# ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS IN INDIA: AN OBSERVATION

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*Abstract*
*The roles of democracy and democratic institutions in advancing environmental policy and, in particular, climate policy are mixed, as evidenced by the variation in the environmental progress of different democratic governments. The widespread assumption that the In the Indian context, the endeavour to trace urban environmental politics must take into account the current and recent upheavals in India's cities environment is of concern for advanced societies but not for developing countries is wrong. Environment has great importance in India but there are many politics in controlling pollution and protecting environment. The present article is going to analyse the status of environment in India and politics in environment.*

***Key words: Democracy, government, Environment, pollution, control.***

## Introduction

The roles of democracy and democratic institutions in advancing environmental policy and, in particular, climate policy are mixed, as evidenced by the variation in the environmental progress of different democratic governments. From a theoretical perspective, democratic procedures can effect meaningful reform if public support for these reforms exists, especially when compared with autocratic regimes, as the set of incentives for policymakers to legislate toward these ends in a system deriving legitimacy from the consent of the governed is substantive; for instance, given political responsiveness as a result of electoral accountability, policymakers in democratic governments have reason to consider a wide view of the public interest that incorporates the varied positions of their constituents and work to efficiently create change. On such a view, democracies will likely consider the consequential impacts to most, if not all constituents, caused by climate change. Factors like regime stability and ruler or governing official interests, too, seem better aligned for progress in a democracy; civil unrest is less likely in a state perceived as legitimate, as is graft, both of which appear likely to inhibit climate action. Environmental politics has great significance in present society.

The widespread assumption that the environment is of concern for advanced societies but not for developing countries is wrong. This is evident in South Asia. According to Anil Agarwal (1994: 346), the environment is 'an idea whose time has come in India'. For more than two decades, there has been a lively environmental debate along with a high degree of legislative activity in India. Of course, this intensified as a consequence of the Bhopal gas leak in 1984 (Khator, 1991; Krishna, 1996), which led to the Environment Protection Act of 1986. However, there is vast agreement that the results of various reforms and regulations have been disappointing. Implementation has been poor. India's course of development is most likely unsustainable (Paulus, 1992). Its current development strategy is therefore increasingly disputed along lines of ecological considerations (Hörig, 1995). According to a World Bank analysis (Brandon and Homman, 1996), the total cost of environmental damages in 1992 amounted to 9.7 billion US dollars in India. This was the equivalent of 4.5 percent T 64 Taking the State to Court of GDP. The comparative figures for China and Mexico were 2.6 and 3.3 percent of GDP. In industrialized nations the annual environmental damage was estimated at one to two percent.

Anil Agarwal (1996) considered the World Bank data for India to be underestimated as they did not account for the loss of biodiversity, health costs due to hazardous waste and deforestation impacts other than timber depletion. Air and water pollution and lack of sanitation, garbage and sewage disposal and other basic urban services severely hamper the development of India's cities. The prime ecological worries in India's rural areas are soil erosion, deforestation, water pollution and the scarcity of safe drinking water. Neglecting environmental standards in practice. For the polluters, in turn, the cost of compliance tended to be higher than the cost of non-compliance. Corruption, litigation and (rather unlikely and normally low) fines were cheaper than installing anti-pollution devices. Most industries were operating under considerable pressure to cut costs in highly competitive markets. The polluters' general view was that bureaucrats could be bought. Their local power alliances with high-ranking party and State officials were based more on suspicion than on mutual interest. Business people did not normally get involved in policy processes. The cost of lobbying would again have been higher than that of simple non-compliance. This, in turn, meant that legislation tended to be unrealistic in terms of economic viability, thus reinforcing polluters' general approach of non-compliance. Institutional inefficiency was exacerbated by the fact that state governments had to implement central government policies. The relationship between them was often characterized by animosity. Beyond formal recognition, there tended to be little concern for the needs of other government levels. Authorities at the state level were likely to see environmental regulations primarily as the central government's tools to delay projects and to interfere in state interests. The chances of successful environmental policy were further diminished by the fact that the bureaucracy concerned was a weak Environment and Politics in India player within the rivalry of various government agencies. It had no powerful clientele, nor even a clearly defined target group. Information about the confusing multitude of environmental hazards was still scarce in India, making the cost of action appear to be higher than the costs of inaction. Finally, the environmental bureaucrats had little legal means of enforcing their policy objectives if other agencies proved unwilling to cooperate. The politicization of the administrative bodies along partisan lines further diminished motivation and efficiency. In day-to-day practice, loyalty to party personnel mattered more than policy compliance. This scenario of 1991 still was basically accurate in 1998. However, public interest litigation had in the meantime given some clout to the Pollution Control Boards, as Deb Kumar Bose, chairman of the WBPCB, and other high-ranking officers told me in interviews. Industries are now more afraid of increasing fines or closures of their companies in the case of non-compliance. Environmental consultancies have become good business because companies are required to prepare environmental impact assessments and are increasingly taking this matter seriously, particularly when large sums of investment are involved.

**Indian Context**
It looks as if environment is an idea whose time has come. Newspapers give prominent display to environmental horror stories. Editorials demand better management of natural resources. Government statements on the need to preserve the environment are commonplace. Government programmes, too, are quite numerous and increasing in number day by day. There are massive schemes for afforestation, for instance. In the last four years, some 1,000 crore seedlings are said to have been distributed or planted. There are new laws for control of air and water pollution and for the conservation of forests. India has been praised all over the world for what it has done to preserve tigers. Nearly three per cent of India's giant land mass is now protected national parks and wildlife sanctuaries, and there are demands to strengthen their protection and increase their area. Plan documents and party manifestoes take care to mention the importance of environment.

In the Indian context, the endeavour to trace urban environmental politics must take into account the current and recent upheavals in India's cities. It is widely acknowledged that the liberalisation policies of the 1990s have brought about fundamental shifts not only in the Indian economy, but also in the society; especially in India's cities. Shatkin (2014:8) argues that the urban political terrain is undergoing fundamental transformation as well. Bhan (2010) therefore states that the urban has "begun to rise not just demographically but politically, electorally, socially, culturally and economically to become the defining problem space of the 'new India'." Due to these recent transformations, but also as a result of the political focus on rural areas that has prevailed through much of India's independence decades, there is still a relative lack of knowledge about current urban local politics (Tawa Lama-Rewal and Zérah 2011). Herein, and throughout this special issue, urbanisation is understood to mean "a political, social, and economic process intertwined with ecological processes and produced through power relations occurring at various scales" (Véron 2006:2094; drawing on Swyngedouw 1997). As cities are socio-environmental entities, the environment and the urban are fused together in a hybrid process. With this conceptualisation, it is obvious that the larger socio-economic and political shifts previously mentioned have environmental dimensions. On the one hand, they have environmental effects brought about by economic growth and increased consumption, as well as sustained urbanisation (Shaw 2007). As Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan (2013:1) note, "rapidly proliferating and resource-intensive urbanism affect[s] everyday lived environments and the ecological processes that undergird them." This becomes apparent in phenomena like air pollution (Sharan 2013, Véron 2006), water pollution and depletion (Sharan 2014), increased vehicular traffic (Pucher et al. 2005), increasing difficulties to find space for solid waste management (Bose and Blore 1993, Hazra and Goel 2009, Gidwani and Reddy 2011, Idris, Inanc, and Hassan 2004,), loss of forest cover (Sharma and Joshi 2015), and growing tendencies toward the Urban Heat Island effect (Roy and Singh 2015) among others. These environmental issues are understood as highly political and closely intertwined with the production of uneven cityscapes, wherein it is the poor who often bear the greatest burden of environmental degradation (Véron 2006).

On the other hand, societal shifts have often been squarely and fundamentally inscribed in urban environments in the sense that this change has come about precisely through the change in environmental practices. The changing consumption patterns just mentioned are part of these. In addition, other practices have been introduced in the course of economic liberalisation, during which the "environment" and "environmental problems" in urban areas have increasingly become the focus of governance efforts by both state and non-state actors in urban India (Mawdsley 2003). Due to this enhanced visibility of the environment and environmental problems in India's cities, Follmann (2015) argues that India is currently witnessing an "urban environmental awakening." This renewed impetus to address environmental issues is to a very large extent a result of the recognition of powerful actors that "in order [for India] to realise its medium-term growth potential, an essential prerequisite is to manage and facilitate the process of urbanisation" (Ahluwalia, Kanbur and Mohanty 2014:2), including urban environmental problems. The government is called upon by global players, such as UN-Habitat, to address issues of environmental sustainability in order to maintain cities' competitiveness (UN-Habitat 2010:162), as environmental degradation threatens to affect investment flows (Upadhyaya 2014) and endanger sustainable economic growth (The World Bank 2001). The meaning and value of urban environments have thus changed along with the larger politico-economic shifts that have placed Indian cities at the forefront of global competition (Coelho and Raman 2013:146). It can therefore be stated that the environment of metropolitan cities at least has been an integral component of the restructuring and urban "renewal" of cities on their way to becoming "world-class" (Arabindoo 2010,

Fernandes 2004, Follmann 2015, Ghertner 2011, Truelove and Mawdsley 2011). Interventions aiming at environmental upgrading are therefore also highly politicised processes, inscribed into the specific political economy of contemporary post-liberalisation Indian cities (Shatkin 2014).

**Environmental politics**

Knowledge, according to Bayly (1996 in Kalpagam 2014), is socially organised and taxonomised information. Environmental knowledge, then, would designate socially organised information pertaining to the environment. Of course, such knowledge is then in no way a collection of "neutral facts" devoid of politics. Rather, our understanding of environmental knowledge builds on Michel Foucault's (1991:27) insight that "there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations." According to Foucault (1997:53) the knowledge-power nexus builds a system of acceptability; a regime of truth that confers to specific information the tag of being "true"—while other information is considered erroneous (Foucault 1997:13-15). These systems of acceptability change over time, so that what is considered truth—or knowledge—is something which is historically situated (Rabinow and Rose 2003). As these systems are never absolute and unchallenged, diverging knowledge claims exist simultaneously. Rademacher (2011:28) points out that many forms of knowledge exist "through which people actually know and engage the environment in social life."

Because of this strong interweaving of knowledge and power, governments and other actors in India and elsewhere have used knowledge strategically to enforce their claims on the environment. Retracing the colonial period, Agrawal (2005) spells out how bureaucratic knowledge about the forest of Kumaon was the basis for governmental attempts to control it. Kalpagam (2014) equally working on colonial India, shows how "[m]odern state forms … have been instrumental in an epistemological conquest." That environmental knowledge and claims over the environment are still bound together in intimate ways in the postcolony is demonstrated by Baviskar (2000) who analyses the strategic use of scientific and indigenous knowledge by the Forest Department, local villagers, and an NGO respectively in competing claims over use of forest resources within a national park in Himachal Pradesh. Often, technocratic knowledge is in a privileged position when it comes to asserting such claims (Rademacher and Sivaramakrishnan 2013). In the context of interpreting Delhi's wastewater, Karpouzoglou and Zimmer (2016) document how embodied, non-technical knowledge that residents of an unauthorised colony gain in their locality is delegitimised at various levels by state actors. These competing knowledge claims demonstrate that tensions exist between professional expertise and democratic governance, a situation which encourages equal participation in framing and governing environmental issues—in theory at least (Fischer 2000).

Such a politicised view of environmental knowledge entails that science or other forms of knowledge and politics are coproduced. In fact, the evolution of environmental facts and knowledge is integral to wider politics (Forsyth 2004). In India, a case study on Delhi by Véron (2006) demonstrates that the framing of air pollution and possible solutions to it, for example, are highly class-biased. Such case studies heed Forsyth's (2003:131) call "to acknowledge the social embedding of environmental knowledge" and recognise how science can be mobilised for political objectives.

Against this background it becomes clear that there is no clear-cut divide between "state knowledge" and "local knowledge." Rather, as Robbins (2000) demonstrates, competing truths about the environment between knowledge communities that include state as well as non-state actors are based

on questions of political economy. The complex positioning of the state is further confirmed by Birkenholtz (2008) who traces the hybridisation of different forms of knowledges about groundwater in Rajasthan. While a redistribution of power-knowledge is attempted through displacement of local knowledge into the state apparatus, the state is currently marginalised there in knowledge production and distribution regarding groundwater. Birkenholtz's (2008:466) statement that "[c]entral to the politics of nature is the question of environmental knowledge, of how it is produced, contested, legitimated, and hybridized" easily maps onto the politics of *urban* nature, or urban environmental politics. And yet, just how these processes play out in the urban context has been studied to a lesser extent.

Environmental arguments mobilize entire networks in civil society and give wider scope for successfully opposing government power. Grassroots movements emphasizing environmental aspects have found academic support. Members of India's urban elites take interest in these issues. Sumi Krishna (1996) warns that it is very likely a misconception to believe that the rural poor are inherently more protective of the environment. Nor does she consider women to be necessarily more ecologically aware than men, as suggested by 'eco-feminist' writers (Mies and Shiva, 1993). Sentimental visions of small village communities living in harmony with nature will easily appeal to the educated, urban elite (Krishna, 1996; Baviskar, 1997). However, for the people concerned, the day-to-day reality may be one of grim struggle for survival. Given the choice, many might indeed opt for the consumerist development model both enjoyed and despised by members of the urban environmentalist elite. Both Krishna and Baviskar basically call for more participative democracy to resolve such dilemmas. This, in the end, is politically the same demand as that made by those accused of romanticism, with the difference that Krishna and Baviskar do not expect immediate ecological relief. As discussed in Chapter 3, public interest litigation has become an important arena for environmentalists (Shastri, 1990; Sharma, 1993). Before turning to the case studies that will elaborate such matters, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the local context of Calcutta. Environment and Politics in India. The Situation of the Calcutta Agglomeration The environmental situation of the Calcutta agglomeration and the state of its environmental polity reflect what has been stated so far for the entire nation. The Metropolitan Area faces tremendous environmental challenges, as has been amply documented on behalf of the state government itself (A.K. Ghosh, 1988, 1991; State Planning Board, 1990; CEMSAP 1995.

**Conclusion**

The analytical contributions to the existing literatures on environmental politics in India and to the hereto limited UPE case-studies of Indian cities. Methodologically they have demonstrated that finally-grained analysis of everyday practices and situated dynamics, made possible through extended qualitative engagement, yields rich analytical findings. They have also highlighted the importance of accounting for temporality within data collection and analysis. Analytically they have further nuanced our understanding of environmental politics in India. Through the exploration of diverse field sites, particularly non-metro cities, but also the careful consideration of luminal spaces within dominant cities, such as rivers capes, and the socio-cultural frontiers within neighbourhoods, these papers have pointed to the heterogeneity of urban environments on the one hand and the interconnected nature of environmental politics on the other. In doing so, they highlight the analytical challenge of accounting for local context and specificity while also recognising the multi-scalar political-economic and social factors that shape the reproduction of particular urban environments. Further, it has brought to the fore a need to recognise and account for inter sectionality in ways that complicate class binaries in order to understand contemporary power dynamics in Indian cities. By demonstrating the multiple ways in

which urban environments in India are increasingly enrolled into a broader reimaging of the role of cities and citizens, this paper has pointed to the need to critically engage with multi-dimensional and multi-scalar relations of power that shape the material and socio-cultural infrastructures of daily life in Indian cities and protection of environment.

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