Carnegie Council
ON ETHICS AND
INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Transcript:

"Environmental Values, Policy, and Conflict in India"

Shiv Visvanathan
Senior Fellow, Center for the Study of Developing Societies
Delhi, India

(The case studies that Visvanathan refers to in this seminar are from the Carnegie Council–sponsored project, "Understanding Values: A Comparative Study on Environmental Values in China, India, Japan, and the United States")

Shiv Visvanathan

One of the dangers of looking only at specific case studies is that they are just stories. You string a few of them together and you get a story of what happened. They have a tendency to become exotic or quaint pictures constituting a still life of the Third World. Just using the case studies puts them in the position of a footnote to history. I want to drag the footnote into a comparative framework. Therefore, I am pulling these three case studies out in search of a comparative framework.

What you have to do in order to put these studies into a comparative discourse is to ask, "How does Indian society construct an environmental discourse?" There has been a falsification, especially by grassroots organizations, of the nature of environmentalism in the state of India. People often construct it as if environmental consciousness were coming forth from the womb of civil society against an anti-environmental state. I wish this were true. But what one has to do to construct the environmental genealogy of the Indian state is to realize that the very structures of the modern state and the very structures of what today are seen as the political economies of planning arose out of an environmental discourse. India is not a backward-thinking, anti-ecological state with a pro-environmental civil society. It is instead a battleground between two forms of environmental discourse. Any search for values must begin by understanding that these

two competing discourses contest the relation between environment and democracy. At the root of it, you have an "environment" that, while being its own philosophical site, is a theater for the future of Indian civil society.

I am emphasizing democracy in this because I think we face a quixotic and strange fact in which I think members of American and Indian academia are jointly complicit: that India is hailed as "one of the world's greatest democracies." An every-day encounter with "the world's biggest democracy" makes one see things differently. You can't just equate elections with democracy or you are going to have problems. Just a few weeks ago we had a Japanese woman visiting. These days we have many Japanese coming to India to find out if we are "stable enough," like Americans who want to find out if we are "integrated enough." As the woman was leaving she was heard saying, "Too much democracy, too little government." Commentary such as this is something that we have to look at carefully today. Election studies done by the institute I work at have shown that there is a clear difference between elections and governance. People that investigate the Indian electorate see the election as a festival of democracy, a statement of freedom. But at the same time, they are very clear that awarding India elections does not give it governance. And it's the link between elections and government that I want to establish to you.

I think that we have to face certain facts. One, that the India which is seen as a great democracy has one million troops for internal order. I'm talking of troops outside of the army. Two, that many of the awards for gallantry that our army has gotten ever since the last Pakistani war were for action against its own people. And three, if you look at the law courts of India, we have ninety million pending court cases that might last anywhere from two to twenty-five years, if you're being optimistic. What I'm suggesting is that unless you put the issue of governance back in, the question of how environmental movements attack the issue of government and the issue of democracy becomes a problem. Today, even the least exaggerated statistics tell us that development projects in India are not only environmentally disastrous; they have produced more refugees than all the wars we have fought.

What I want to begin with is the question, "What was the discourse of the environmental state?" What is really fascinating is that this is one discourse on environmentalism that emerges from an encounter with Marxism. If you look at the history of Indian planning, you discover that the whole idea was developed by engineers and physicists. Outstanding physicists like Meghnath Saha, Visvesaraya, and P. C. Mahalanobis, who was the founder of the Indian Statistical

Institute, all constructed the Indian state as the scientific manager of energy. What needed to be understood here was this very notion of energy, because Indian society was full of notions of energy. The first thing one had to do was to discipline all of these different varieties of energy into one term: the calorie. I want to emphasize this, because it looks quaint, but the words "calorie" and "watt" did more to create the Indian state than you can think of.

If you look at the early records of Indian planning, if you look at the records of the Science and Culture group you'll discover that there is a fascination with energy, and that it is this attempt to create a bounded notion of energy that made the state a disciplinary event. The scientist became the chief discipliner. The thing that fascinated India about the Bolshevik Revolution was not any great Marxist analysis, not any great class analysis, but the personal (here it is that a nepotistic metaphor can recreate history). It was discovered and became a fact of life that the scientist and the politician could cohere together and work together.

In fact, when Meghnath Saha saw this particular sort of relationship, he decided to find his own Lenin. What fascinated Saha was the Leninist dictum: "Soviets plus electrification is equal to communism." But he gave it a Lockean, liberal variant. And so Jawaharlal Nehru worked it out into: "Dams and laboratories are the temples of modern India." A liberal statement which was to prove equally genocidal. I want to make you realize that the reason why Saha was fascinated with this whole idea is that he saw behind it the image of a Leninist world. He saw behind it the idea that a control of energy would be a control of the environment. The state then became an environmental agency for the control of floods and famine. It is thus out of the discourse of environmentalism that the state is not only legitimized, but constructed.

I want to emphasize that the state itself began as a technocratic environmental discourse, what some have called an ecocratic discourse. The state wasn't concerned with democracy, wasn't concerned with welfare, but with locating environmentalism within the logic of a certain science. The tragedy began here. Because I can't think of a more ecocidal statement than, "Dams and laboratories are the temples of modern India." If you look at the whole question, the trend of eco-science has been anti-environmental, in the official sense. The whole discourse, whether of environment or of dams has been anti-environmental. In fact, it's very interesting to look at the great debates taking place on dams. When the first protests against the Narmada Dam took place, the protestors were arrested under "Defense of India" rules because a protest against the dam was

a protest against the Indian state. So what we have is an emerging counter-discourse of environmentalism that has to take into account that the state itself is an environmental discourse.

I think the mistake we've made is attempting to empty out the ideologies of environmentalism of the Indian state. Let's not forget that even when the first dictatorship was established in India between 1975 and 1977 in the so-called "Emergency," it was legitimated in terms of environmentalist metaphors. It was all very hygienically environmental. The poor were a virus, dirt that needed to be transported out of the city. The only way to solve poverty was to eliminate the poor. The state did this with urban planning or family planning programs. The demolition of slums or the sterilization of people became the environmentalist discourse. It was at that particular time that Indira Gandhi was applauded for saying, "Poverty is the greatest pollution." She may as well have said, "Poor people are pollution."

What I want to emphasize again and again is that the environmental discourse is not just a liberating discourse. Within the framework of many Third World countries, it becomes not only the framework of a technocratic discourse, but it creates the possibility of a technocratic tyranny. After all, the man who dominated Delhi at the time, who is today our Minister for Urban Planning, saw himself as a great environmentalist, but without the technocratic arms of Le Corbusier. The only dictatorship that we have had in India was constructed with an environmentalist discourse.

We have a picture of the city and the nation-state in its moment of technocratic tyranny or in its moment of democratic celebration, constructed as a technocratic ecological discourse. You can add the elements of class analysis, you can add the pluralistic raucous imaginations of other democracies, but unless we realize that the state of India sees environmentalism as one of its sources of legitimacy, we cannot realize the vigor with which it has responded to many people that have challenged its environmental discourse. Even today, at this moment, when people are talking about the Narmada Dam, police chiefs are moving to evacuate village after village. The one thing the movement has failed to realize is that it has not been able to break the environmentalist discourse of the state. Civil society has only managed to emerge in one place, not in environmentalism, but in the theory of energy. Electricity has been seen as the dominant metaphor for the state. In fact, if you look at the old energy records of India, you'll find electricity, hydra- and other things, being tabulated. But fuel wood and biogas were never a part of this budget of energy. Feminist economists would say that when the economists discovered

firewood, they recognized the woman in the economy. The woman carrying the firewood became one of the great critics of modern economics.

We have two contrary discourses of environmentalism. We see a separate, unilateral picture of what appears as a series of performing pleas against what looks like a vacuously empty intellectual state. Until you see that the environmentalist discourse is a powerful one, and is not something that we have emptied out, any debate trying to emphasize environmental values becomes problematic. The problems then become varied. You have what I would call the "civilizational problems" of the society, against the problems of the nation-state. The whole source of environmental values stemming from various religions clashes with the secular ideology of the state, which is trying to locate environmental values within the logic of a kind of secular value, energy economics, and environmental resource value. At the same time, you have the availability of the values of so many different kinds of religions that can articulate their own notions of energy, values that offer an almost pluralistic idea for discourse.

If you look at their location within civil society, almost all of the greatest movements have tended to challenge the logic of the nation-state with the logic of civilization. An example of this tactic is something like Vandana Shiva's book *Staying Alive*, in which the first three paragraphs of every chapter are an appeal to this kind of civilizational discourse. Without, however, any clarification of the logic of the discourse, the author then counters it with the logic of the green revolution, with the logic of the nation-state, and so on. But the language has not been unraveled. By not unraveling the logic of the civilizational discourse, you reduce it to a kind of fundamentalism.

The problem this kind of logic generates is that you appeal to civilization, but the civilization you appeal to is a valorized version of something put out by some writer-fundamentalist-communist, who says, "Oh, our tradition was so great." But it doesn't allow one to look at that tradition critically and to say, "It was great, but it went to sleep somewhere on the way." By not allowing for a particular focus on both the nation-state and civilization simultaneously, many studies tend to get caught in a lack of a framework. These studies are unable to talk about "tradition" and "modernity," "equality" and "justice," and the question of "globalization" simultaneously. It is this lack of a framework that I think creates real problems for a search for equality and justice, and for ecology and the notion of rights, simultaneously.

This reveals another problem. What I have is a series of questions without answers. I don't think the case studies in fact bring out full answers, but I think that this is precisely what generates the political value of this Carnegie Council project. The problem is the question of rights versus commons. If you're going to articulate ecology in the language of liberal democracy, you're not going to go far. If you use the language of resource economics, or you articulate ecology in the language of individual rights, you deprive any Third World country of the notion of the commons. By commons I mean not just a bundle of natural resources, but a bundle of skills. A destruction of the commons also involves the destruction of the skills that go along with the commons. This act of de-skilling, this question of obsolescence, becomes a fundamental fact. I remember asking a student, "Great, you've got entitlements, you've got famines, but where have you got obsolescence in your system?" How is a theory of obsolescence moved into a theory of rights going to argue for the disappearance of so many cultures, the disappearance of so many ecologies?

In the first report on the Narmada Dam the cost/benefit equation had only three criteria: wood and pulp, timber for construction, and other lines of forest produce. When you produce a contingency report of this order, you cannot get to the language of the commons. Nor can you articulate for the people themselves in the current language of rights what is going to become obsolete. When this language of rights does not presuppose the language of community it becomes problematic. The question one has to ask oneself is, "Can environmentalism as it is currently framed give us the language of the commons?" Because it's the decline of the commons that has in a way deprived these movements of one of their greatest weapons, conceptually, intellectually, and ecologically. Can we create a different notion of the commons, based on the traditional ideas, but going beyond its sacred role and its other kinds of activities to a new heuristic idea of commons that can protect these kinds of rights?

Another question one should ask is, "Does this debate have to be framed in the language of science and anti-science?" I must confess that I have been one of the original creators of this sin, by actually working on a critique of science and technology for many years. I'm not going back on my critique of science and technology, but what I want to do is to understand whether a preoccupation with science versus anti-science helps to create the kind of ecological discourse that Indian democracy needs. I want to emphasize this because unless we put a kind of self-

critical function into our own discourses, the language of civil society within which this is articulated becomes deeply and powerfully problematic.

Many times when we go down to forums and articulate the language of this kind of environmentalism, the first guy who shakes your hand is this fundamentalist communist saying, "You were saying precisely what I wanted to say." And you wonder what you are to do, go and wash your hands immediately? There's something about your discourse that needs to build an ecological and political framework that does not get into this kind of equation. And then the second scenario is that you have a retired scientist who says, "You know, I was waiting to say what you were saying, but I could not say it during my years in office." The thing is that this logic makes you politically important in a certain kind of way. How do you liberate your discourse from this cacophony of pluralism that is there?

It is within these kinds of perspectives that I want to look into the three case studies our team is carrying out as part of the Carnegie Council project. These case studies then become footnotes to this wider historical discourse rather than the other way around. I want to show the intellectual career of each of these case studies and go into what happens to this kind of work unless you put it into a framework.

The first case study is about shifting cultivation. My current obsession is the Orissa cyclone, which eliminated half the state of Orissa in a few minutes. We don't know how to look at the language of a disaster and yet, I've found one of the most interesting things about Orissa is that there are one million people engaged in shifting cultivation there. How does the language of shifting cultivation fit in the current discourses of ecology? What I would emphasize here is not the ecology of the thing; it is the nature of the classificatory acts of the genocidal impetus.

You can look at the history of shifting cultivation as a policy document, and there's no indication of its policy. You'll find in colonial documents that shifting cultivation is classified as "waste." The second way it is classified is "primitive." The third is "pre-modern." The minute you use any of these three categories, you've pre-determined the subject to the language of museums. The minute you museumize the practice of shifting cultivation you give it a certain kind of value. But by placing that antiquated value on it, you devalue any current worth because you place it in the past that you have already gone through, rather than the future that you are going to encounter. The genocidal impetus of social science has to be taken into account in these situations. We look antiseptic, but the anthropology we generate, whether it's from New York

University or Delhi School of Economics, creates a kind of developmental impetus which does not allow for the language of the commons to be brought in; it doesn't allow the language of civilization to be brought in except in a dualistic sense. It's this ecological dualism that becomes a problem. If you create these dualistic languages, you will not have the kind of discourses that can create the alternatives we are looking for.

The existing groups that practice shifting cultivation today have no language of defense. They are often defended by anthropologists who "go native" and not by members of their own community. In fact, the Bastar shifting cultivation case study is being conducted by a student of mine who went so native that it took us some time to bring him back. It's very interesting to look at what happened to him. He had this notion that the Bastar way of life was a state of absolute perfection. This is the same thing Leo Strauss once said to a teacher of mine: "Your caste system is so perfect, why would you want to change it?" But the thing is, it *is* changing. The language of Leo Strauss and anthropology can't defend it from this change. Nor does the currently fashionable language of "hybridization" help. The question is: What kind of a language will defend populations that are dying out? What kind of language do we use beyond the language of genocide or ecocide to defend a way of life within everyday terms?

It is in this context that shifting cultivation becomes interesting. What rescued us was, and I love this, the irony of the UN bureaucracy. When Bruntland gave legitimacy to the logic of sustainability, I loved her for it because for the first time, we found a peg or a marker within which shifting cultivation could acquire a new kind of scientific legitimacy. Using the heuristics of sustainability was a political tactic, but I want to be very clear about such political tactics. Justifying shifting cultivation in the language of anthropology doesn't necessarily help; it gives you a self-enclosed, isolated system. The minute you acquire a *global* language within which you can locate a local practice, or a multiplicity of local practices, the battle is on in a new way.

I want to emphasize this again and again: there is no essentialism to many of these languages. You can't actually invent the language of ecologism to protect a way of life. What you can have is two sets of tactics, both coming from modernity. On one level, you have the universities, which tell you the only right thing for India is rice cultivation. You have the calendar, which only looks at a linear notion of time, going against other varieties of time in which shifting cultivation functions. What you have within the discourse of democracy is the notion of the standard citizen, living in linear time—that is, living outside of agricultural time,

living outside of ecological time. I don't think that the current notion of citizenship has a notion of ecological time. A citizen is born in industrial time. A citizen is born in clock time. In fact, today a citizen is recreated in digital time.

Until you bring back what I call the wider embodiments of citizenship, which the feminist movement in a way is trying to do, as is the ecology movement, you cannot discover the kind of discourse of environmentalism associated with shifting cultivation. I am not interested in making chapter three of an anthropology book. I'm interested in looking into how a discourse of shifting cultivation environmentalism can survive politically; how it can provide the heuristic of a different kind of sustainability. It is necessary to be aware of the different discourses that democracy has lost: the varieties of time; the varieties of embodiment, a different relation between work and nature. Then you can combat the empty logic of the UN bureaucrats, and what I call "the world of the Bruntland" is enriched in a new way with the notion of sustainability that they never dreamt of.

The Indian nationalist movement used a similar tactic to this. When Gandhi was asked, "What are the great goals of the Indian nationalist movement," he said, "To rescue the English from their modernity." We are going to use shifting cultivation to rescue the United Nations from *its* notions of modernity. Otherwise we are stuck in the logic of "essentialism is this; modernism is this." If you take it in terms of a repertoire of tactics, shifting cultivation might become a way of life that might rescue modern ecological resource economics and the UN bureaucracy from the narrowness and parochialism of a certain way of life. It might also cure governments of their attitudes about tribals in an area, so that it will blame forest fires on timber companies rather than on shifting cultivation practices.

Our second case study looks at fishing trawlers. A lot has been written about this issue. In fact, the discourse has become so reified that I don't see any possibility of breaking it. What we have is Marxism and ecology, my two preoccupations for a long time, which, similar to the shifting cultivation case, have no notion of citizenship that allow for the kinds of marginalities that exist. If you are tribal, if you're a woman, if you're a peasant, if you're an old person, there is no logic of citizenship for you; there is only the logic of obsolescence.

The fishing struggle come into prominence because there were unorganized workers. The Marxism of class and organized labor had ignored them altogether. The problem is a very simple one between groups of traditional fishermen versus modern trawlers. The question is one of

mediation between modernity and tradition, between ecology and justice, between two different notions of value.

Let me give you a simple example. At spawning season, the fishermen in Alappy will starve, but they won't go out to fish because they know that at that time they would insult and hurt the fish catch. The trawlers, however, will go in. Here are two frameworks of value: one which actually allows for fasting and feasting, allows for cycles of time, and another which only conceives of linear time. If there's one thing we have to emphasize today in our theories of democracy, it is the multiplicity of notions of time. Notions of multiplicity of time allow for a new meaning to the notion of death and obsolescence than you have today. In the modern theory of democracy no citizen actually dies. This conception of citizenship doesn't work in the notion of death in a systematic way. What these new discourses do—and I will give you a simple example—is to bring science back in an interesting way. The interesting question is not "big trawlers versus small trawlers," "traditional fishermen versus modern fishermen," but, "How does science intervene ecologically and non-violently in these discourses?"

I want to talk about a friend of mine who died recently. He was addressing this problem when he was in Madras. He said, "You've got these small fishermen, you've got the kind of resources they have, you've got the kind of communicative system they have, and then you've got the 'big guys' who don't need your help, because their idea of science is the latest Japanese invention. How do I intervene?" And so he started by looking at anthropological records. (It's very interesting to see where anthropology comes in. It's a powerful tool for the scientist who wants to escape, because the anthropologist discovers that every act of science carries its own anthropology.) What he found was that many of these fishers used to carry a coconut trunk on the back of their boats and the fish used to be attracted to it. He said, "If that can be scaled up, I've got an artificial coral reef." Fish are always attracted to a coral reef, or to junk piled into the sea. They find these places secure, so they come and lay eggs there. What he did was build fish aggregation devices the size of this building in order to attract more fish.

The trawlers sank these devices. They could not accept that something that came from the traditional fishing culture would increase their catch. The only language they understand is that of science. This is a clear example of modern science ignoring what could be useful techniques culled from "traditional" knowledge in its focus on technology. There could be great benefits

that would come from dialogue between these two discourses rather than a dichotomous relationship and conflict between them. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

In the trawling case, we're talking about everything being replete with values. In fact, it's what I call the surplus of values that creates all the tension. When you come to the Delhi pollution case, our third case study, there's no question of value. What you confront is something new.

It's very interesting that when you look at the logic of cities today, it is the Indian middle class that is the greatest proponent of environmentalism, without understanding the genealogies of it or the political implications of it. In the Delhi pollution case, which was the attempt of one judge, Kuldip Singh, to create a "green" city, the first thing you realize about the judge is that he had decided in advance to be a "green" judge. His ambition was to win the Magsaysay Award for environmentalism. This man actually created a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Singh wanted to beat the link with the criminal empire, so he became a "green" judge. In this vein, he presented a series of cases, which had the effect of overloading the Supreme Court. Today you have a Supreme Court which is passing laws not just on traffic, but on why you shouldn't spit betel inside government offices. When you overload one agency of the government that performs all these functions, then it takes over the complete civics of a modern discourse. From spitting to vehicular traffic to whatever. You create problems about education, politics, pedagogy. You create problems with the sort of knowledge base within which the Supreme Court is functioning. Is it going to rely solely on one discourse for its recommendations or is it going to look at the variety of discourses within which law comes to play? Is law just a hammer for pounding one little nail, or is it a repertoire of choices within which different kinds of discourses are articulated?

The Supreme Court rulings collectively became a critique of industrial pollution, even when industrial pollution only constitutes ten percent of the pollution of Delhi. The real source of pollution is vehicular pollution. But the Supreme Court was not able to make a single stand on it, because no man in Delhi is ever going to give up his scooter or his car, but you can throw the poor across the city or further. It's very interesting, this idea of creating a middle-class "green" population. You create the standard splits, between ecology and justice, "red" and "green," which in fact brings Marxism back in a fascinating way. The notion of class is brought back to the center stage of the city at a time when Marxism is saying its goodbyes to all radicals.

So this is the problem. You have today a Supreme Court which is trying to create a "green" city without having a notion of the city, without having a notion of labor, without having a notion of industry. At the same time, the Supreme Court sees itself as a modernizing body. The greatest beneficiaries of these Supreme Court rulings have been the old industrialists who have put investment into the first industrial revolution industries and now want to shift their finance capital into the third industrial revolution industries. They love it because each one of them has closed down these industries on 'green' terms, and then re-invested in them as real estate, which is the real source of money in Delhi.

I will say it again that when we look at this multiplicity of discourses, we have to look at a frame. What we see today, especially when we look at this notion of modernity in itself, is that we have a modernity that lacks any sense of self-reflection. A modernity which has no sense of the genealogy of its own values, and an elite middle class that sees itself as a vector of globalization, without any sense of what that vector involves in either magnitude or direction. We must put this new discourse back into a certain kind of political picture. Otherwise, what we have is the antiseptic nature of an environmental discourse happier on American campuses than on the ground in India.

Thank you.

Discussion

Michel Gelobter: Can you describe things that are going on now or that ought to be going on now to achieve the sorts of systematic changes necessary to be able to protect the interests of people on the local level? I'm thinking not only of technology assessment, but the sort of idea of sensitivity developed in America in the 1960s during the analysis of early environmental concern and the "new town concept"—in which many factors were considered all together in risk assessment and in which factors that overlap in the real world would be assessed with real case studies. This sort of thing requires a lot of time and understanding on the ground.

Visvanathan: I would put it as paradoxes. I want to put it in the framework of what we're developing, which might sound a bit sharp, but bear with me. It's what I call the "good boy" theory of democracy. It's not liberal democracy, but it's the kind of framework within which the World Bank and other agencies have tried to reduce the scope of the democratic imagination so that human rights becomes only child labor, democracy only becomes elections, contract only becomes patenting and property. What it does is reduce the imagination into a set of things that facilitates a sort of global or multinational framework of globalization and democracy.

What we have to recover and add to is the globalization of the democratic imagination. This has to be a slow process; it has to be a transparent process; it has to be a public process. I think the best thing that has happened is that the government has gone to five hundred schools to look at the issues of globalization and environment. On one level this looks puerile, antiseptic, puny. But I think in a future sense, these five hundred schools might integrate more into the ecological imagination that we have than the environmental movements today, which are caught in a fixity of positions that does not allow them to negotiate.

Let me put it this way: How do you create a set of anticipatory conditions where we don't always end up trying to catch up to disasters? You know, I am tired of being an intellectual fire engine. I mean, can we prevent some of these from taking place? I'll tell you what we need, and some groups are working for it, although not yet in an effective way. What we need is a new kind of democratization of technologies in terms of social auditing. I'm not talking in terms of EPA or anything like that. I mean something bigger, faster; where a group of different constituencies, I think the Americans use the word "stakeholders," but I don't want to use the term, come into an operation where everything from children to villages find a voice, and the role of the NGO or grassroots movement is to articulate the multiplicity of voices. In specific terms, I can't think of anything like this right now. I can think of heuristics. But right now, we are losing this battle.

There is a problem with the idea you propose of the sort of the 1960s American project of assessing various factors before acting. It presupposes a certain notion of objectivity. It presupposes you can filter out. The problem in trying to create this kind of objective evaluation in something like the Delhi pollution case is that many voices would get lost. Workers are being shot for protesting against the transfer of industries.

The question is: How then do you make a case against finance capital and the irresponsibility of its ecologism? Workers have been disaffected and displaced, the factories simply moved out of the center of the city, and this is "green." It's suburban America suddenly transplanted to the outskirts of Delhi. So in the terms of the language of a certain kind of environmentalism, it's perfect. You can find twenty experts to give you an objective notion of carbon monoxide monitoring in that area, but the question is how this policy affects the workers. There are all kinds of complexities. When you say, "Can you thrash these complexities out," I don't know. Because if we are talking about justice in terms of objective indicators, how do you bring a notion of objective indicators to a notion of justice?

Michel Gelobter: Well, it is a problem, a very real one actually in terms of international emissions trading of greenhouse gasses. If you look at that situation, there's a presupposition that somebody in the United States is going to buy emissions from China. But once those emissions are bought in China, are they going to be bought from a big coal-fire power plant or are they going to be bought from a peasant on the Tibetan highlands, or forced out of a peasant on the Tibetan highlands for compliance because they have the coal? Are they going to replace it with anything? You know that the industrialists are going to have more power. At the end of the day, China's going to tell the coal industry to go full-steam ahead, so to speak, and not be concerned with the small, biogas, or other more decentralized energy usages. And you raise these sorts of things.

The thing that struck me as most stimulating in your lecture was the mention of the roots of environmental discourse in Indian democracy. Because often the state is more of a guarantor of boundaries and property meant to facilitate business and is actually the antithesis of environmental management. You can see it as completely ill-equipped to deal with issues of sustainability. Now obviously, some of that is cultural baggage from the West. Its transplantation, its origins, its emergence in India may be completely different. In the global system it may appear as though the government is playing the same role without necessarily actually having those same origins or roots, which I think is a really important point to make for those of us who think about the role of the state in sustainability.

The point about the language of sustainability you make is most fundamentally a Marxist struggle of workers' control over a resource. I've always felt that way about the term, that it's at

least something that I can stop things with; I can say, "that's not really sustainable"; the way they're educating kids up in Harlem is not really sustainable, or whatever, even though I can't necessarily define what exactly sustainability would mean. The reason that these movements, whether in India or the United States, have failed is simply because of the stunning and accelerating success of technology on its own terms in the last decade, decade-and-a-half. In the last two years, even the economists have to admit that computers are changing the world. And so it just becomes hard, the worst possible time to try to solve these problems. Our consortium in the United States is engaged in the use of technology, trying to integrate the use of technology and sustainability. And, you know, even most progressive funders don't want to hear it.

But in India, the roots of democracy are different. In some sense, the question I would ask would be: Is there a way in which the Indian state or the roots of the Indian state can be used to conceptualize or to dream of a more sustainable form of governance?

Visvanathan: You've got to be careful here, because a lot of our socialism came as ecology. That's a point generally not made in these energy debates. The problem is not that you have, to a certain extent, dropped your socialism in the move to globalization. What is the justice matrix within which ecology activates itself? Is it the language of rights? Because in the current language of rights, you can't rate the old kind of environmental discourse. And you must be careful because there are two discourses of ecology: the technocratic and the democratic. The question is, what is the dialectic between them? I think at certain times you have the meetings of that dialectic. After a point in India we had civil society groups articulating the language of critique of science, critique of development rights. It provided the wider matrix within which modernity itself could be sustained. It wasn't that anti-modern. The problem is it appropriates the discourse. Of course, a lot of the discourse has been appropriated by the wrong people.

The great possibility I see is India as a great compost heap of ideas, a clearinghouse. Gandhi, for example, was more interesting in the West than in India after 1947. And I think a lot of the ideas he influenced in the '60s can be re-incarnated back in India a lot of interesting ways, combined in a new kind of matrix.

Michel Gelobter: You might also need an environmental justice movement to motivate these middle-class people. It's always disheartening for me to see that the conservation ethic that is so

responsible for environmental pressure in the United States re-emerging in other parts of the world can so easily go in and out of fashion. This is going on in Puerto Rico right now. Puerto Ricans are more concerned with their rainforest than they are with industrial encroachment on estuaries and bays. These are very direct industrial issues, but it's fashionable to hug trees there now. You know, it used to be that the environmental battle was just the people next to the power plant.

Visvanathan: See, there's the thing. If you talk tribal ecology, you've got the usual ecology. If you talk Dalit ecology, which doesn't exist as yet, then you might find that these might be the greatest advocates of ecology. So the question is, how do you put both discourses into play simultaneously? The question is, how do you keep courting with your own theory in a way that allows for notions of justice and prohibitive justice to come into play?

Joanne Bauer: Are there any steps being taken towards an environmental justice movement in India?

Visvanathan: The trouble is, the minute you invent the name, you have already passed on a view. You've got to be very careful about this sort of thing, because a lot of what we are saying is not classified under environmental justice. Every time I hear the words "diversity" or "environmental justice," I feel like reaching for a gun. Because the problem is, you've got to be careful about the appropriation of these terms without the context of the matrix within which they grew. If we put that back, we can be self-critical of what we've been doing also.

Michel Gelobter: The way it would work in the U.S. is that the people who are doing the struggle are fairly conscious, because of the media and everything, of the guilt factor for the middle class. The poor in the United States. are able to guilt the middle class, to relate to and culturally tug on the middle class. So that's maybe a little bit of why the idea of just transplanting environmental justice right now might not work.

Shyama Venkateswar: I wanted to go back to your idea of "good governance." You did a wonderful job of introducing it right at the start, this idea of creating it to show the inherent

values. I think some of the things that mean good governance—you mentioned a decentralized political structure, power sharing, multiplicity of voices, multiplicity of time, and multiplicity of discourses, and skills. All of these presuppose a successful environmental movement, for lack of a better term. I'm trying to push you to think of examples outside of India of successful environmental movements where good governance has not existed. So, for example, are there successful environmental movements in Latin America during military authoritarian regimes? Are there successful environmental movements from the European cases that are clearly social-democratic parties that are not any more sensitive to local concerns? A lot of environmental movements actually occurred because social democratic parties were no longer viable in these societies. So, are there examples where the Indian case will not apply? Are there cases where you think environmental movements actually led to better governance?

Visvanathan: There must be many. But I think you've got two types of questions to ask: Are there good environmental movements where good governance has not existed? And, second, are there bad environmental movements where good governance exists because governance has not extended to environmentalism?

Let me explain it at two levels. At one level, I'm India-obsessed. What I mean is that when Latin America or anything intrudes into my thought, it's because it's an intellectual resource. So, politically there's a narrowness to what I'm saying. But on another level, I'm interested in the fact that there's no notion of governance in India. Our democracy has *no notion of governance*. Either it's the World Bank's notion of governance, or it's the public administration's notion of governance. But when has an Indian theory of democracy articulated anything beyond the old notion of nation building or institution building? What is missing today, other than the logic of co-operations and foundations, is the notion of governance. I'm not even talking about the notion of good or bad governance. I'm talking about the notion of valorizing governance.

I can give you an example of environmental movements improving governance in India: the Chipko movement, or the movement in Rajasthan for greater transparency in government. I think these environmental movements have led to good governance. The idea of the Chipko Dalits is very simple. Every fifteen days there is a *panchayat* which is a meeting of the village–level people who want to track the financing of the development project. They map the

thing out in a village-level meeting. I think this has created a new notion of governance that, as the environmental movement grows, has created a positive notion of governance. Even in the Delhi pollution case, if you look at the work that some people are doing, this has created a positive notion of governance. But this is getting hijacked.

What I'm trying to say is that all of these movements do create good notions of governance, but they are so fragile. I think that the Delhi pollution case is about governance and good governance. But there's this dualism of good governance, where there is good governance only for the middle class, rather than good governance for a wider kind of system. And it's middle class politics that's driving this. I think there are examples of good governance in India, but these are temporary. By the time you've written the story and submitted it as a Ph.D., the politics have taken it away somewhere else. So what I'm trying to say is that I can think of transient kinds of examples of good governance. I can't think of sustaining examples of governance. And sustainable governance is really what I want to submit. So that's in India, but in the broader case, I don't know.

James Schoff: The question of technology is an interesting one. On one level, it's a variable, it's a tool, it is affecting governance and communication among different groups and different people, and it's also an issue that gets into values that people have to make up their minds about. I think with regard to technology your notion of time comes in.

Visvanathan: When you think of technology today, you always think of the great changes. I think that an outboard motor in a fishing village is as much about externalities, pollution, and all the great modern things that you're thinking about. It's a question of whether you can ground it into the matrix of ecology or into a local set of relationships, otherwise you disaffect that whole local matrix.

Therefore, I wouldn't say there's anything backward-looking about my case studies. I would say they are as forward-looking as some studies on the impact of computers on nuclear energy. Because at one level, scientists think just like villagers. To me, the interesting thing would be: What is the openness and transparency of a democratic imagination? I would want to bring into this progress an idea of scientific imagination in terms of public knowledge, public testable knowledge. And I think it's the same whether we talk about Narmada Dam or the Delhi

pollution case. It's a question of how transparent you can make it and how you handle ambiguities and uncertainties in knowledge.

Here I want to make a distinction between "risk technologies" and the notion of vulnerability, and the kind of voice that technology gives to the vulnerable sections. If you do away with these kinds of social logics, then these voices are missing. The question is, how do you bring in that voice and how do you articulate it methodologically so that it acquires validity and objectivity? You see, I think numbers have to have an autobiography. If you put an autobiography to a number, I think it acquires a different kind of value. So that it's not just something frozen in time. If it is frozen in time, it can become innumerate. If you can break the innumeracy of numbers, I think you can bring technology in a different kind of way into this kind of thinking.

Let's not put technology under a capital T. As a technological system, yes, I think things are changing and there are new notions of complexity coming in. But I think the important thing is, if you look at a tribal society, or a village society, if you operate purely in terms of clock time, notions of productivity and efficiency that you bring are of a linear order. If you have ecologism, you bring different kinds of productivity and efficiency, and you bring a different notion of rights. What I'm going to say is two sets of things. Within a notion of technology, can you give rights for different kinds of soils to exist? Do you need a different kind of notion of soil assessment? If you can't give the rights for different kinds of soils to exist, what kind of technology assessment can you make?

V. W. Jim Steward: There is a view that technology will revolutionize society and will empower the poor, which will allow their affairs to be considered. Isn't it true that any movement or belief system is cyclical and has its ups and downs, so that perhaps the current trend will lead eventually to empowerment?

Visvanathan: I used to hold the view of technology empowering the poor, and I still adhere to it in a certain kind of way. I don't want to abandon that view, but I want to disprivilege this view by making it only one constituency in this democratic urge. What that view didn't have in India is a sense of irony, and a sense of laughter. The minute you questioned it, you had the Emergency, or you were called anti-scientific, anti-national. The lack of irony and of its own

genealogy made it self-defeating in India. What could have been really progressive and democratic became inner-directed and the science became narrow. I think that this is the fate of many technocratic moments, that they become inner-directed. If they responded to new democratic notions coming in, they could have produced more interesting kind of hypotheses. This is the fate of Indian science in a certain kind of way.

As to your question about the cyclical nature of movements, I would answer your question with a question. When you create 20,000 refugees from dams, where is the cycle going up? Unless you have *enormous* civilizational notions of time. But if you locate yourself politically, you take narrow periods of time. Maybe you have to operate linearly to work politically, in units of ten years, instead of the wide ecological notions of time I am suggesting. Sometimes when you have obsolescence and death, unless you're talking about species-level interactions, where can this particular community find its place in the cycle? I think this becomes the question. I think that politics sometimes mediates between different notions of time.

Charlotte Patton: You were talking about the state as a technocratic discourse, you went to environmentalism, and then you went to energy and electricity. It sounded like you were getting back to a single basic principle. Then you went on to the logic of civilization, the logic of the nation-state and you even washed your hands with having met the rightist fundamentalist, who had his own definition of your civilization. I think your middle class is not the American middle class, it's got its feet both in state building and in being Indian, being Hindu. I just wondered whether there is an entrance within that to some kind of environmental protection.

Also, I don't think it's only the middle class, I suspect that there are a lot of groups across these boundaries. Isn't there some area where people who are Indian can claim their own civilization without just handing it over to the right-wing fundamentalists?

Visvanathan: I'm not handing it over to the right-wing fundamentalists. Let's make one thing perfectly clear with an example. I've just completed a work on what seems to be my continuing obsession: disasters. Our study of the Orissa cyclone has been very interesting. When I first started investigating, the question was, "Who saved Orissa if the government collapsed and the army left in fifteen days?" It was the RSS [The Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh]. The way that the RSS operated was fascinating. They had all the information computerized; they had people

from the villages feeding in data every second day. I spent a week roaming around with them, and the interesting thing is that they're not just appropriating civilization. I want to say that they're appropriating the best of managerial modernity. They're running away with two discourses.

I'm one of the old kinds of Indian democrats in that I believe the best way of fighting Hindutva, which is the communal right, is through the availability of Hinduism. I think that many ecological groups are trying to find resources in this kind of thing. But the question is, can it be an interesting heuristic? I think that the only example of an interesting heuristic was tied to the nationalist movement. So you could have a Gandhi, who was both Hindu and something more. The problem is when I consider India after 1947, I can think of particular groups that have done remarkable work, like the RSS in Orissa. But I am confronted with an interesting sort of paradox. At the moment of disaster, the best work was done by fundamentalists. How does a secular social scientist like me, who is also a "good Hindu," fight this? I am looking for the full heuristics of it.

On one level I can say that, yes, I can go back to my civilization, and I can go back to my certain notion of democracy. But it's getting tough. When you have what I call the unavailabilities of certain theories of Marxism, certain notions of socialism, certain ideas of justice, the broader sense of the democratic imagination, I think it's becoming more and more problematic. You can do one of two things. You can privatize your political theory, you can become politically correct in some happy niche in Delhi, whether it's the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Museum or the Delhi School of Economics, but when you step out, you get contaminated. And at that point, it becomes a question of which source in Indian civilization you are talking about.

My problem is, how do I take the best of Indian civilization and at the same time keep my modern, democratic imagination alive? It's not the hijacking of civilization I am worried about, it's this mix between what I call civilizational discourses and the question of looking at a critical notion of modernity. If I don't combine both, I might lose both. And this is what's happening in many of the villages and towns in India. They're getting the worst of modernity and the worst of tradition.

Charlotte Patton: Is your definition of civilization only Western-based?

Visvanathan: I hope not. Westernization and modernity I do not equate. But can we create our own modernities? The West is a part of me. Once I say that, I've got a certain kind of intellectual confidence that I can domesticate the West in India. I wouldn't go as far as some, who have said there should be bits of Portugal and France still left in, so that we have the availability of other colonialisms. But why not? Why not take a lot of these imaginations deeper into ourselves and digest them in a new way? To not get caught in the colonial/anti-colonial, national/multinational debate, I'm saying widen the discourse. This will help the West too. We are coming out to rescue you.

Seminar Ends