

COMMENT

India needs a rainbow recovery plan

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Such an approach would require integration of ecological protection and tackling inequality



The world could emerge from **COVID-19** so much the worse by attempting ‘business as usual’, or it could take pathways to a more just, sustainable future. In Europe and the U.S., a ‘green new deal’ (GND) proposed by some from the political mainstream puts the climate and employment crises at the centre of economic recovery. In India, we have a chance to

build on our genius and heritage to forge a multihued approach – a rainbow new deal (RND).

By RND, I refer to a seamless integration of ecological protection and tackling of wealth inequality and economic vulnerability of several hundreds of millions of people. Green meets red, so to speak. But 'green' itself is a restricted environmentalism; the oceans and rivers and natural deserts and mountains together are a lot more colours. I also include here recognition of multiple genders and sexualities from whose movements I borrow the symbol of the rainbow.

What would RND entail?

Our most urgent task is to generate dignified, sustainable livelihoods for the vast majority of the population and workforce that is today living precarious lives. And this has to be built on regenerating and safeguarding the country's soil, natural ecosystems, water, biological diversity, and air. We should never forget that the more we destroy it, the more we invite crises, from COVID-19 to climate.

The nearly 200 million small farmers, pastoralists, and fishers can be enabled to sustain or switch to organic, ecologically sustainable production, with their own food security as the highest priority, and with local marketing links. This would include over 10 million people who appear to have gone back to agriculture in the COVID-19 period.

Next, the RND could encourage lifestyles and livelihoods that obtain substantial food, medicines, household items and other needs, as also sustainable livelihoods, from natural ecosystems. Forest-based livelihoods alone, for instance, can support 100 million people.

Third, it would entail reviving and sustaining India's incredible diversity of crafts, and decentralised production of most goods and services, across all villages and towns, with a massive investment in the small and medium sector enterprises. This could gainfully employ 200 million people. All such production could be run democratically as producer companies or cooperatives. For all the above, schemes like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme could be re-oriented and extended, including for urban livelihoods.

Then, the RND would entail substantial investments in public health, education, housing, transportation and other basic needs. If these are run in a decentralised way, with appropriate training, they could generate many more millions of jobs. The same could be for other services like digital networks and communications, as also decentralised infrastructure development by worker collectives. All of this would be within ecologically sustainable limits, and specially focused on empowering and benefiting the most marginalised people.

In such a recovery, big companies need to be kept out. Soap, footwear, furniture, clothes, energy, and myriad other items of everyday use can be produced by community-run units across the country. 'Made in India' should be 'Handmade in India' by local workers. In a recent webinar, Suresh Chhanga, sarpanch of Kunariya village in Kachchh in Gujarat, proposed that they can save ₹40 lakh a month on such items by producing them locally. Elango Rangasamy, former Dalit sarpanch of Kuthambakkam village in Tamil Nadu, proposes a 'network economy', in which clusters of villages can be self-reliant for most basic needs, and exchange with neighbouring clusters what they cannot produce or grow. Ela Bhatt, founder of SEWA, has proposed the '100 mile radius' as a region within which the objective of self-reliance can be met. These are all currently relevant versions of Mahatma Gandhi's focus on self-reliance.

There are hundreds of initiatives already demonstrating the feasibility of such an approach. Many are run by workers and communities themselves. Government-sponsored programmes like Kudumbashree in Kerala and Jharcraft in Jharkhand show how they can be significantly scaled with state support. During the COVID-19 lockdown, community resilience based on such initiatives was amply demonstrated.

But let's be clear: such RND will succeed only if there is a fundamental move away from a privatised, capitalist economy, and an authoritarian state, and head-on tackling of casteism, patriarchy and other structures of inequality. There are many successful initiatives at empowering women, Dalits, Adivasis, landless, the LGBTQ+ community and the disabled to learn from.

This also means a serious attempt at land reforms, including recognising collective rights over the commons: forests, grasslands, coastal and marine areas, biodiversity, wetlands, water, and knowledge. Legislation similar to the Forest Rights Act, and community mobilisation to implement it, is needed for all other ecosystems.

Wealth redistribution

Where substantial public investments are needed, serious wealth redistribution is called for. As economist Prabhat Patnaik has pointed out, a mere 2% wealth tax coupled with a 33% inheritance tax on the richest 1% of India could generate more revenue than the total recovery package the Government of India announced in May 2020 .

It is of course foolish to expect the government to go for such RND. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' programme, with all its doublespeak on 'self-reliance', places India's economy even more into the hands of private capital and big players. Massive, informed public mobilisation is needed to counter this policy regression.

The recent protests by lakhs of young people against the regressive Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020 and against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act and National Register of Citizens provide hope. If these diverse strands of resistance, feminist, worker,

farmer, and other mobilisations of the marginalised, and myriad grassroots initiatives at alternative living all can be synergised, a RND kind of transformation may yet be on the horizon.

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