



Balancing environment protection and post-pandemic growth--challenge for new minister

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New Delhi: How will India tackle chronic environment issues such as pollution, fossil fuel dependence and degradation of natural habitats with the development imperatives of a post-pandemic world? This is the biggest challenge facing Bhupender Yadav, recently appointed the Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

Yadav takes over at a time when the environment ministry has been repeatedly criticised for watering down the country's environmental safeguards, reducing the legal protection to vulnerable natural habitats, and granting clearances to hundreds of development projects that could affect national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and conservation reserves.

The ministry's permissions for the diversion of forest land in already fragile areas and approvals for polluting mines and industries will have a direct bearing on the country's environmental health in an already warming planet, experts say. Evidence of these impacts is already available: Surface temperatures in India are rising fast due to climate change, as seen from the government's own studies; Indian cities continue to be among the most polluted in the world, and the country's global ranking on environmental performance index is among the lowest in the world.

Experts told IndiaSpend that these events signal a breakdown of the regulatory framework in India and that the new minister needs to put environmental justice at the centre of government policies because it has a direct link to public health.

Increasingly, the environment ministry has been treating environmental regulation as a contract between the government and project developers, excluding the people affected by these decisions, said Kanchi Kohli, senior researcher at the Delhi-based think-tank, Centre for Policy Research (CPR). "The breakdown of regulation is felt by people living around and working in these project sites who are neither involved in scrutinising the applications nor in monitoring the conditions [imposed on projects]," he said.

Climate change

What should figure high on the minister's policy priorities? Clarifying India's position on climate action and financial assistance needed for this ahead of the annual United Nations (UN) conference on climate change, cleaning up India's polluted air and ensuring transparent and inclusive regulatory processes, said activists and researchers.

COP 26 [conference of parties, as the annual UN climate event is named] to be in held Glasgow, Scotland, in November this year is significant for two reasons: It is the first after the Covid-19 pandemic struck, and countries are expected to update and announce their plans of cutting greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming.

"COP 26 is around the corner and India needs to make its position clear and negotiate hard for a better world. India is also poised to be the world leader in climate, especially for the global south that lacks voice in some of these forums," said Anjal Prakash, research director and adjunct professor at Bharti Institute of Public Policy, Indian School of Business in Hyderabad. He is also a coordinating lead author for the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate, published in 2018.

Protection of forests and water bodies--critical in the race against climate change and also necessary to generate sustainable employment--has to be prioritised, said Prakash. "Forests, if protected and harnessed well in a sustainable manner, could provide jobs and employment to millions of poor. [And] if forest produce is directly linked with access to open markets for tribal and forest-dependent communities, it would help in direct benefits coming to the primary producers and protectors of forests," he said.

Forests feeding coal power

Despite its ambitious plans to produce 450 gigawatt of renewable energy by 2030, India, the third-biggest emitter of greenhouse gases, continues to depend heavily on polluting coal power. In June 2021, coal accounted for 54.31% of the installed power capacity in the country, as per the Central Electricity Authority.

The Union environment ministry has a prime role in the industrial policies of the country because its clearances are mandatory for highly-polluting units such as coal mines and coal-fired power plants.

Between January 2019 and December 2020, the Union environment ministry granted clearances to six coal-fired power plants of more than 500 megawatt each, per an analysis by Legal Initiative for Forest and Environment (LIFE), a non-profit organisation that promotes environmental justice and environmental transparency. The ministry also cleared work on 23 coal mines in this period; of these eight were new and 15 were cases of mine expansions, another analysis by LIFE showed.

A total of 5,566 hectares of fresh land were diverted for these mines and of this, 1,419.3 hectares were forest land, the analysis stated.

Regulations and transparency

In a bid to improve its ranking in the World Bank's 'Doing Business' report which maps the regulations and permissions needed to start a venture in a country, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government has been reducing the time taken to obtain environmental permissions since 2014. It has relaxed several procedures for different sectors.

This focus has led to the weakening of environmental regulations, as we reported here. In one of its recent regulatory tweaks, the ministry allowed polluting industries to expand their capacity and change raw materials without seeking fresh permissions as was the norm earlier. This could increase the risk of industrial disasters.

There is also a need for greater transparency in regulatory changes: "There is an agenda of legal and regulatory reform in the ministry. However, there needs to be more consultations with those working on the ground. Changes cannot be made in the consultancy mode and not in a hush-hush manner," said Sanjay Upadhyay, Supreme Court advocate and environment lawyer.

The "consultancy mode" Upadhyay referred to points to the ministry's recent decision to seek the services of legal firms to draft amendments to environmental laws.

Kanchi Kohli of CPR alleged that the ministry routinely issues orders that bypass legal processes. "We have seen office memorandums issued that exempt projects partially or fully from legal processes. There are also executive orders which allow for regularisation of violations. The new environment minister should ask for a thorough environment and social audit of these orders and amendments," she said.

Clearing the air

India ranks among the five most polluted countries in the world and long-term exposure to outdoor and indoor air pollution contributed to over 1.67 million annual deaths across all age-groups in India, in 2019, as per the State of Global Air report, 2020. Cleaning the country's toxic air, especially in cities, should be a top priority for Yadav, experts said.

The National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) 2019, the NDA's flagship project, aims to reduce the concentration of particulate matter (PM) pollution by 20-30% by 2024, with 2017 as the base year. For this, the Union government has targeted 102 cities where at least one parameter consecutively exceeded National Ambient Air Quality Standards standards for five years.

The NCAP's progress, though, has been tardy, and as of May 2021, not a single state in the country had prepared the mandatory state action plan, a recent analysis by LIFE showed. Under NCAP, state action plans are needed for a participatory approach which involves states, Union government ministries, local bodies and other stakeholders to address all sources of pollution.

Information on state action plans was sought from 23 states to which only 17 responded and none had prepared a state action plan, the analysis said. The programme also faces the challenge of creating different action plans for cities with varying problems and including satellite settlements that contribute to urban pollution, said a December 2020 study by the Council on Energy, Environment and Water and Urban Emissions. For instance, Uttar Pradesh has 15 cities covered under NCAP and except Anpara in Sonbhadra district, all have identical plans, the study noted.

The study estimated that across the airsheds of 50 cities, an estimated 30% of PM 2.5 pollution (particles smaller than human hair) came from outside city boundaries.

The Union environment ministry needs to take stock of the programme to understand the gaps in funding, resources, institutional preparedness and enforcement, pointed out Anumita Roy Chowdhury, the executive director of the Centre for Science and Environment. A key requirement, she added, was the preparation of a more regional approach that will address issues of common airsheds. "It is not enough to focus on Delhi or Kanpur alone. We need a plan for the entire Indo-Gangetic belt to ensure that no pollution source is unaddressed," she said.\

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