

India's Middle Classes and the Environment

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Abstract—The focus of most analyses of environmental struggles and discourses in colonial and postcolonial India is on rural and forest areas, and on subalterns versus elites. Recently, however, there has been increased interest in urban environmental issues, and, to some extent, in India's (variously defined) 'middle classes'. This article reviews a range of literatures — environmental, social-cultural, and political — in order to draw out themes and arguments concerning the relationships between India's middle classes and the complex meanings and materialities of the environment. Three issues are explored in detail: civic indifference and the public sphere; environmental activism; and Hinduism and ecological thinking. The article emphasizes the importance of recognizing diversity and dynamism within the middle classes in relation to the environment. It argues the need to develop situated understandings of what constitutes 'the environment' amongst different middle class groups; and underlines the ways in which environmental issues reflect and are often emblematic of wider social and political debates.

1. INTRODUCTION

The environment in colonial and postcolonial India has been widely explored as a site of both material and discursive conflict, often emblematic of broader social and political struggles. Analyses of contested environmental and/or livelihood issues have frequently been framed in terms of 'elites' (British and Indian, scientific, administrative and social) and/or subalterns (typically women, forest dwellers, adivasis, pastoralists, small farmers and fisher folk). Such studies have also tended to focus on the rural — appropriate and understandable in the Indian context — with forests and water resources occupying a pre-eminent place in the literature. Recently, however, there has been a growing interest in urban environmental issues, and, to some extent, in the role and impact of the wealthier middle classes. Together these writings obviously represent a wide spectrum of approaches and concerns, and engage in a whole variety of ways with the complex and multitudinous meanings and materialities of 'the environment'. Moreover, and as we would expect, they are all intricately and irreducibly concerned with, and commentaries upon, other aspects of India's social, cultural, political and economic life.

This article proceeds from the view that there is a need for more explicit analytical focus on the middle classes in order to

develop greater empirical insight and conceptual sophistication in relation to environmental issues in India.

The arguments developed in this article build on previous research into subaltern environmental issues (Mawdsley, 1998), and a two month visit to India in February–March 2002. During this time I visited Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore and Trivandrum, and conducted thirty-one formal interviews with a range of respondents, including journalists, lawyers, educationalists, NGO personnel, national and international media persons, civil servants, Scientists and academics. Although these cities and town by no means cover the range of regional and urban forms (or include the rural middle classes), they did allow insight into the importance of plurality and the specificities of place. Published work and grey literature was also collected, and many informal discussions were held.

The next section sets out the main reasons why a more careful examination of the middle classes in relation to the environment is required. It is followed by a brief discussion of who constitutes India's middle classes, and some of the conceptual and empirical difficulties that accompany attempts at definition. The article then goes on to identify a number of critical themes in thinking about middle classes and the environment, namely: civic indifference; the varieties of environmental activism; and, more tentatively, whether Hinduism and ecological thinking has a class inflection.

2. THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASSES IN RELATION TO THE ENVIRONMENT

The first reason for being concerned with India's middle classes in relation to environmental debates is because, however defined (see below), they constitute a sizeable percentage of India's population, and their behaviors have a significant impact on the environment (Gadgil and Guha, 1995; Vyas and Ratna Reddy, 1998). Wealthier groups, especially in urban areas, make higher demands upon environmental goods and capacities through their ability to command more resources—such as per capita water and electricity, consumer products — and their greater waste production, including vehicle emissions and garbage (Buch,

1993: 39; Panch, 1993). The global situation of a high consuming minority and a poor majority is not just a North/South issue, but also one that is inflected within national inequalities (Narain, 2002).

Second, and perhaps more importantly, the middle classes exert a disproportionate influence in shaping the terms of public debate on environmental issues through their strong representation in the media, politics, scientific establishment, NGOs, bureaucracy, environmental institutions, and the legal system. From place-specific disputes (such as the air pollution debates in Delhi), through institutional cultures and approaches (in the Ministry of Environment and Forests or environmental NGOs, for example), to the content and tone of national newspaper reporting, the middle classes dominate the public sphere.

By analyzing the middle classes, we are in a better position to think about the poor, and the relationships between environmental and social injustice. This has parallels with recent work by Husain and Moore (2002), in which they explore elite attitudes to the marginalized and to poverty reduction strategies. Following Husain and Moore's argument, I argue that a better understanding of the middle classes, in this case in relation to the wide range of what could be considered environmental, is an important dimension in examining and seeking to improve the lives of the poor.

A third reason to focus more directly on the middle classes of the South, is the growing evidence of dynamism and change in terms of their understandings of and anxieties around various environmental issues, and indications of regional differences and inflections around these debates.. A recent legal ruling has stated that 'the environment' must be on the educational curriculum at all levels, from primary school to colleges and universities, and there are a growing number of school and college eco-clubs being established, some in collaboration with environmental NGOs like the WWF. In the meantime, environmental disputes are one of the main elements in the growth of Public Interest Litigation, in which the Supreme Court in Delhi is playing what appears to be an increasingly activist role.

3. DEFINING INDIA'S MIDDLE CLASSES

The Indian middle class, like the middle class anywhere in the world, is differentiated in terms of occupation, income, and education. However, the peculiarity in India is its diversity in terms of language, religion, and caste. The applicability of 'class' as a relevant construct in a postcolonial context, and the relationship between caste and class, for example, are just two areas of ongoing debate and dissent (Mukherjee, 1999; Sheth, 1999).

For some commentators, one of the defining features of India's middle classes at the turn of the millennium is their appetite for 'global' culture, and their pursuit of 'western' lifestyles, possessions and values (Gupta, 2000;

Lakha, 2000).

There is certainly evidence that such aspirations extend beyond the urban middle classes. A recent poll by ORG-Marg (reported in Business Standard, 2000, and Economic Times, 2000) points to the growing rural market for 'luxury items', even amongst the relatively poor. In their sophisticated ethnographic account of social mobility in Kerala, Osella and Osella (2000) point to significant changes in consumption behaviors and aspirations amongst all social groups. These observations have implications for future demands made upon the environment: not only do consumption levels change when people become wealthier, but led by their upwardly mobile desires, the nature of consumption appears to be changing towards branded and other status goods. The middle classes can be argued both to represent and to promote these broad cultural shifts in what constitutes the

'Good life' or 'desirable change'. This subject has received considerable attention across Asia more widely (Chua, 2000; Pinches, 1999; Sen. and Stevens, 1998). In India, significant media and political attention is devoted to analyzing and discussing these changes, especially amongst the young (see, for example, The Week, 2001).

Much of the corporate and government interest in the middle classes has centered on economic calculations of their purchasing power, and the profit potential of India's vast and growing middle class has been heavily marketed by successive Indian governments and businesses seeking to encourage foreign investment in the 1990s. Varma (1998: 175) argues that, in contrast with a previous ethic of austerity encouraged (in some ways) by the state, 'Consumerism [is now] sanctified because the middle class ability to consume is an index of progress'. A number of national and foreign reports have sought to assess the size and spending power of the middle class Indian market (see NCAER, 1994), although many of these appear to have over-estimated the consumer potential of their target population, and misread their willingness to incur debt.

A final approach to defining the middle classes centers on employment status. Misra (1961), for example, identifies eleven groups that together comprise the middle classes, including teachers, lawyers, doctors, bureaucrats and so on. The problem comes at the margins, such as lower level state employees, or at the other end of the spectrum, elites. This is another demanding question, and is subject to many of the same problems that arise in defining the middle classes. In some usages, 'elites' clearly refers to a quite wide section of the wealthier population, which could be understood to extend to a significant proportion of the middle classes. For others, however, this is the top 1-2 per cent of India's rich, whose wealth, mobility and status is globally comparable on an absolute scale to their peers around the world. Often the terms are used interchangeably, and there is certainly a wide range of interpretations within the literature concerned with environmental issues. Class in India is thus a complex

construct, which opens up difficult methodological and conceptual debates, not least because of vast social and regional diversity. While generalizations can be made (Rudolph and Rudolph, 2001), they must be made cautiously, and in the end, any analysis of who constitutes the middle classes, and what their environmental values, beliefs and behaviors may be, must be locally anchored.

4. THEMES IN THE LITERATURE

We now turn to the central issue: a review of current literatures in order to elucidate and explore middle class environmental values, beliefs, and behaviors. It should go without saying that the three themes that have been chosen — civic indifference; environmental activism; and religion and ecology — are by no means comprehensive,⁹ and there is plenty of interconnection and overlap between them — and indeed, contradiction, as one would expect. Moreover, following on from the section above, we should also note that while some analyses are more detailed on who they have included (and excluded) in their definition of the middle classes (and/or other groups), others do not elucidate in much or any detail on this subject. However, the three areas sketched out here do provide a good indication of some of the range and wealth of issues for discussion. In a discussion of Bollywood films, a rather different but nonetheless revealing context, Lal (1998: 237) argues that: Beteille (2001: 5) suggests that, ‘an expanding middle class has an ugly face, and its members often appear as callous and self-serving’. Tax evasion, endemic rule breaking, hostility, and indifference are all argued to arise from these social characteristics of the wealthier classes. Various reasons have been suggested for this seeming lack of concern about the collective public good. All of this points to a strong theme in the literature, namely an indifference to the wider public good, with implications for both the poor and the environment.

A subject that has been picked up by many commentators, and which has relevance to this debate, concerns the threshold between domestic space and the ‘outside’. Gupta (2000: 23) draws out a connection between caste, households, and hygiene. Gupta suggests that middle class disregard for civic cleanliness has a parallel in traditional caste practices, whereby the lower castes are ritually forced to absorb the ‘pollution’ of the upper castes (see also Chaplin, 1997). Looking at the role of voluntary organizations and the public in garbage collection in Madras, Tropp (1999: 125) notes that the continuing attitude of many: ‘It is simply a question of moving the rubbish out of sight. In effect the households’ own premises will be kept clean, while the pavement outside the premises will be used as a dumping ground.’ It could well be argued that this is not an attitude confined to the middle classes. The only difference between them and the poor is that the latter generate less waste through their lower consumption levels and higher Recycling — both being behaviors born of necessity rather than choice. While certainly true to an extent, some authors suggest a more specific class attitude. Pankaj

Mishra (1995), for example, makes this observation of a typical middle class colony in small town India:

The roads within the colony were all unpaved, and were most certainly unusable during the monsoons. Wild grass and weeds grew unchecked everywhere. At the back of every house lay gigantic mounds of garbage. Water spurted noisily from a leaking pipe and into a small drain, someone had very cleverly directed to his garden. It was not for lack of money that things were as they were: the houses belonged to extremely prosperous people. There were cars parked in front of every house: on the roofs were a surprising number of satellite dishes . . . No it was not for lack of money that such appalling civic conditions were allowed to prevail. If anything, the blame lay with the sudden plenitude of money: far from fostering any notions of civil responsibility, it had encouraged in its beneficiaries only a kind of aggressive individualism. (Mishra, 1995: 8–9, emphasis added) Middle class (and elite) civic indifference is not something that tends to bode well for the environment or for the more marginalized social classes (Husain and Moore, 2002; Moore, 2001). As Gadgil and Guha (1995) remind us, the environment (in all of its complexity) constitutes a key arena for the exercise of discursive and material power.

5. ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM AND THE MIDDLE CLASSES

We have briefly reviewed some of the connections between the middle classes, civic indifference, and the environment. What then of those amongst the middle classes who are more actively engaged and concerned with the environment? Many commentators point to a minority of middle class men and women who are significantly involved in a wide variety of organizations and movements that are partly or wholly concerned with environmental issues. This involvement covers the entire spectrum of political and environmental ideologies, from deeply conservative and often anti-poor wilderness enthusiasts and anti slum-dweller organizations, through to social movement leaders and activists, sometimes supporting radical agendas of social and environmental change. This ‘environmentally-engaged’ category also includes workers and managers within NGOs, obviously representing a wide range of ideas and perspectives; scientists and bureaucrats; and members of environmental clubs and organizations.

Although a minority, they are often a vocal one, and some sections can be extremely powerful in pursuing their agendas—although at present and for the near future, these interests are rarely pursued through formal party politics (Katzenstein et al., 2001).

As this diversity suggests, we cannot make any sweeping generalizations about the nature of middle class environmental activism in India. However, we can draw out some themes and arguments. One set of issues revolves around the reasons for middle class environmental concern (such as it is, and in all of its forms). Explanations vary with author, and in relation to

the specific groups and to what aspect of the environment they are referring to, but three broad arguments occur more frequently than others do. The first is the post-materialist thesis, most famously associated with Inglehart (see Inglehart, 1995; Inglehart et al., 1998), which explains a shift towards 'green' environmental concerns as part of the shift in public culture that accompanies increasing wealth and 'modernization'. However, the notion of post materialism has come under heavy fire from a range of analysts, in relation to both richer and poorer countries, and different groups within them (Adeola, 1998; Brechin and Kempton, 1994; Gardener, 1995). While it may provide useful insights into certain forms of elite green environmentalism, it is limited in its explanatory abilities, including, for example, in relation to the 'brown agenda' of urban pollution and squalor.

A second set of reasons for the growth in 'environmentalism' amongst the middle classes is self-interest. As Gadgil and Guha (1995: 9) note: 'Even the urban well-to-do, increasingly subject to noise and air pollution, and deprived of exposure to nature, might be viewed as victims of environmental degradation, and their organization into societies like the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF, India) is an environmental movement of sorts'. As noted above, there is evidence of growing concern about the environment, particularly in relation to health and urban space, which largely would credibly drive the self-interest explanation.

Many commentators point to a middle class tendency to put the blame for environmental degradation such as deforestation or air pollution squarely on the poor, and especially on population growth (for example, Gadgil, 2001; Saberwal et al., 2000; Srinivasan, 1980). This is allied to a willingness to see such problems tackled through a variety of authoritarian and anti-poor ways, rather than through, say, redistributive policies, or technical assistance. A number of commentators point to the Emergency (the suspension of democracy between 1975 and 1977, under Indira Gandhi), as a period that encapsulated middle class attitudes to the poor, the polity and the environment. Two of the more notorious policies of this time were the bulldozing of slums and the rounding up and forced sterilization of lower class men. In a newspaper article, Das (2000) argues that:

Many in the middle class thought that forced sterilization was okay. . . [Sanjay Gandhi — Indira Gandhi's son] was the great middle class authoritarian Indian dream, the man who made trains run on time and would, over time, reduce the population by half, make the babus [bureaucrats] clear their desks and perform a million goose-stepping miracles which would transform India into an efficient society, bristling with escalators and neon lights. Visvanathan and Parmer (n.d.) also argue that the Emergency showed up the fundamentally authoritarian nature of bourgeoisie social and environmental instincts of India's wealthier groups which, as Das suggests, found support amongst many in the middle classes. The destruction of slum houses and colonies, and the grotesque

excesses of some elements of 'family planning' were popular with many in the middle class, who put the blame for environmental conditions on the 'breeding teeming masses', and who were willing to see this dealt with in deeply unjust and undemocratic ways. Varma (1998) suggests that the Emergency marked an increasing jettisoning of even the rhetoric of concern for the poor.

It is evident, then, that the current increase in certain forms of environmental concern amongst the middle classes may have negative consequences for the poor. With a growing 'wildlife' sensibility, for example, stronger efforts may be made to expel adivasis and other forest dwellers from National Parks and other Protected Areas (see Saberwal et al., 2000 for an overview of these debates). At the same time, specific incidents point to the willingness of park authorities to allow luxury hotels and more roads to be built in the same parks, servicing the demands of the rich domestic and foreign tourists while displacing the poor. Similarly, in an urban context, thousands of small industrial units have recently been expelled from Delhi in the interests of reducing air pollution, with very little regard for the livelihoods of their owners or employees (Baviskar, 2002).

On the other hand, some middle class 'environmental' concern and activism is allied to social and environmental justice movements. Gadgil and Guha (1995) note that many progressive movements have middle class involvement and often leadership, and Amita Baviskar's (1995) account of the Narmada Valley dams project, for example, explores the role of different middle class groups in various parts of the movement. Having said this, it is important to reiterate that the middle classes are as heterogeneous and plural as any other group in society. We can expect regional, generational, personal, gendered, and other differences to be important in thinking about environmental values, beliefs, and behaviors, including how these inflect with various forms of activism.

6. HINDUISM, THE ENVIRONMENT AND CLASS RELATIONS

An interesting set of debates, although not one that has traditionally been concerned with class, concerns the relationship between ecology, culture and religion, including, in the South Asian context, Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism and Jainism (out of a massive literature, see the Daedalus Special Issue, 2001, which has papers on a range of religions). Focusing here on the debates around Hinduism and the environment, I would suggest that the best of the recent literature has been concerned to underline the diversity of different Hindu traditions, and the multiple and non-determinist ways in which different aspects of Hindu cultures and beliefs intersect with environmental values, beliefs, and behaviors, with varying environmental consequences?

A number of authors seek to deconstruct and contest the notion of a 'civilization ecological consciousness' which is claimed to arise from Hindu notions of cosmological unity

(see, for example, Dwivedi, 1990), and point to the range of environmental viewpoints that can be sustained or disputed through reference to various Hindu texts and their interpretations (Jha, 2002; Nelson, 1998a).

These critiques are attentive to the complexity of India's geographical diversity; to the variations between different strands within Hinduism, such as Advaita, Vaishnava, and Tantric traditions (Mumme, 1998; Nelson, 1998b; Sharma, 1998; Sherma, 1998); and to the differences that arise from the disjunctures between Brahminic and more vernacular and dynamic interpretations and understandings. Certain Hindu traditions and precepts have been mobilized to support environmentally and socially progressive movements and initiatives.

With reference to contemporary debates, in an excellent article looking at the economics of, and cultural discourses around, meat, Robbins (1998: 221) argues that: 'These groups [conservative Hindu nationalists] are capitalizing on inflamed emotions and eliding the complexity of India's cultural past. The pace of cultural and economic changes may be accelerating, but recent changes continue to follow complex traditional patterns.'

7. CONCLUSION

While a great deal of the current 'environmental' literature intersects to some degree or other with the middle classes, relatively little focuses explicitly on them. In particular, I would suggest, we require ethnographically informed analyses that are attentive to various cultural constructions of nature, and how these are situated within multi-scaled socio-political contexts. There is a rich literature in the West debating the relationship between class and the environment (for example, Harvey, 1996; Morrison and Dunlap, 1986). These debates need to be more firmly opened up elsewhere, and not least in India, whose environmental conditions and trends have profound implications at the global level, and for the large number of its population who live in or near poverty. In this respect, we can welcome the evidence of a greater scholarly concern with urban environmental issues (which should balance and link with the rural, rather than neglect it), and more directly with the middle classes.

A second observation builds on the point made throughout this article about differences and dynamics. We know that in any context 'environmental' concerns and activism can be expressed in a whole variety of ways, and are informed by a range of ideologies and assumptions of what constitutes the environment, and how humans can and should relate to it, individually and in groups and societies. As this review makes clear, a very wide variety of values, beliefs, and behaviors can be found amongst India's middle classes, reflecting regional, linguistic, gendered, ideological, and other pluralities. A frequent criticism of 'neopopulism' concerns the 'romantic' essentialization of subaltern groups and communities (see Mawdsley, 1998; Jackson and Chattopadhyay, 2001; Sinha et

al., 1997). One of the arguments in this article is that this 'unpacking' of groups and identities needs to be extended to the middle classes.

To conclude, India's environmental debates and struggles, and the role of the middle classes in these, are a subject of growing interest for many scholars. This focus is adding to what is already a rich set of debates around India's past, present and future environment. Moreover, the connections and interrelations are such that explorations into the environmental values, beliefs, and behaviors of India's middle classes contribute to wider debates over, for example, the public sphere, governance, and social change. In it, and in terms of these synergies, this is a subject, which is likely to prove increasingly interesting and important.

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