
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.

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 fisherfolk). 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 (for example, Agrawal and Sivaramkrishnan, 2001; Guha, 1999; Jeffery and Sundar,

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1999; McCully, 1996). 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 (see Baviskar, 2002; Chaplin, 1999; Dembowski, 2000). 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.

While much of the existing environmental literature intersects in various ways with the middle classes, there is relatively little work that takes the middle classes as the direct focus of attention, whether in terms of detailed ethnographies of environmental values and beliefs (see Brosius, 1999), or in terms of more survey/psychometric approaches (see Dunlap and Jones, 2002).¹ 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. Given the limitations of space, the article will not review the very rich and complex debates around conceptualizing and defining values, preferences, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours; but simply point out that the relationships between values, beliefs and behaviours are now widely recognized to be complex and non-linear, with plenty of contingencies, contradictions and slippages (Davies, 2001a, 2001b; Foster, 1997; Kempton et al., 1995).²

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

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1. Peritore (1993) has conducted a survey of *elite* environmental attitudes, although the approach is limited by the small group of respondents, and somewhat sweeping conclusions. India has also been included in some large cross-national and cross-class surveys such as Adeola (1998), Dunlap et al. (1993), Inglehart (1995) and Inglehart et al. (1998).
 2. In relation specifically to various Asian environmental values and behaviours, and the 'slippages' between them, see Bruun and Kalland (1995) and Tuan (1968).

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.

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 behaviours 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 (Chapman, 2000; Chapman et al., 1997; Frankel, 1989; M. Roy, 1993). Nandy (1998: 4) refers to the 'middle-class culture of public life', and suggests that 'The entire ideology of the Indian state is so formatted and customized that it is bound to make more sense — and give political advantages — to [the urban middle classes]'.

The political assertiveness of lower class and caste groups should not be underestimated (Hasan, 1998; Jaffrelot, 2003), but exploring the ways in which the middle classes conceptualize and behave in relation to the environment, in all of its multiple forms and interpretations, is critical if we are to reflect on much wider changes within India, including industrialization processes and policies, social relations, urban governance and so on. By analysing 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 Hossain and Moore (2002), in which they explore elite attitudes to the marginalized and to poverty reduction strategies. Following Hossain 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. Chapman et al. (1997), for example, point to an increasing concern with pollution and urban squalor, or the 'brown agenda' (see also Forsyth, 2001; Satterthwaite et al., 2001); and there is evidence of an increase in the number of middle class residents' associations seeking to manage waste, green areas and regulate or deny access to public space (Baviskar, 2002; Dhar Chakrabarti, 2001; *Times of India*, 2001). In the last few years, the Discovery Channel and National Geographic have arrived in India, providing a whole new range of programmes that entertain and, to some extent, inform about 'the natural world', promoting particular understandings of what constitutes the 'natural world' and the threats it faces.³ Doordarshan, the state-run television service, now has a programme called *Earth Matters*, which is aimed at children and young people.⁴ 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,⁵ and there are a growing number of school and college eco-clubs being established, some in collaboration with environmental NGOs like the WWF.⁶ 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 (Dembowski, 2000; see Gadgil, 2001: 246 for a critique of some environmentally-oriented PIL).

Clearly this is a dynamic situation, presenting new possibilities and challenges to analyses of environmental issues and politics in India. Critically, these indications of a growing 'environmental' consciousness are not necessarily positive — either for environmental improvement (however that might be defined) or for the poor. There is a wealth of literature on the regressive nature of much that goes under the name of environmentalism around the world. This ranges from the violence and exclusion that have

3. See Lutz and Collins (1993) for a discursive analysis of the National Geographic magazine, which provides a useful model for thinking critically about its sister TV channel.
4. The maker of *Earth Matters*, Mike H. Pandey, gets between 500 and 800 letters a week from children and young people (and e-mails on top of that), expressing their interest, reactions, questions and concerns. He believes that that there is an enormous hunger for information (Interview, 9 February 2002). He also argues that programmes made in and about India and by Indian companies have far more impact than the foreign nature programmes, which are visually stunning but which Indian viewers, he suggests, don't connect to their lives.
5. Although like much environmental legislation, implementation is poor.
6. Interviews with Dr Roopa Vajpeyi (Reader, Kamala Nehru College, Delhi University) and Mr P. P. S. Gusain (WWF, New Delhi), February 2002.

often accompanied conservation agendas and urban beautification schemes (Adams and Mulligan, 2002; Baviskar, 2002; Saberwal et al., 2000), to the promotion of vapid and arguably redundant 'armchair environmentalism' of many in the West, whose 'green' concerns and activities have little or no impact on their consumer lifestyles. Examples can be found from all over the South of the ways poor and marginal groups can suffer from, and resist 'elite environmentalism' (Gardner, 1995; Rangarajan, 2001).

Finally, a more careful analysis of the varied environmental values and behaviours of India's middle classes would, in my view, help challenge two powerful but problematic directions in current environmental thinking. The first is the assumption that Northern environmental theories, histories and experiences can provide a straightforward guide to the future, or a template by which India's present can be understood and analysed. This 'stages of development' model is remarkably pervasive, in India and elsewhere, despite its evident empirical and conceptual failings (Dodson, 1993; Mawdsley, 2003; Narain, 2002). For example, Susan Chaplin (1999) examines the politics of urban sanitation in nineteenth century England and twentieth century India. Amongst other things, she notes that the availability of new medical technologies, such as antibiotics, allows India's wealthy to insulate themselves from the effects of poverty (in this case the threat of contagion), in ways that Manchester's bourgeoisie could not. This is just one of the critical differences in the cultural milieu, urban governance and technological capacities that undermine a simplistic comparison with trends and paths in the west. The environmental behaviours and values of India's middle classes need to be the subject of detailed and close exploration, embedded as they are in specific cultural and historical conditions (see Buttel and Taylor, 1992; Guha and Martinez-Alier, 1997; Kempton et al., 1995). The first task must surely be to explore the very languages and concepts that inform middle class peoples' understandings of 'nature' and 'the environment', recognizing that these most complex of English words do not translate directly into any Indian language. Teasing out the etymologies and vernacular understandings of the various terms in different languages for different aspects of the material and metaphysical world is an essential element of any study in this area.

Having said this, a second problematic direction is the strength of 'nativist' environmental theorizing. Some commentators present a sanitized and partial environmental (and socio-political) history, which relies on a paradoxically Orientalist construction of a timeless, ecologically attuned figure, hostile to science and 'modernity', in their critiques of the present and prescriptions for the future (see Sinha et al., 1997 for a critique). Notwithstanding Brosius's (1999) insightful comments on the place of strategic essentialization in environmental politics, there are dangers in portraying groups, and even whole cultures, as 'innately' ecologically-attuned, and externalizing all the blame for degradation and change. This perspective provides an ineffective platform for dealing with contemporary environmental change in an

increasingly urban, consumerist and industrial society; and it can prove dangerously chauvinist when allied to a discourse of cultural-national 'purification', such as that proposed by Hindu nationalism.⁷ It is a contention of this article that closer attention to the environmental beliefs and behaviours of the middle classes will help steer a course between a simplistic 'stages of development' model, and that of neo-traditionalist romanticism in theorizing changing environment-society interactions.

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. But the peculiarity in India is its diversity in terms of language, religion and caste. It is by any reckoning the most polymorphous middle class in the world. (Beteille, 2001: 5)

Who exactly constitutes the middle classes, and how they are internally distinguished or layered, is a deeply complex and controversial issue, not least given India's extraordinary social plurality. The applicability of 'class' as a relevant construct in a postcolonial context,⁸ and the relationship between caste and class, for example, are just two areas of ongoing debate and dissent (Mukherjee, 1999; Sheth, 1999). Methodologies to establish class boundaries differ, as do definitional concepts, for example around education, income, occupation and culture; and around relative and absolute comparisons. The proof of this conceptual variance can be found in the sheer range of current estimates of the middle classes in India, from around 50 million to 300 million people out of a billion (see, for example, NCAER, 1994; ORG-Marg and Media Users Research Group, 2001; Varma, 1998).

Sen (1988) suggests that a 'bourgeois' class existed prior to the arrival of the British but the expansion of European and later specifically British influence paved the way for the emergence of a larger and distinct 'middle class' (see also Bayly, 1983; Joshi, 2001). M. Roy (1993) argues that this class was a colonial instrument, a comprador class that serviced the Empire and which, in the nineteenth century especially, lacked any broader social identity, thus paving the way for a later legacy of the cultural and even psychological schizophrenia of the western-educated classes (see Madan, 1996; Nandy, 1983). Other commentators saw the colonial middle class as a vital progressive element in India's transition from feudalism to an industrially-based modern society (Sen, 1988). Here the middle classes represented the vanguard of social and cultural change, embracing 'rationality, science and secularism', leading India out of its 'tradition, superstition and ignorance' (see Sarkar, 1983, for a discussion). However, many of these

7. This is the subject of a paper in progress.

8. This is not to suggest that 'class' is an unproblematic concept in the West, as one of the anonymous referees of this paper pointed out.

accounts rely on a formulaic modernist teleology that is now rather discredited and certainly unfashionable as an explanation for the course of history. Sen is probably right to say that the growing Independence movement led to a new phase in social relations within India, as the expanding urban, educated middle and elite classes took on the mantle of leadership in the nationalist struggle, forging some element of unity with the masses. However, this was a somewhat superficial championing of the poor, and after Independence was achieved the wealthier and more powerful sections of the population moved rapidly to secure their own narrow class interests (Gadgil and Guha, 1995; Naregal, 2002; Visvanathan and Parmar, n.d.).

Varma (1998) argues that the 1970s marks the emergence and rapid growth of a brash, new middle class that, for Varma, contrasts very unfavourably, with an older, more cultured and paternalistic middle class of the Nehruvian period (broadly the 1950s and 1960s). This 'new' middle class is the product of, amongst other things, reservation policies (positive discrimination) for lower castes, which led to a change in the caste composition of the newly wealthy and powerful. The partial liberalization of the economy in the 1980s, and then further liberalization from 1991, has also helped to create new wealth in India — although how far this has benefited the poor remains hotly contested (Corbridge and Harriss, 2000; Parikh, 1999). Varma is damning in his depiction of this new and growing middle class as crass, kitsch, materialistic and utterly lacking in a broader social concern, although there is an uncomfortable element of patrician disdain for these 'arrivistes' in the tone of his analysis.

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). This is, according to these accounts, a transnational class of people who are bound up in the cultural and economic transactions of contemporary globalization, and who have more in common and closer social relations with parallel classes in South Africa, Australia and the USA than with the parochialized 'have-nots' of their own nation. Linguistically, for example, M. Roy (1993: 57) argues that: '[English] continues to regulate access to specialised, professional training; it is linked to economic benefits and it reproduces and maintains cultural privilege'.

Nandy (1998), on the other hand, argues that for the lower middle class it is the slums that provide the imaginary (and fearful) boundary against which they define themselves, providing the anxious margins of their identity and consciousness. But among both rich and poor, a higher quality of life does appear to be increasingly associated with being able to buy and display certain key markers of status, including foreign or branded goods, substituting them for one's own labour and self-produced or local goods (Monteiro, 1998; Osella and Osella, 2000). Sheth (1999: 2508) argues that 'the idea of upward social mobility motivates people of all castes... the

quest today is not for registering higher ritual status; it is universally for wealth, political power and modern (consumerist) lifestyles’.

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 behaviours 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 is a subject that has received considerable attention across Asia more widely (Chua, 2000; Pinches, 1999; Sen and Stivens, 1998). In India, significant media and political attention is devoted to analysing and discussing these changes, especially amongst the young (see, for example, *The Week*, 2001). Some celebrate India’s modernity, and the equal footing of its metropolitan culture with other parts of the world, whilst others strike a more anxious note about the social, individual and family implications of these new pressures and desires (Dwyer, 2000; Lakha, 2000; *Times of India*, 2001). Westernization, globalization and modernization are subjects of major popular, political and academic debate in India. Mirroring other elements of the globalization debate, for some it heralds an exciting new world of enhanced interconnectivity and hybridity, while for others it is condemned and resisted (cf. Held et al., 1999; see Philip, 2001, for a discussion on globalization and the environment).

Much of the corporate and government interest in the middle classes has centred 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 centres 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 behaviours may be, must be locally anchored.

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 behaviours. 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.

Civic Indifference, the Poor and the Environment

Varma (1998: 130) suggests that, 'if we seek to catalogue the dominant social traits of the middle class, the first thing that comes to mind is a truly amazing imperviousness to the external milieu except in matters that impinge on its own immediate interests', a view that would be largely endorsed by Gupta (2000). In a discussion of Bollywood films, a rather different but nonetheless revealing context, Lal (1998: 237) argues that:

9. There are plenty of other themes that could be discussed if space permitted, such as middle class constructions of 'nature'; or an exploration of how ideas about the environment are produced, circulated, constructed, assimilated and contested amongst the middle classes.

[the narrative style of the newer films and the choreography of the song and dance sequences] point to the emergence of a new cultural politics; the advent of a middle class consciousness notable for its aggrandising spirit, the gradual erosion of the transcendental from everyday affairs and, most evidently, a matrix of action and behaviour in which . . . machismo replaces the older and softer virtue of restraint.

Beteille (2001: 5) suggests that, ‘an expanding middle class has an ugly face, and its members often appear as callous and self-serving’.¹⁰ 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. These include the colonial origins of the middle classes, and their alienation from wider Indian society (Misra, 1961; M. Roy, 1993; Sen, 1988); globalization, neoliberalism and increasing wealth disparities (Lakha, 2000; Varma, 1998); the appropriation of power and privilege by the high castes and classes in post-Independence India, and their command of political and economic systems to perpetuate this (Gadgil and Guha, 1995); political, social and economic changes in the last couple of decades, and the tensions these have produced between former elites and new low caste/class social and political challengers (Frankel, 1989; Jeffrey, 2000); and the focus in Hinduism on the self and one’s personal cosmological relationship rather than obligations or moral relations to others or the community, other than kin groups (James, 1999; Varma, 1998: 125–9). All of this points to a strong theme in the literature, namely an indifference to the wider public good, with implications both for the poor and the environment.

Amongst the best known exponents of this view are Gadgil and Guha (1995) who set out a powerful thesis regarding the congruence between the exploitation of the environment and the oppression of the poor (‘ecosystem people’ and ‘ecological refugees’) by the richest sixth of India’s population (the ‘omnivores’). Pointing to ‘islands of prosperity, oceans of poverty’ (ibid.: 34), they argue that there is a direct relationship between ‘the obesity clinics [that] sprout up in Madras, [and the] fully one-third of the Indian people [who] cannot afford to buy enough food to keep their body and soul together’ (ibid.: 3). The costs of the greed and profligacy of the omnivores are, according to Gadgil and Guha, passed on to and borne by the poor and the environment, which means that the omnivores have little interest in preventing or ameliorating the situation. They suggest that: ‘India’s omnivores are increasingly being swept into the global frenzy of consumption, which is daily fuelled by glossy magazines and satellite television’ (ibid.: 118). Gadgil and Guha argue that the state is dominated by and tuned to the needs of this minority, resulting in highly environmentally destructive, inefficient and socially exploitative structures and processes.

10. Beteille also notes that few are more eloquent than the middle classes at criticizing the middle classes. The author of this paper is undeniably middle class.

A different expression of this argument can be explored in relation to domestic and international environmental policy. A number of authors have suggested that one reason for the difficulties widely observed and experienced in implementing and policing environmental regulations, is the relatively low levels of awareness, concern and/or pressure from 'civil society', who do not, largely, monitor or complain about failures in policy compliance (see, for example, Dwivedi and Khator, 1995; Lindstad, 1999; Rajan, 1997; Reich and Bowonder, 1992). Amongst other things, this raises questions about the applicability of this policy model. Organizations like the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), which over the years has played a critical watchdog role, are few and far between.

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. He refers to Mary Douglas's (1966) famous assertion that dirt is 'matter out of place', and argues that when an Indian middle class household expels its garbage out on to the street, it is no longer their concern. On the street is not out of place (see also Korom, 1998). 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 general 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 re-cycling — both being behaviours 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 wasn't 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 wasn't 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

(Hossain 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.

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 (see Table 1). 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 foreseeable 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. 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'. But the notion of postmaterialism 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

Table 1. *Environmental Activism and the Middle Classes*

Type/affiliation	Issues and debates	References
Wildlife enthusiasts, conservationists	Often subscribe to a 'wilderness' model of 'nature' and conservation. Frequently seek the exclusion of the poor from protected areas, although more talk now of participatory strategies.	Gadgil (2001); Rangarajan (2001); Saberwal et al. (2000)
Urban campaigners	Concerns include traffic management, waste and urban aesthetics. Groups range from NGOs to residents' associations. Many accused of being anti-poor (e.g. displacing hawkers and slum-dwellers).	Baviskar (2002); Chaplin (1999); Dhar Chakrabarti (2001); Srinivasan (1980); Tropp (1999)
NGOs	Cover the entire spectrum of environmental activities and ideologies, from Gandhian to neoliberal/mainstream sustainable development. Some are partners and contractors for government and foreign donor environment programmes.	Guha (1998a); R. Roy (1993)
Environmental/livelihood social movements	Usually part of a wider development struggle. Role of middle classes and elites often significant. Sometimes unacknowledged, and sometimes denounced.	Baviskar (1995, 1997); Mawdsley (1998); Rangan (2000); Roy (1999)
Biologists, scientists and forest officers	Often argued to be reactionary and anti-poor, although there is personal, regional and generational variation.	Gadgil (2001); Guha (1998b); Rangarajan (2001)
Members of local, national and international environment clubs	Very little known. Probable middle class basis, but a wide spectrum (e.g. Centre for Science and Environment; World Wide Fund for Nature, India; Greenpeace, India; Bombay Natural History Society)	

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 to a large extent would credibly drive the self-interest explanation. It is, therefore, an issue that requires more focused theorizing, in terms of how it plays out in different cases, and with what consequences.¹¹

A third set of explanations for interest in the environment centres more on the experiences and impacts of individuals, in terms of formative moments and personal characteristics, and their role in leading and stimulating others. Examples include M. Krishnan, a naturalist and writer (Guha, 2000); the late Anil Agarwal, one of India's leading and most influential environmentalists (Guha, 2002); Salim Ali, the world renowned ornithologist; and Valmik Thapar, who has been a prominent defender of the tiger. In *Ecological Journeys*, Madhav Gadgil (2001: 52) reminisces on his own love of nature, noting that it is 'not a trait shared widely by my kinsfolk... [or]... the urban middle classes of India'. What these accounts often share is a sense of the individual's differences from many around them, and the sometimes lonely, if for them rewarding, struggle they have faced.

While these reasons and motivations have been the subject of some discussion, there has generally been more focus on the forms, discourses and outcomes of the various and diverse types of middle class environmental activism. One of the most widely explored themes in the literature concerns the relationship between 'elitist' (which in some cases is taken to include the urban middle classes) environmental concerns and the oppression of the poor and marginalized. Much of the debate over the conservation and management of India's wildlife, national parks and protected areas, for example, has focused on the exclusionary policies that have sought to separate out people and 'nature', displacing and dispossessing the poor (Saberwal and Rangarajan, 2003; Saberwal et al., 2000). Although participatory approaches to conservation and to resource management, such as Joint Forest Management and community conservation have recently gained institutional support, critics argue that in many instances this remains partial and unsatisfactory, although this is undoubtedly a complex and varied situation (Jeffery and Sundar, 1999; Rangarajan, 2001; Sundar et al., 2001).

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

11. For a discussion of this in relation to the West, see Eckersley (1989) and Rohrschneider (1988).

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 sterilisation 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 behaviours, including how these inflect

with various forms of activism. For example, while the ‘leaders and orchestrators’ (as Chapman et al., 1997: 34 call them) of some groups may be drawn from the highly educated urban middle classes, Sundar’s (1999) portrait of the fishing movement in Kerala shows how the priesthood and education have been important avenues for mobility. Although now middle class, many of these leaders of the struggle come from lower class fishing backgrounds themselves.¹² Middle class involvement in environmental-social movements and organizations is by no means unproblematic (see, for example, the debate between Gail Omvedt and Ashish Kothari on the Narmada Bachao Andolan),¹³ or, as discussed above, representative of wider middle class attitudes to the poor and the environment, but it should not be ignored. Being critically aware of this middle class involvement is important if we are to avoid a problematically isolating political imaginary (see Gupta, 1997). The intention of this article is not apologist — it does not seek to rehabilitate or defend the reputation of the middle classes in relation to the oppression of the poor or the exploitation of the environment; nor can it overlook the difficulties and power differentials at work in more progressive cross-class alliances. But it does argue for a more considered and empirically-informed consideration of the diversity and dynamism of the middle classes in relation to the environment.

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 behaviours, with varying environmental consequences. A number of authors seek to deconstruct and contest the notion of a ‘civilisational 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

12. I am grateful to one of the anonymous referees of an earlier draft of this paper for elaborating on this point, and providing the example mentioned.

13. Gail Omvedt’s ‘Open Letter to Arundhati Roy’ can be found at: <http://www.narmada.org/debates/gail/gail.open.letter.html>. Ashish Kothari’s reply is at: <http://www.narmada.org/debates/gail/ashish.response.html>.

(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 (Kinsley, 1998; Narayanan, 2001; R. Roy, 1993; Sullivan, 1998). These examples support Callicot's (1994) call for promoting an enhanced ecological consciousness in ways that recognize plurality and that are sensitive to local cultural values. However, there is no *automatic* interpretation, connection or outcome between environmental well-being and the vast complexities of the texts, rituals and practices of past or present Hinduism — or indeed, any religion or culture (Pederson, 1995).

Those writings within this genre that have been more attentive to class have focused mainly on scavengers and low castes, whose ritual and physical impurity has implications for urban sanitation regimes, as well as their well-being and socio-political status (Chaplin, 1997; Korom, 1998). For the most part this literature has not been especially concerned with distinctions that might arise from exploring the relationship between Hinduism, the middle classes and environmental values, but there are indications that class may prove to be an increasingly relevant line of study within these analyses. The context for this is the rapid growth of an aggressive and chauvinist agenda of Hindu nationalism in society and the polity. Several commentators note the strong electoral and activist base of the Sangh Parivar¹⁴ amongst elites and the urban lower middle classes (Basu, 1996; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996; Ludden, 1996). At the same time, there is some evidence of saffron seeping into green politics and movements. Mukul Sharma (2001, 2002) is one commentator who points to the way in which a variety of 'environmental' movements and issues have been commandeered by the Hindu Right. In particular, he points to the powerfully Hinduized metaphors and myths that are being used to mobilize sentiments and action, which often rely on and reinforce an anti-Muslim (or other minority group) rhetoric and reinterpretation of history. For example, Sharma examines the way in which the Tehri dam controversy has been harnessed by Hindu nationalist organizations to promote a connection between threats to a sacred river and threats to a community and culture: 'the essential purpose of [these metaphors] is to consciously connect the Ganga to the Hindu community and community to nation in a conservative Hindu frame. Apparently dissimilar entities — the politics of saffron and that of green — are made to be similar, to go together' (Sharma, 2002: 13).

14. The Sangh Parivar is the name given to the (sometimes uneasy) coalition of prominent Hindu nationalist organizations, including the current governing political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

In other texts we can find environmental degradation in modern India being blamed on the impact of ‘seven hundred years of foreign cultural domination’ (Dwivedi and Tiwari, 1999: 183), which has allegedly eroded and damaged the ‘essential harmony’ between humans and nature that (supposedly) characterizes Hindu thinking and practices (see also Dwivedi, 1990). This is an argument that can be comprehensively refuted. Saberwal et al. (2000), for example, argue that there was no pre-colonial state of ecological harmony (something also noted by several contributors to Grove et al., 1998). Saberwal et al. (2000) also contend that there were strong local variations in practices and attitudes (both utilitarian and sacred), amongst and between different groups, including Muslims and Hindus, as well as marked syncretism of belief and practice (see also Thapar, 2002). A recent work by Jha (2002) provides evidence of beef eating in ancient India (see Watkins, 2002, for a review essay). 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 capitalising 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.’ He continues:

As in the case of Western interpretations of Indian cultural history, the nationalist and neoconservative conceptions of Hindu tradition are linked through discourse to larger agendas. Where the essentialism and determinism of colonial and Orientalist interpretations of Indian history and tradition served to justify domination, the singular and monolithic interpretations of Vedic tradition and ethics offer a wide field of play for Hindu revivalism. The tropes are powerful and the remoteness of the time in question is no barrier to its powerful role in contemporary politics. (ibid.: 234)

All of this quite clearly underlines the point made in the introduction — that the exploration of environmental values is embedded within and inseparable from wider social values and political struggles. In her discussion of Hinduism and ecology, Narayanan (2001) notes that the middle classes (including Non-Resident Indians) are heavily involved in the reification and dissemination of texts and interpretations that promote and encourage Hindu nationalism. A closer analysis of this relationship between class and constructions of and contests over the environment could add a valuable dimension to environmental debates, and to analyses of the Hindu Right.

CONCLUSIONS

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. Given their impact on the environment, and their influence on the social and political contexts within which environmental change is being experienced and managed, this is an area of study that requires greater

attention. 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 behaviours 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 inter-relations are such that explorations into the environmental values, beliefs and behaviours of India's middle classes contribute to wider debates over, for example, the public sphere, governance, and social change. In itself, and in terms of these synergies, this is a subject which is likely to prove increasingly interesting and important.

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