its controversial China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that will connect Xinjiang in China with Pakistan's Gwadar coast.

Similarly, China is limiting its coal dependency on Australia with the AUKUS deal putting economic pressure on India. This move by the South East Asia's economic giant has made coal costlier in the international market.

In September- October 2021, incessant monsoon rains rendered coal mines across India unproductive, resulting in a coal shortage to its thermal power units. As of September 2021, 50 per cent of our energy is generated through burning coal. To escape the shackles of hydrocarbon geopolitics, India has to look towards renewable and nuclear alternatives. This will also limit the nation's GHG emissions. Amid these energy uncertainties comes India's 'pro-green' energy pledge at COP 26, Glasgow.

At COP 26, where 100 nations agreed to reduce 'methane emission' by 30 per cent within 2030, India did not make any such commitment.

Agriculture employs two-thirds of the nation's population, contributes 17 per cent of the GDP along with 23 per cent of national GHG emissions. Of this, 83 per cent of the nation's methane production is generated from its farm sector. The yearlong nationwide farmers' protests to revoke the three contentious farm laws — Farmers (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Services Act, 2020, the Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation Act) Act, 2020, the Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act, 2020 an amendment to the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 — pressurised the central government to repeal them, ahead of major state-level elections across the nation.

Enforcing environmental reforms in the agriculture and animal husbandry sector can alienate the farming community who contribute to the bulk of the electorate in the coming elections. This epitomises the political pressure on the Indian environmental commitments.

The capital territory is suffocating due to stubble burning and severe pollution. As per 2020 estimates, 46 out of 100 most polluted cities are in India. As per WaterAid water quality Index, India ranked 120 out of 122. Major rivers of the nation are clogged by pollution. Arsenic pollution in ground water is devastating the lives of millions at its eastern corner. India ranked 177 out of 180 nations in the transnational environmental performance index (EPI), showing its incompetency in managing the environmental problems.

Why Third sector Is A Major Hurdle

In the backdrop of COP 26, in 2020 the nation had tried to amend 'Environmental Impact Assessment' guidelines favouring faster clearances of industrial cases, disregarding the protection of the pristine forests. The recent Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2020 (FCRA) targeted to asphyxiate the 'Third sector' with several 'red taped' regulations giving more scrutinizing power to the government. This bill can become a tool to stifle the 'green noise' from NGOs' hindering the nation's rapid developmental plans. As per a recent update, 12,000 NGOs including Oxfam, may lose foreign funding licence.

Third sector is a major hurdle for passing pro-industry and anti-environmental policies. In 2015, an NGO-led petition at the Supreme court of India resulted in revoking the mining leases of 88 companies in Goa that were disturbing the pristine Western Ghat ecosystem, a biodiversity hotspot. The issue of deforestation was also sidelined at COP 26. A report indicates that India has lost 38.5 thousand hectares of tropical forests between 2019 and 2020, which accounts to about 14 per cent loss in tree cover. Prior to India's pledge at COP 26, about 2 lakh trees were set to be cut down for diamond mines at Buxwaha forest of Madhya Pradesh. Only with the MP High Court's intervention in response to the PIL filed by advocate Sudeep Singh Sainy this environmental catastrophe was averted.

This contradicts the Government of India's claims of a rise in forest cover to 24.56 per cent of its geographical area. The proposed amendments to the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, can make the situation worse by giving unrestricted access to researchers working on ethno-medicines and alternatively can also deprive the traditional forest dwellers.

There is a disparity between the environmental 'commitments' by our nation and its field-level implementation.

Only pledges and advertisement of environmental schemes are not enough. A proper climate change policy is needed to safeguard India's rapidly deteriorating environment. Proper environmental governance and transparency are keys to combating climate change issues and upholding the COP 26 commitments.

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