

## NITI Aayog's "Strategy for New India @75"

**Context:** NITI Aayog recently released the document "Strategy for New India@75" with the purpose of defining clear objectives for 2022-23 in a diverse range of 41 different areas. This aspirational strategy aims to achieve a 'New India' by 2022, when the country celebrates its 75th year of Independence.

### Strategy for New India@75"

- The document has identified 41 different areas that require either a sharper focus on implementing the flagship schemes already in place or a new design and initiative to achieve India's true potential.
- Each chapter summarizes the current status of the sector, takes full cognizance of the progress made thus far and spells out the objectives.
- It then identifies the binding constraints and proposes measures to address these constraints.
- The approach is believed to provide an inventory of readily implementable measures for the government departments and agencies both in the central and state governments.
- The focus is to improve the policy environment so that the contribution of private investors and other stakeholders can be maximized to achieve the goals set out for New India 2022.

### Other details

- In the chapter focusing on ecological and related livelihood concerns, there are positive directions vis-à-vis the environment, such as a major focus on renewable energy, organic farming (with the zero budget natural farming model developed by Maharashtra farmer Subhash Palekar being singled out for national application), increasing forest cover, and reducing pollution and waste.
- It has a chapter titled 'Sustainable environment' states: "The objective is to maintain a clean, green and healthy environment with peoples' participation to support higher and inclusive economic growth through sustainable utilization of available natural resources."
- It focus is primarily on air pollution, solid waste management, water pollution, and forestry.
- The strategy has many progressive objectives. It follows the UN Sustainable Development Goals of Inclusion, sustainability, participation, gender equality etc.

### Issue:

- There are serious doubts if the strategy envisaged in the document relating to ecological

and livelihood concerns, will be any different from the crisis-ridden society we live in today.

- Government have been promising for more than three decades that with environmental safeguards, growth can be made sustainable.
- There seems no indication that this is anywhere near achievable. The Confederation of Indian Industry has already indicated in 2008 that India was already using twice of what its natural resources could sustain, and that more than half its biocapacity had already been eroded. Things are likely to become worse now.
- No political party in power has done anything to suddenly make growth sustainable.
- India faces a large number of environmental concerns but air pollution, solid waste management, water pollution, and forestry are only given much spotlight.
- Some other issues such as arresting land degradation and soil erosion, and water conservation are also mentioned elsewhere.
- But issues that need urgent attention such as increasing presence of toxic chemicals around us, the need to conserve a range of non-forest ecosystems do not find mention.
- There is a forest department but no dedicated entity for grassland, marine and coastal, wetland, mountain, and desert conservation.
- There is an absence of integrated, comprehensive view on how ecological issues can be integrated into all sectors indicating that these issues are still not core to the mindset of the planners.
- There is a total absence of an understanding that the current form and goal of economic growth is inherently unsustainable.

### **Alarming features:**

Examples of the internal contradictions in the document. Mining:

- Mining is one of the biggest ecological and social disasters in India, especially the large-scale open-cast type.
- NITI Aayog has ignored this when it proposed a doubling of the extent of mining.
- To “limit environmental damage” the only concession it makes is the suggestion to bring in “cutting-edge” technology, which will most likely not solve the fundamental need to deforest areas.

### **Tourism:**

- It is one such sector which will have large scale impact on environment, as witnessed by the hill stations and the ruin that areas like Ladakh, Kutch and the island regions are facing.
- Despite this, NITI Aayog recommended doubling the number of domestic tourist visits to over 3,200 million from 1,614 million in 2016.

### **River Valley Projects:**

- It also urges completion of mega river valley projects that have ecological nightmares, including Pancheshwar in the fragile Himalaya, the Ken-Betwa link in Madhya Pradesh, and dozens in the Northeast which will choke up rivers and are being opposed by the locals

### **Agriculture:**

- The agriculture chapters are in fact full of fault lines.
- For all the mention of organic farming, there is no clear direction to phase out chemical fertilizers and pesticides.
- The document says “Phase out old varieties of seeds and replace them with hybrid and improved seeds”. This is the kind of Green Revolution approach that has caused huge loss of agricultural biodiversity and resilience amongst small farmers.
- No focus is given to dryland farming though most farmers are engaged in this.
- It says organic farming models should be replicated but it is silent on the amazing work of dryland farmers (such as the Dalit women of the Deccan Development Society in Telangana) showing productive, sustainable, biodiverse agriculture with millets and women as the fulcrum.

### **Infrastructure Projects:**

- Most alarming feature of the document is its stress on rapid, single-window clearance of infrastructure and other projects.
- It suggests 180 days limit for assessment of a project which is too less as any decent ecological assessment of a project needs a year of study (over all seasons).
- This means compromising on crucial processes of social assessment, public hearings, and participatory decision-making, as already seen in the last few years.
- Nothing is there on the need to seek consent from local communities, which is mandated under the Forest Rights Act, 2006, and the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996.
- The track record of government in safeguarding the environment and the livelihoods of Adivasis and other communities as they have found ways to bypass constitutional and policy safeguards these vulnerable sections are supposed to enjoy.

### **Conclusion:**

- The strategy is replete with environmental and livelihood related contradictions.
- The focus is more on economic growth.
- While there is great focus on forest conservation, there is an urgent need to conserve non- forest ecosystems such as grasslands, wetlands, mountains, and deserts.
- Without a strong, unambiguous commitment to upholding these protections, and

putting communities at the centre of decision-making, India @ 75 is going to be an even more unequal, unjust, and conflict-ridden society than India @ 50.

- We need to learn from the many alternative initiatives for food, water, energy, housing, education and health existing across India, which show the way to more just and sustainable livelihoods and ways of living.

