

'Environment very much an issue in this campaign'

Environment was an integral part of the issues discussed during this election campaign, says one of the top environmentalists in India.

As the country Wednesday ended the long-drawn balloting process to elect the 15th Lok Sabha, many observers have commented on how this has been an 'issue-less' election campaign.

'But don't look for a national issue. Look at the local issues, which have been at the forefront, and you will see how basic environmental questions have been a part of the dialogue during this campaign,' Sunita Narain, director of the New Delhi-based Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), told IANS.

Narain said that throughout the country, voters had been asking candidates 'serious questions on water scarcity, on farming, and various similar issues' and candidates had been dealing with them, with each major party setting out its agenda on how it would tackle these problems.

'Look at the environment as a question of survival at the local level, and you will see how it is an integral part of this campaign,' Narain said. 'It cannot be otherwise.'

She talked about how the mining project of the Vedanta group had become a major poll issue in Orissa. 'The Congress has promised the voters that if it comes to power, it will stop the mining project, while the BJD (Biju Janata Dal) has said it will go ahead with it. That's the issue on which the election has been fought in that part of the country.'

In Himachal Pradesh, voters have forced the candidates to state what they plan to do to address the problem of dwindling water supplies. [Bangalore](#) residents fed up of traffic pile-ups and the resultant air pollution have asked candidates what they plan to do to improve public transport. In West Bengal's Sundarbans delta, candidates have been asked how they plan to fight sea level rise, caused by global warming.

While welcoming the entry of these issues in the political process, a senior official in the Ministry of Environment and Forests rued that the long drawn poll process had brought India's preparation for a global climate pact to a virtual standstill.

The pact to combat climate change is expected to be finalised by this December, and a key preparatory meet is scheduled early June. The official said that unless India had concrete proposals to take to the June meeting, it could expect to be pilloried by many industrialised countries.

India is now the world's fifth highest contributor of greenhouse gases that are leading to global warming. The country is also one of those worst affected by climate change, which is causing more frequent and more damaging droughts, floods and storms, raising the sea level and adversely affecting farm output.

The outgoing United Progressive Alliance government unveiled a National Action Plan on Climate Change June 30 last year, but details about the activities in the eight areas of action identified by the plan had not been fleshed out before the country went into poll mode.

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