

Roundtable on “Environmental narratives: Urbanizing Environments and the Media”

(This roundtable is being organized by T. V. Padma)

Rationale:

India, like most Asian countries, is heading towards a rapid rise in urbanisation. The trend, closely linked to prospects of more employment opportunities in cities, translates into overcrowded, unmanageable cities growing in a disorganised manner. On the one hand, civic agencies, not the most efficient at best of times, are unable to provide basic amenities such as water and sanitation. As demands on natural resources such as land and water rise; and as industrial pollutants contaminate these resources increasingly, there are inescapable environmental consequences. The impacts on environment range from pollution of air, water and soil with toxic gases and wastes; to degradation of resources and loss of natural habitat. A more recent contributor is global warming that is beginning to impact cities too, as witnessed by the spurt in floods in cities caused by unusual torrential downpours that bring cities to a standstill. At the same time, cities are where political and economic power is concentrated, and where economic growth is most visible. Any criticism of urbanization can therefore be construed as criticism of economic growth itself.

Against this backdrop of pulls and pressures, the media plays a critical role in highlighting the crisis and concerns about urbanisation and environment. Whether it is air pollution in Delhi, the murder of a civil servant by the mining mafia in Rajasthan, the flourishing organic food retail business in Bangalore, the drinking water tanker business in Chennai, or the acquisition of pristine ecosystems for construction of gated colonies in the Western Ghats, news about the environment in the context of unfettered urbanisation, is delivered by the popular media.

This panel asks experts in the media how the news on urbanization and the environment is presented and delivered. It also explores “how” the media has demanded and enabled changes in policy, and further research (in the natural and social sciences), as well as how the media has responded to scientific research evidence on environmental issues related to urbanisation.

Beyond reporting, the media can, and do play a proactive role in pushing for change in government policy and practice on the ground. There is increasing awareness within the media that the discourse on urbanization and the environment reveals several historical biases, affinities to expected (perhaps not realizable) development trajectories, socially constructed hierarchies of knowledge, etc. This panel will discuss how, for instance, are these biases evident in the hype about air pollution and relative silence about sewerage, the excitement about technologies and no questions about the institutional arrangements that are necessary to make these technologies work for the urban populations?

The panelists will address the following key questions:

1) How does the media frame and construct urbanisation issues in the context of development and environment trade-offs? What are the key issues that media tends to and needs to highlight? Who speaks for the urban development demands and the urbanisation affected people?

2) What are the challenges that media faces in covering urbanisation-environment issues? Are there additional pressures on media that addressing environment concerns are

'blocking development'? Conversely is there a newer tendency to report on international concepts (many without adequate 'proof of concept' research) such as 'payment for ecosystem services' etc coined by international monetary organisations, without trying to see whether and to what extent they apply to local contexts?

3) How can media influence policy goals, and the nature of policy interventions? For instance, how does the media promote a regulatory intervention or an incentivising intervention? What are the key sources of evidence that the media uses, and how has the media prompted further research? Are there successful case studies, or other sources of evidence that the media uses?

Panelists:

- 1) Darry D'Monte, Chairman Emeritus of the Forum of Environmental Journalists in India (FEJI) and Founder President of the International Federation of Environmental Journalists (IFEJ).
- 2) Kalpana Sharma, Editorial Consultant with Economic and Political weekly, former deputy editor of The Hindu, author of *Rediscovering Dharavi: Stories from Asia's Largest Slum* (Penguin India).
- 3) Ammu Joseph, Freelance journalist, media analyst and editorial consultant. Co-author and co-editor, with Kalpana Sharma, of *Whose New? The Media and Women's Issues* (Sage). She is currently completing another book, commissioned by The Media Foundation, Delhi, on Indian women in journalism.
- 4) (TBD)

Moderator:

T. V. Padma: Journalist on science, environment and development; editor and correspondent with Nature and Physics World.