

Programme name: Environment and Human Behaviour

Project title: Middle class environmental values in India: An interdisciplinary dialogue

Award no: RES-221-25-0024

Award holders: Dr Emma Mawdsley and Dr Glyn Williams

Period of report: 1.1.2003 – 31.12.2003

Institutions: Department of Geography, Durham University, moved to Department of Geography, Birkbeck College, London University

Total ESRC award: £24,319

Progress Report

1. Aims and Methods of Research

The main aim of this project was to bring together an array of scholars and activists who have some interest and/or involvement in the subject of the environmental values, beliefs and behaviours of India's middle classes. A two day workshop was held in London, August 2003, which 22 people attended from India, Canada, the USA, Eire, the UK, and Denmark. The academic rationale for this meeting was that this is an issue with which very few people are directly engaged. Despite the fact that, by some reckonings, India's middle classes now number some 300 million people, most analyses of environmental issues and conflicts have tended to concentrate on the rural poor and marginalized (especially women, forest dwellers and tribal peoples) and/or on elites (political, administrative and scientific). The massive environmental impacts of the higher-consuming middle classes, and, perhaps more importantly, their role in shaping the legal, political, cultural, educational and media structures and norms in relation to the environment, have received far less attention. The workshop was intended to stimulate original ideas and theoretical frameworks, and to create an informal network of scholars and activists who could share information and perspectives, and conduct future collaborative work.

Related to this, the second aim of the project was to develop a substantial follow-on project, which would, through a rigorous empirical study, allow the exploration and analysis of issues raised in the workshop. To this end, it was intended to arrange a short visit to India following on from the workshop, to discuss our ideas and findings with interested parties, and perhaps future research partners, in academia, government, industry and environmental NGOs.

A final aim was to produce a series of publications.

2. Confirmation statement

The main element of the research project, the workshop, was held successfully. Over 80% of our original intended invitees were able to attend the meeting, which attracted

outstanding scholars working on various aspects of India's environment. Also present were representatives of two of India's most important and influential environmental organisations. The second aim, for reasons we explain below, was somewhat compromised by unavoidable personal circumstances. The publication output is going very well.

3. Highlights of the research and important findings

- i. As noted above, the starting premise of this project was that the environmental values, beliefs and behaviours of India's middle classes are somewhat neglected in an otherwise substantial literature. Although it is perhaps paradoxical to suggest this as a 'highlight', one of the conclusions drawn at the workshop was that the subject really is very original – and of critical importance given its implication for both India and, in terms of ecological impact, even the world. Although the workshop drew together some outstanding environmental scholars, and discussion was theoretically informative, it was agreed that there is a profound lack of empirical material and grounded enquiry, particularly in terms of values and beliefs (there is more on behaviours). It was felt that the workshop was an important event in initiating a fresh perspective and research direction into contemporary environmental politics in India.
- ii. An unexpected area of importance that was raised was the relationship between class, the Hindu Right and the environment. Drawing on those discussions, Emma Mawdsley has recently had a paper accepted on this subject for publication by *Worldviews*. A second one, exploring the connections with postcolonial theory, is under review for *Geoforum*.
- ii. Everyone involved in the workshop valued the bringing together of scholars and activists around this original field. Reports back from individuals have highlighted a number of ongoing connections and interactions that have resulted from meeting at the workshop. Should the proposal to carry out detailed empirical research (currently in progress) be successful, then this network will form an important formal and informal resource.

4. Changes to the original award

- i. The main award holder (Dr Emma Mawdsley) moved from the Geography Department, Durham University, to the Geography Department, Birkbeck College, London University on 1 July 2003. This caused some disruption in terms of shifting the finances, although eventually it was resolved. Between Durham, the ESRC and Birkbeck, the procedure seemed unnecessarily complex.
- ii. The award included funding for two research assistants in India (£1400). However, because of the disruption to the planned visit to India (see below), this was paid instead to one person, Ms. Deepti Sastry, who carried out a research study arising from the project. She spent six weeks in India examining the production and viewing of environmental issues and programmes on terrestrial and satellite TV channels – a subject that has not been examined elsewhere. The project was planned with and guided by Dr Mawdsley and Dr Williams. Ms Sastry was able to work in collaboration with one of the people who attended the workshop, who has close connections with the media. The final report, which is now complete, will form the basis for future research and a paper. Given the complexities of the move between institutions, Ms. Sastry also provided the

secretarial and administrative support for the workshop, and for the project more widely.

5. Research staff

N/a

6. Publications

Mawdsley, E.E. and Williams, G. (in progress) 'The middle classes and the changing environmental geographies of postcolonial India'. In S.E. Corbridge, S. Kumar and S. Raju (eds) *Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies of India*. New Delhi: Sage.

Mawdsley, E.E. (in review) 'Hindu Nationalism, Postcolonialism and Environmental Discourses in India'. Sent to *Geoforum*, November 2003

Mawdsley, E.E. (2005) 'The Abuse of Religion and Ecology: The Vishva Hindu Parishad and Tehri Dam'. *Worldviews*, 8 (2), in press.

Mawdsley, E.E. (2004) 'India's Middle Classes and the Environment'. *Development and Change*, 35 (1), pp.1073-97.

7. Engagement with potential research users (outside the academic community)

Close ties have been forged with the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) in Delhi, and Kalpavriksh in Delhi and Pune. They have different organisational set-ups and agendas, but they are the two pre-eminent environmental pressure organisations in India. To differing extents they work with government, and more oppositionally as active lobbying/watchdog organisations. Both have expressed interest in the research to date, and the possibility of future research collaboration.

We have also been in contact with Indian academics and think tanks (representing different stances on environmental issues), and sent them a short summary of the project aims, findings and future goals. The change of dissemination plans (see below) meant that face-to-face discussions with these groups has not been possible, but they have expressed a strong interest in meeting to discuss findings, and to talk about future study.

8. Contribution to the programme

The programme set out three questions:

- Why do people behave as they do towards the natural environment?
- How do/will people seek to adapt their behaviour in response to environmental change, especially rapid environmental change?
- What public policy approaches might persuade people to change their behaviour, either to mitigate the extent of environmental change (where it is negative), or to

adapt to it in ways that do not exacerbate it, and to change their behaviour in ways that are least costly for society as a whole?

In accordance with the original programme specifications, we did not seek to commission fresh empirical work, but rather encouraged the discussion and consolidation of existing work. In our case it became very apparent that the questions above are the *right* questions to ask in relation to India's middle classes and environmental change; and, indeed, that they are extremely *important* questions to ask. The environmental beliefs, concerns, attitudes and behaviours of the middle classes already have a huge regional impact, and with the growth of the Indian economy, widening consumption, and shifting values, these impacts are likely to have a significant global impact (for example, in terms of global warming). However, as we have noted above, although we started from the premise that there was not very much work on this subject, even we were surprised by how little was available. As a result, the workshop certainly significantly advanced our conceptual understandings of the issues, and there was a great deal of valuable discussion of trends and experiences, as well as *how* these issues might be investigated. It also identified the serious lack of rigorous, empirically-grounded data with which to begin to meaningfully respond to these questions. We are now in an excellent position to start this work, and are currently in the process of writing a grant proposal, drawing primarily on the networks developed within our project, and also the EHB programme more widely.

More practically, we have attended both programme workshops (in February and December 2003), and will also be attending the third in May 2004. In the first two, as well as giving presentations on the background and progress for our own project, we presented and wrote a short piece on 'Environmental Values'. This appeared in the second workshop newsletter.

9. Detailed progress

i. Resume of project development

The project has led and developed an original and important perspective on environmental issues in contemporary India. The workshop allowed the discussion and elaboration of arguments which were presented in a document circulated earlier in the year (which has now been published in *Development and Change*). The project helped develop a more sophisticated set of theoretical insights, and detailed ideas on future research methodologies.

ii. Main developments since last progress report

The development of an alternative dissemination agenda, in part a result of the difficulties encountered with our existing plans (see below). We now propose to present our work in the following academic conferences later this calendar year:

- The International Geographical Conference (Glasgow, August 2004) will provide an opportunity to participate on a session on citizenship and environmental justice. Here, we will present work based around India's middle classes to an international audience primarily looking at these questions within the context of OECD countries. As such, our participation will help to further develop the North-South comparative perspective that we have aimed to contribute to the EHB programme more widely. The conference will also provide the opportunity to engage with South Asian

academics (primarily geographers) to discuss our future empirical research plans

- Emma has been invited to attend a conference on Culture and the Environment in India at Macalester College, Minnesota in July 2004. This offers a complementary audience to the IGU, as it will mainly speak to South Asian specialists in the US and beyond.

iii. Difficulties encountered

Personal circumstances led to a change in the original plans. Dr Williams became a father in summer, and it was decided that Emma would go alone to India in September, where she would conduct initial meetings. As she intended to be in India in January on a different project (funded by DFID), it was decided that Glyn would come out then, and the main dissemination period would follow. However, over autumn and winter, Emma had significant health problems which necessitated rest and lot of medical tests. She was unable to go to India in January, and it was decided to cancel this part of the project at this stage.

iv. Changes

The workshop cost less than anticipated (in part because two overseas participants were unable to attend), and money was also saved on equipment (to be used in India) and Dr William's trip to India. We would like to vire this over to support participation in the two international academic conferences mentioned above. This is a financially prudent response to the practical difficulties we faced with dissemination, and uses the existence of two appropriate conferences to present and discuss our work with appropriate academic audiences efficiently. Dissemination to non-academic audiences will continue through discussion on email.

v. Timetable

The original timetable will be met.

Emma Mawdsley and Glyn Williams, 26th January 2004