

CHAPTER  
FOUR

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## **Environment and Politics in India**

**T**he widespread assumption that the environment is of concern for advanced societies but not for developing countries is wrong. This is evident in South Asia. According to Anil Agarwal (1994: 346), the environment is ‘an idea whose time has come in India’.

For more than two decades, there has been a lively environmental debate along with a high degree of legislative activity in India. Of course, this intensified as a consequence of the Bhopal gas leak in 1984 (Khator, 1991; Krishna, 1996), which led to the Environment Protection Act of 1986. However, there is vast agreement that the results of various reforms and regulations have been disappointing. Implementation has been poor. India’s course of development is most likely unsustainable (Paulus, 1992). Its current development strategy is therefore increasingly disputed along lines of ecological considerations (Hörig, 1995).

According to a World Bank analysis (Brandon and Homman, 1996), the total cost of environmental damages in 1992 amounted to 9.7 billion US dollars in India. This was the equivalent of 4.5 percent

of GDP. The comparative figures for China and Mexico were 2.6 and 3.3 percent of GDP. In industrialized nations the annual environmental damage was estimated at one to two percent. Anil Agarwal (1996) considered the World Bank data for India to be underestimated as they did not account for the loss of biodiversity, health costs due to hazardous waste and deforestation impacts other than timber depletion.

Air and water pollution and lack of sanitation, garbage and sewage disposal and other basic urban services severely hamper the development of India's cities. The prime ecological worries in India's rural areas are soil erosion, deforestation, water pollution and the scarcity of safe drinking water. In the cities, up to one-third of household wastes are never collected by municipal services (Venkateswaran, 1994). The situation is particularly bad in slums, which house at least one-fifth of India's urban population. Up to three quarters of Indian city dwellers lack sanitation (J.M. Rao, 1995a).

Overall, India's environmental situation is bleak. J. Mohan Rao (1995a) claims that 60 percent of agricultural land is degraded to varying degrees. Semi-arid and fragile soils have been brought under the plough. Waterlogging, erosion, salinization and overgrazing add to the depletion. While the government targets one-third of the nation's land to be covered by forest, the ratio had dropped below 20 percent by the late 1980s. Seventy percent of surface waters are seriously polluted. Eighty percent of the population do not have permanent access to safe drinking water.

Such data prove that India needs effective environmental policies. Indeed, the issue has been of political concern since the early 1970s. This is discussed in the next section. Section 4.2 scrutinizes deficiencies in implementation. The failure of environmental policies has triggered opposition and social movements in India (section 4.3). The last section of this chapter reconsiders these phenomena in the case of the Calcutta agglomeration. Throughout this book, the emphasis will not so much be on the physical reality of India's environment, as it would be in an engineering context. As this is an effort in sociology, the focus will be on academic assessments of environmental initiatives and even more on governmental and semi-governmental reports that are normally expected to serve as guidelines for State action.

## **4.1 The Emergence of Environmental Policy**

In the early 1970s the environmental feasibility of economic growth became an issue of governmental concern in its own right for the first time in India. The impetus came from the 1972 United Nations Conference on Human Environment in Stockholm. This reflected the international trend.

Before, there had been environmentally relevant disputes, for instance, over the use of water or forests. In the case of India, such historical developments have recently been of academic interest (Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Arnold and Guha, 1995). However, it was only when the very survival of humankind was perceived to be threatened because of ecological degradation that environmental policies and bureaucracies began to emerge on national and international levels (Jänicke and Weidner, 1997, Jänicke et al., 1999). The Stockholm conference was of lasting impact in this sense.

As elsewhere, the environmental challenge was initially seen primarily as a threat to economic development in India. As quoted by Renu Khator (1991: 23), Prime Minister Indira Gandhi summed up this point of view in her address to the plenary session of the conference on 14 June 1972, stating:

On the one hand the rich look askance at our continuing poverty, on the other they warn us against their own methods. We do not wish to impoverish the environment any further and, yet, we cannot for a moment forget the grim poverty of large numbers of people. Are not poverty and need the greatest polluters?

In this perspective, environmental protection appeared to merely increase the costs of economic activity. It was thus considered unaffordable for developing countries. Environmental worries were seen as a concern mainly of the rich world—and yet another means to keep the poor world poor (Paulus, 1992). To some extent, this perspective still prevails. In the words of J. Mohan Rao (1995a: 681), ‘many in India today including government officials ... regard the environmental lobby as a child of northern conspiracy and northern funding’.

Even back in 1972, however, this was not the only attitude. Indira Gandhi returned from Stockholm having become something of an environmentalist herself. Renu Khator (1991) lists several reasons

why this prime minister with autocratic tendencies became interested in the issue. Indira Gandhi saw herself as a leader not only of her nation but of the Third World in general and was therefore eager to pursue what she saw as a progressive issue. More important, she used this, and other issues, to centralize power. Forests, water and energy had previously fallen exclusively under state legislation. Pressing environmental concerns provided an opportunity for constitutional reform, increasing the influence of the central government.

Finally, Indira Gandhi perceived the chance of using environmental issues in order to politically mobilize mass frustration by predominantly symbolic means. Khator labels the attempt to deal with environmental challenges without affecting the economic and social basis of the Indian society as ‘politics of reconciliation’ (1991: 22). While this may appear disappointing, it must be emphasized that it is typical of emerging environmental policies the world over to be chiefly symbolical at first (Jänicke and Weidner, 1997, Jänicke et al., 1999).

In 1974, the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act was passed. Since then, there has been ample legislative activity in India (Pathak, 1988). In 1976, the constitution was amended in order to include environmental protection among the principles ruling State policy and even individual behaviour:

- The State shall endeavour to protect and improve the environment and to safeguard the forests and wildlife. (Art. 48A)
- It shall be the duty of every citizen of India ... to protect and improve the natural environment including forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife, and to have compassion for living creatures. (Art. 51A)

International environmental politics continued to affect the Indian government, as has been exemplified by the Montreal Protocol, the international agreement to phase out ozone-depleting substances. While Indian diplomacy played a role in securing funds for poor nations to pursue this goal, the government had difficulty in developing a national strategy (Sims, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of course, there are technological problems involved here. However, implementation problems are also predictable, particularly as small-scale industries account for some two-thirds of the chlorofluorocarbons applied in India.

## **4.2 Implementation Deficits**

The 1974 Water Act serves as the paradigm of Indian environmental legislation and of its failure to achieve the desired goals. Khator (1991: 72) states that ‘from the very beginning, several loopholes existed in the Water Act, making it symbolic in nature and ineffective in practice’.

The Act established a network of State and Central Pollution Control Boards, but their hierarchy and responsibilities remained unclear. Neither acceptable limits of pollution nor clear time spans for their implementation were defined. Municipalities had been identified as the main polluters of India’s water bodies, but they were not made liable for prosecution.

By the mid-1980s, Khator (1991) counted more than fifty different items of environmental legislation in India, thirty of which dealt with pollution alone. There were various programmes of the central and state governments for afforestation and soil conservation. Major policy issues such as the prevention of air pollution and environmental protection in general became the jurisdiction of the Pollution Control Boards. In addition to their network, India today has a full-fledged Ministry of the Environment. It was initially established as the Department of the Environment in 1980 and turned into a ministry in 1985.

The vast bureaucracy did little more than create awareness and establish a monitoring network. According to Khator (1991: 100), the achievements of this organizational endeavour can be ‘summed up in a few sentences’:

The rate of deforestation has not been reduced; the level of pollution in water has not been decreased; and the quality of air has not been improved in any significant way....Even after ten years, the reports of the achievements of the Central Water Pollution Control Board emphasize activities rather than achievements.

As argued above, local power structures in India do not necessarily reflect constitutional aspirations. According to Khator, this also holds true for environmental regulations. She made out five core reasons for the almost complete failure of India’s environmental bureaucracy:

- the cost of enforcement for local officials,
- the cost of compliance for polluters,

- conflicting interests of state and central authorities,
- rivalry with other state or central departments, and
- the politicization of bureaucratic structures.

Khator's five arguments of 1991 are briefly summarized here.

While those who formulated policies were exposed to pressures by environmentally concerned international donor agencies, those in charge of implementation of the policies were under the pressures of powerful local elites, which include the usually well-connected owners of polluting industries. Within their bureaucracies, officials were held responsible for following procedural rules but not for the results of their actions. As they were generally perceived to be prone to corruption, there was no reputation to be lost. The future careers of the mostly frustrated and alienated low-ranking bureaucrats depended on their being perceived as not causing trouble. This scenario meant that the individual cost of enforcing strict environmental standards became considerably higher than that of paying lip service to procedures and neglecting environmental standards in practice.

For the polluters, in turn, the cost of compliance tended to be higher than the cost of non-compliance. Corruption, litigation and (rather unlikely and normally low) fines were cheaper than installing anti-pollution devices. Most industries were operating under considerable pressure to cut costs in highly competitive markets. The polluters' general view was that bureaucrats could be bought. Their local power alliances with high-ranking party and State officials were based more on suspicion than on mutual interest. Business people did not normally get involved in policy processes. The cost of lobbying would again have been higher than that of simple non-compliance. This, in turn, meant that legislation tended to be unrealistic in terms of economic viability, thus reinforcing polluters' general approach of non-compliance.

Institutional inefficiency was exacerbated by the fact that state governments had to implement central government policies. The relationship between them was often characterized by animosity. Beyond formal recognition, there tended to be little concern for the needs of other government levels. Authorities at the state level were likely to see environmental regulations primarily as the central government's tools to delay projects and to interfere in state interests.

The chances of successful environmental policy were further diminished by the fact that the bureaucracy concerned was a weak

player within the rivalry of various government agencies. It had no powerful clientele, nor even a clearly defined target group. Information about the confusing multitude of environmental hazards was still scarce in India, making the cost of action appear to be higher than the costs of inaction. Finally, the environmental bureaucrats had little legal means of enforcing their policy objectives if other agencies proved unwilling to cooperate.

The politicization of the administrative bodies along partisan lines further diminished motivation and efficiency. In day to day practice, loyalty to party personnel mattered more than policy compliance.

This scenario of 1991 still was basically accurate in 1998. However, public interest litigation had in the meantime given some clout to the Pollution Control Boards, as Deb Kumar Bose, chairman of the WBPCB, and other high ranking officers told me in interviews. Industries are now more afraid of increasing fines or closures of their companies in the case of non-compliance. Environmental consultancies have become good business because companies are required to prepare environmental impact assessments and are increasingly taking this matter seriously, particularly when large sums of investment are involved.

The general impression today is that the judiciary has become an ally for those in the environmental bureaucracy committed to the goal of their institutions. Books on environmental law include extensive chapters of public interest litigation (Shastri, 1990; Leelakrishnan, 1992). Leading judges are aware of their potentially decisive role, as the following quotation of former Supreme Court Chief Justice R.S. Pathak (1998: 1178f) exemplifies;

Where, however, there is no law on the subject it will be a question for consideration whether the [Supreme] Court, in the guise of affirmative action, can embark on a programme of environmental protection and enter into the area of law making. The Court has done so in some cases, assuming an 'activist' role, provoked no doubt by the absence of pertinent executive action or of the requisite legislation.

Nevertheless, Khator laments that Indian environmental policies have been mostly symbolic. While this complaint is common for OECD nations as well (Huber, 1991), in the case of India we are dealing with a keener perception of implementation deficits. Renu Khator (1991: 123) makes out as general deficiencies of India's institutional life:

Lack of rationality and neutrality in officials; absence of the public trust in the bureaucracy; presence of corruption and the acceptance of this corruption by the society; existence of the alliance between the elite and the ruling party; non-accountability of technicians; and finally, the domination of political patronage in policy processes.

Gadgil and Guha (1995: 48) agree with this dismal assessment of Indian government institutions:

Each department has developed a culture of a well-knit, highly organized group pursuing its own vested interests in an independent fashion. Of course, each department does interact with others to carve out the total share of the pie, but to no other useful purpose.

Given the sorry state of government affairs in India, it is naïve to merely suggest technocratic solutions to the ecological impasses. Specialized environmental courts, introduction of preventive strategies and modernization of public sector industries as suggested by Paulus (1992) can be of little help as long as societal conditions do not allow such instruments to operate effectively. Consequently, Paulus also demands greater transparency and public participation, as do an increasing number of Indian citizens (Qaiyum, 1997).

Granting that ‘ambient standards of air and water pollution continue to be routinely exceeded and in some places quality has distinctly deteriorated’, a radical overhaul of India’s environmental policies has been mooted (Mehta et al., 1997: 17). In tune with the recent international debate, the argument is that restrictions and government regulations are less efficient than fiscal incentives. However, this approach has little to offer in terms of safeguarding implementation. Fiscal instruments, of course, would depend on tax collection effectively covering the entire economy, something not to be taken for granted.

There will be little doubt that the senses of ecological threats and frustration with government action are particularly strong in India. However, it must be kept in mind that the emergence of the specific policy arena in India is following a pattern that has been made out internationally (Jänicke and Weidner, 1997, Jänicke et al., 1999). It is normal for environmental politics to begin with symbolical measures and then to become more stringent over the years (not least as the result of an increasingly intense public debate).

### **4.3 Opposition to Government Deficiencies**

In view of India's urgent ecological crisis, social protests and opposition movements have been emerging, mostly at local levels. The Chipko activities to protect mountain forests and the mass campaigns against the Narmada Dam project have gained international media coverage. They are examples of grassroots political opposition gaining momentum (Guha, 1989; Krishna, 1996; Baviskar, 1997). Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1994) list them as the most prominent examples of environment-related political activities throughout India.

India has a long tradition of conflicts over the use of natural resources. Disputes with a clear environmental aspect have occurred at least since the British rule in 19th century (Gadgil and Guha, 1992; Arnold and Guha, 1995). However, arguments over the right to consume forest materials or of access to water were then seen to be rather of a social than of an environmental nature (Gadgil and Guha, 1994). Ecological issues were interpreted as matters of resource distribution not concerning the long-term ability of society as a whole to survive.

Gadgil and Guha (1992) stress that up to today many environment-related conflicts in India have a sharper social edge than in the industrialized countries. The livelihood and survival of those poor who are living at subsistence level are normally harmed whenever land use, water access or urban space are in dispute (Viegas and Menon, 1989).

Sumi Krishna (1996) points out that for poor people involved in conflicts viewed as environmental by scholars or journalists, the emphasis is still likely to be on the protection of their immediate livelihood. This includes the internationally known Chipko and Narmada movements (Guha, 1989; Baviskar, 1997). In the first case, villagers' rights to access and use the forest were at stake. In the second case, farmers do not want their land to be flooded. For these movements, ecological reasoning has become a resource in the socio-economic struggle to protect livelihood. This helped to create coalitions that went beyond single communities.

Krishna compares the Chipko and the Narmada movements to similar cases in which people were mobilized along linguistic or caste lines. The former tend to be less violent and more effective in rallying

support from outside their respective regions. They also appear to be more successful in securing the livelihood of the people involved. Environmental arguments mobilize entire networks in civil society and give wider scope for successfully opposing government power. Grassroots movements emphasizing environmental aspects have found academic support. Members of India's urban elites take interest in these issues. The first widely regarded non-government documentations of environmental decay were published by the Centre for Science and Environment (1982, 1985).

Critical social scientists and economists generally demand a new development model. They claim that the current policies of structural adjustment and world market integration are adding to ecological disaster tendencies (e.g. Shiva, 1991; Arun Ghosh, 1994, Gadgil and Guha, 1995; J.M. Rao, 1995b; P. Sheth, 1997). Empowerment of the rural masses is meant to lead to greater environmental protection. Particularly the rural poor, after all, depend immediately on the biomass production of their village and surroundings.

Skeptical of reducing complexity by means of such somewhat romanticist ideologies, Sumi Krishna (1996) warns that it is very likely a misconception to believe that the rural poor are inherently more protective of the environment. Nor does she consider women to be necessarily more ecologically aware than men, as suggested by 'eco-feminist' writers (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

Sentimental visions of small village communities living in harmony with nature will easily appeal to the educated, urban elite (Krishna, 1996; Baviskar, 1997). However, for the people concerned, the day-to-day reality may be one of grim struggle for survival. Given the choice, many might indeed opt for the consumerist development model both enjoyed and despised by members of the urban environmentalist elite. Both Krishna and Baviskar basically call for more participative democracy to resolve such dilemmas. This, in the end, is politically the same demand as that made by those accused of romanticism, with the difference that Krishna and Baviskar do not expect immediate ecological relief.

As discussed in Chapter 3, public interest litigation has become an important arena for environmentalists (Shastri, 1990; Sharma, 1993). Before turning to the case studies that will elaborate such matters, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the local context of Calcutta.

#### **4.4 The Situation of the Calcutta Agglomeration**

The environmental situation of the Calcutta agglomeration and the state of its environmental polity reflect what has been stated so far for the entire nation. The Metropolitan Area faces tremendous environmental challenges, as has been amply documented on behalf of the state government itself (A.K. Ghosh, 1988, 1991; State Planning Board, 1990; CEMSAP 1995).

However, the activities of the authorities responsible have, in general, been more symbolic than effective. Opposition to inadequate and unimplemented government planning has been organized by various groups and associations, with many concerned citizens now resorting to public interest litigation. However, the activists normally are from the middle class. Their campaigns are not based on a struggle for their immediate livelihood.

This section first assesses the major environmental problems of the Calcutta area. It then examines programmatic government documents that, overall, have not been implemented. Finally, the environmentalist action groups are discussed.

Before turning to these environmental issues, it is useful to briefly discuss governance in West Bengal on a more general level. In the 1960s and 1970s this state was exposed to serious civil strife and was perhaps even the most troubled state in India. 'One measure of the chaos that existed in Calcutta in 1970 and 1971 is that, even under presidential rule, there could be as many as 60 political murders committed in a day. Politics became a dangerous profession' (Kohli, 1990: 130). Today, this no longer holds true.

In 1977, a Left Front coalition dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) gained a solid majority in the state assembly. It has since been repeatedly re-elected. It is generally considered successful in having re-established civil peace and implemented some reforms (Kohli 1987, 1990; Webster, 1992, 1995; Lieten, 1994, 1996; Chatterjee, 1997b). It is true that some writing supports the Left Front in West Bengal only with critical scepticism (Echeverri-Gent, 1992; Engelsen Ruud, 1994; Sengupta and Gazdar, 1997). Increasingly, it has been stated that the Left Front is pressing less and less for progressive social change, but rather has assumed the role of a power broker (Olnhausen, 1990; Webster, 1995). Nonetheless, even its harshest critic blames it only for not performing

above average, rather than for particular abuses of power (Mallick, 1992, 1993).

The progressive policies implemented by the Left Front were predominantly focused on the rural areas. They included a modest land reform and the establishment of village self-administration (panchayat raj). Contrary to what many well-to-do citizens of Calcutta express, the Metropolitan Area was not totally neglected. There have been noticeable improvements in traffic infrastructure and slum settlements, as is elaborated in the next sections. Nonetheless, the environmental challenges remain daunting, and some of the most important duties of city management, for instance urban planning, have not been carried out in a satisfactory way.

#### *4.4.1 The Major Challenges*

Calcutta has a reputation for ‘urban decay’ (B. Banerjee, 1990: 27). According to the State Planning Board (1990: 204), it is ‘one of the worst polluted cities in the world’. Major problems include waste water, industrial effluents, poor sanitation and drainage, air pollution, noise, traffic congestion, and high population density (also United Nations, 1986; State Planning Board, 1990; Chakraborti, 1990; A.K. Ghosh, 1991).

A few selected data and figures from the State Planning Board’s report will suffice to illustrate the dimension of Calcutta’s environmental drama. Measurements of suspended particulate matter in the urban air went up to almost 420  $\mu\text{g}$  per cubic metre (compared to an allowable limit of 90  $\mu\text{g}$ ). Sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide also exceeded the allowable limits. The mean noise levels in residential areas such as Shyambazar and Gariahat rose above 80 decibels (compared to average human tolerance level of 60 to 65 decibels). Calcutta has less than half an acre of open space per 1000 inhabitants (compared to the international standard of four acres). The CEMSAP report of 1995 confirmed these trends.

The picture for waste water disposal was equally dismal: ‘Calcutta and Howrah are not fully covered with underground system of sewage disposal. Most of the areas are serviced by open drains. Treatment facilities are inadequate wherever existing’ (State Planning Board, 1990: 201). In some of the unsewered areas bucket latrines are still regularly emptied manually, a system causing health hazards and environmental nuisance: ‘This socially degrading system is a scar on

the three hundred year old city', writes K.J. Nath (1991: 300) in his contribution to a book published by the state government on the occasion of Calcutta's tercentenary (Dasgupta et al., 1991).

The same can be said for garbage disposal. There is no overall collection from individual households (CEMSAP, 1995). Rather, the sidewalks are swept and solid waste gathered in handcarts. Labourers bring the garbage to intermediary collection points on roadsides. From there it is removed by truck to waste disposal sites on the fringes of the city. Estimates of the backlog of uncollected solid waste range from 10 to 20 percent (Chakraborti, 1990) to some 30 or even more percent (State Planning Board, 1990; CEMSAP, 1995) in the Calcutta Corporation, the best-served area of the metropolitan district.

Ragpickers and animals roam through the waste piling up at the roadside and in the collection points. Neither the trucks nor the handcarts are specifically designed for garbage collection (K.J. Nath, 1991). Roughly 400 tonnes of waste were estimated to be dumped daily in canals, drains and open spaces around slum and squatter settlements, creating serious health hazards (CEMSAP, 1995: 3.40). Garbage was dumped in an unorganized manner, and sanitary landfills did not exist (CEMSAP, 1995). Garbage was used by private landowners to raise low-lying terrains prior to construction of new buildings. Up to 1999, there was no separate disposal system for hospital waste.

Calcutta's urban crisis is exacerbated by several factors. First, the metropolitan district is a poor and densely populated urban agglomeration. Roughly one-third of the population live in slum and squatter settlements (United Nations, 1986). In terms of per capita income, Calcutta ranks last among India's metropolises. Petty trading and other forms of informal economic activities provide a living for large sections of the population. This agglomeration is the most densely populated urban area in India. On an average, 8000 inhabitants lived in every square kilometre in 1990, with the figure surpassing 30,000 for the city of Calcutta proper (CMDA, 1990).

Second, Calcutta's industrial base is probably the oldest in Asia. In colonial times, industrialization started on the banks of the Hoogly in the 1860s and 1870s (A.K. Mukherjee, 1992). The industrial progress of this region was stalled for several decades beginning in the 1960s. This was due to diverse influences such as labour unrest and unfavourable central planning (United Nations, 1986). Tiny

small-scale industries and a number of industrial dinosaurs surviving only on subsidies today characterize the manufacturing structure. In 1988, the metropolitan area housed almost 150,000 industrial units providing employment for some 1.2 million persons. Many units were considered environmentally hazardous, and most do not follow norms and scientific procedures in discharging wastes and emissions (State Planning Board, 1990: 200).

Third, the urban agglomeration has grown for over 300 years in an almost completely unplanned manner. Apart from the 'British' area in the city centre between Park Street and the government buildings at Dalhousie Square, the city was allowed to sprawl unchecked. 'In the pre-independence period there was no national policy or strategy to guide or influence urbanization', summarizes Tapan K. Banerjee (1991: 30). The Calcutta Improvement Trust was established as late as 1911 (Bhattacharya, 1990; Banerjee, 1991). Even then, it was not designed to come up with a comprehensive urban development plan. Rather, it conceived and implemented some isolated but expensive projects such as the construction of the Dhakuria Park and Southern Avenue complex.

Commercial, industrial and residential areas are not separated. The traffic infrastructure is inadequate and not systematically laid out. Calcutta also houses a vast wholesale market in the centre of the city. Cargo pours into the city by truck and train. Traffic congestion is particularly bad between the two main railroad stations, Howrah and Sealdah, where, in addition to motorized vehicles, coolies and handcart pullers deliver all kinds of merchandise.

Immediately after independence, Calcutta had to deal with the massive influx of refugees from what had become East Pakistan. Only in the 1960s did concerted urban planning efforts begin. A WHO report highlighted the risk of epidemics in this overcrowded city with poor infrastructure. In 1970 the Calcutta Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA) was formed; it is the statutory planning body for the entire metropolis (Bhattacharya, 1990 and Banerjee, 1991). It is directly responsible to the state government.

The CMDA has operated with considerable success in some areas. Its achievements in slum improvement are acknowledged by critics of the state government (Forum for Calcutta, 1988). Reform of the tenancy laws has given the residents legal security. The vast majority of the city slums have been provided with paved footpaths, tubewells and community latrines. The slums have been connected to the

electricity grid. They are generally better maintained than those in other major cities, for instance Bombay or Delhi—not least because the residents (no longer facing immediate threats of eviction) invest in their housing.

The government has also tackled some infrastructural problems. Calcutta, once famous for power failures for hours on end, had a fairly reliable electricity supply in the 1990s. Thanks to major construction projects such as the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass, the Second Hoogly Bridge and the underground Metro Rail, traffic runs considerably faster. The CMDA deserves its fair share of credit for this.

However, this government body has not succeeded in drafting, publishing and enforcing adequate development plans for the area under its jurisdiction. The CMDA's own categoric assessment (CMDA, 1990:9.1) reads: 'The chaotic sprawl that had plagued this metropolis during the last four decades will have to be checked with determination'.

#### 4.4.2 *Administrative Slack*

Ashis K. Ghosh (1991: 61) highlights the lack of systematic planning as follows: 'This trend continues more than 20 years after the Basic Development Plan (1966-1986) for metropolitan Calcutta came out'. According to this author (1991: 64), the consequences are serious: 'The absence of any zoning system and continuous violation of existing norms are the major reason for the present dismal environmental situation'.

The CEMSAP (1995) report summarizes the following deficiencies: Subsequent planning documents were not consistent. The growth pattern of the agglomeration did not follow the proposed outlines. Decentralization of the urban core was as rarely addressed as environmental issues. Finally, many reports were only internal papers and not legally binding. The report says: 'To date, only development control plans for Howrah and Calcutta have been prepared, and unplanned growth in fringe areas continues' (CEMSAP, 1995: 5.20).

Given Calcutta's socio-economic state as a subsistence city and its history or urban crisis, there can be little doubt that improving the environment will be a daunting task by any international standard (B. Banerjee, 1990). It is, in the words of a British consultant, 'constant fire-fighting' (Green, interview).

In this context, it appears encouraging that the CMDA has conceptually recognized the relevance of environmental matters. It is worth citing at length from its 1990 'Plan for Metropolitan Development 1990-2015' (p. 6.3):

Development projects should be environmentally sound. Otherwise, it will not be possible to sustain the development. The metropolitan development plan, therefore, should have provision for

- conservation of nature, the wetland and wildlife to maintain ecological balance,
- ecologically balanced waste water disposal system recycling the waste resources as manure, fish protein and irrigation water, and thereby relieving natural water courses from the nuisance of eutrophication,
- conservation of greeneries, parks and public open spaces and water fronts along the river, canals and lakes,
- regulatory measures for reducing air, water and noise pollution,
- extensive tree plantation and social forestation, prohibition of indiscriminate abstraction of ground water, development of sanitation low cost and appropriate facilities for all, and
- safe and hygienic disposal of solid wastes in form of sanitary land fill and garbage farming as well as incineration, energy recovery and composting.

In addition to this last the CMDA (1990: 6.3) states:

A major concern of metropolitan development should be to ensure environmental restoration and conservation. This will involve systematic study of environmental impact assessment with environmental mapping.

This text basically expresses what would be the dream of most environment activists in the metropolitan area today. We will return to almost every single item in our analysis of two major matters litigated in court. Both passages quoted here were copied and, nearly word for word, included in an environmental chapter in a 1992 CMDA document concerning the development of Howrah. We will return to the second document in the case study of the *Howrah Matter* in Chapter 6. Yet another passage (CMDA, 1990: 6.10) has lasting appeal for Calcutta's environmentalist NGOs:

For effective decentralization of planning and development, public participation is essentially required. The most essential basic objective of any action for metropolitan development is to maximize community benefit. The purpose of implementing development control measures is also to protect community

interests against individual gains. The Development Plan, therefore, should have the approval of the people.

The paper explicitly recommends the involvement of slum committees, important NGOs, professional bodies, chambers of commerce and cooperatives in urban planning. This has not happened. Rather, the report, like most government documents, is not publicly available.

As has been stated for India in general, the authorities' track record for the implementation of such well-conceived intentions is rather depressing. While the Left Front government of West Bengal reformed legislation for urban planning soon after it gained power in the late 1970s, documents sponsored by the very same government constantly reiterate the need for determined execution.

In its chapter on environment, the State Planning Board's Perspective Plan draft recommended the implementation of existing laws 'with all possible seriousness' (p. 209) and the 'rigid enforcement of the Town and Country Planning Act (1979) along with other (Central) Acts' (p. 210). And the CMDA (1990), in its basic chapter on environment, points out that urban planning should be exercised 'under the Town and Country Planning Act'.

Smoke nuisance legislation was introduced in Calcutta as early as 1863 (Amit Mitra, 1992; Anderson, 1995), but it still suffers from obvious governmental and administrative neglect.<sup>2</sup> In an essay for the feature page of *The Statesman* (5.1.1998), Chinmoy Mazumdar complained that politicians and bureaucrats had turned the CMDA into an 'ideal environment for open corruption' with the result that the Master Plan for the Metropolitan Area was 'still not charted even though the CMDA was statutorily established 27 years ago to do the same'.

Such complaints are typical of South Asian mega-cities. According to the World Bank (1999), the development authorities of Delhi and Bangalore particularly have reputations of inefficiency and corruption among the citizens dealing with them. Pretty much the

<sup>2</sup> Apparently, the colonial administration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century faced tremendous difficulties implementing anti-smoke policies. They remained ineffective for years. Eventually, regulations put the burden of reducing smoke entirely on the workers operating the smoke-stacks rather than on the industry owners. Only after this compromise between administrators and capitalists was reached, on the back of labour, did the legislation have some impact (Anderson, 1995).

same complaints have been made in the case of Pakistan's business hub Karachi and its development authority (Zaidi, 1997).

It must be emphasized that skepticism concerning the track record of urban planning is not confined to non-government agents. Ashis K. Ghosh (1991: 82) concludes in his essay dealing with Calcutta's environment and written on behalf of West Bengal government for a book to celebrate Calcutta's tercentenary:

The problems have long been identified. Many solutions have been evolved, proposed and accepted, but implementation has not been forthcoming or started and been abandoned halfway through. The quality of life in the city of Calcutta can even now be improved with determination and effort, otherwise, the problems would only accumulate and get worse and neglect would become more pervasive.

#### 4.4.3 *Environmental Activists*

Reflecting the national trend, there has also been a growth in citizens' groups that campaign for environmental improvement. The current network of NGOs has two distinct roots: neighbourhood and community initiatives concerned with their immediate surroundings, on the one hand, and nature lovers and conservationists, on the other. While the first might be considered to be basically pursuing environmentally relevant strategies, the latter group clearly has an environmentalist outlook with an interest in the maintenance of the ecological balance. For practical political purposes in Calcutta, however, this distinction is not relevant. Both groups have found support from engineers and scientists.<sup>3</sup>

Some NGOs date back to the early 1950s. The Tollygunge Development Council was formed as a reaction to the particular problems arising from the massive influx of refugees. It initially campaigned for better infrastructure, such as the Tollygunge railway bridge and railway station. The Howrah Ganatantrik Nagarik Samiti, also concerned with the immediate neighbourhood, was formed in 1978, when a strike of municipal workers had put sanitation facilities out of order for weeks on end. Such local groups increasingly pick up environmental issues.

Other environmental NGOs in Calcutta are generally concerned with nature conservation. In 1971, the World Wide Fund for Nature

<sup>3</sup> The data presented here mostly rely on ethnographic field work during my research in Calcutta, as will be discussed in Chapter 7, section 7.1.

started its branch office for East India in Calcutta. Besides funding projects, it has spawned nature clubs in many of the city's schools. Former regional directors of this international organization now play crucial roles in other organizations such as People United for Better Living in Calcutta (PUBLIC) and Forum for Action and Coordination on Environment (FACE). These again overlap with Prakriti Samsad, as association of some sixty amateur birdwatchers and botanists.

A 1996 membership list of Calcutta 36, a loose umbrella organization, indicates some fifty groups in the city and the metropolitan area. Some relevant NGOs, particularly from outside Calcutta's city limits, are not members. Neither the Howrah Ganatantrik Nagarik Samiti nor the South Howrah Development Association have joined Calcutta 36.

These NGOs have a wide range of activities, including various methods of awareness-raising such as seminars and demonstrations, publication of leaflets, or academic expertise on matters such as garbage, traffic, or water disposal. Prakriti Samsad specializes in nature excursions and wildlife observation. Other organizations tidy up garbage before holidays in order to set an example and embarrass the municipal corporation.

The activities of some NGOs are confined to particular neighbourhoods, others aspire to cover all of the metropolis. Some cooperate closely with government authorities, for instance by taking responsibility for maintaining certain public parks. While there is strong criticism of State failures, this does not, in most cases, add up to clear-cut partisan opposition to the ruling Left Front coalition in power at both the state and the city levels in Calcutta and Howrah. Many involved persons define themselves as 'leftists' and claim to normally vote for the CPM and its allies. Most consider the Congress Party even less efficient and committed.

Only a few of these NGOs interact and cooperate closely. Others eye one another with a sense of suspicion and competition. There is a tendency, as in social movements elsewhere, of personal animosities as well as friendly feelings affecting the quality of coordination. Overall, the interaction is difficult. As will be elaborated in Chapter 7, the NGOs could very likely achieve more if they mustered enough mutual trust to cooperate more closely. So far, there is hardly any division of labour or active mutual support.

Typically, these groups consist almost exclusively of Bengalis with an educated, upper caste background. English-speaking abilities

are an important status symbol. Travelling abroad is not uncommon for these people. Several of them have worked or studied in the United States, the United Kingdom or other advanced industrial countries.

Caste is generally declared to be irrelevant in Calcutta. However, it cannot be a coincidence that most of the people named in Calcutta 36's membership list as representative of over fifty associated organizations are upper caste Brahmins, Kayasthas or Baidyas. Muslims, who make up a large share of Calcutta's population, are not represented in these organizations, and nor are other communities that make up the bulk of Calcutta's poor population. It is worth pointing out that members of the upper castes also make up the vast majority of government, administration and party leadership. There are only isolated Muslims or tribals in their ranks. The same goes for the judiciary.

Apparently, environment is not an urgent issue for those struggling for their day-to-day subsistence, even though pavement and slum dwellers are among the most severely exposed to environmental hazards. Again, as elsewhere in the world, Calcutta's environmental NGOs find it easier to mobilize people of their own social strata than to reach out to others.

As education levels coincide with caste status, it is impossible for the foreign researcher to make out which distinction is more important. In Calcutta, reservations of social interaction such as not sharing meals with people of other castes are seldom seen. This does suggest that here the symbolic capital of good education and fluency in English matter more.

Contacts with the urban poor are possible. FACE, for instance, is involved in a sanitation improvement programme in a slum neighbourhood along the Tolly Nullah Canal. However, such contacts are difficult to establish and to maintain. Well-to-do NGOs do not easily gain poor people's trust. Purnima Dutta of FACE told me: 'We have to convince *them* that we want something for *them*' (emphasis added). However, as will be elaborated in Chapter 7, trust is also fragile with other groups of one's own social background.