INDIASCAPES:
REFLECTING ON INDIA AT THE 11TH EASA CONFERENCE

• MARI KORPELA AND JONATHAN MILES-WATSON •

The recent Commonwealth Games opening ceremony aimed to showcase the places and people of India to the world. The image it sought to project (of a united yet diverse place, where the past and the present sat comfortably together) was at odds with the image that Western-based media companies had projected in the weeks building up to the games. This latter vision was of India as a chaotic and wild place, where hygiene was questionable and planning imprecise. This is no surprise, for these elements of the modern Indian landscape often attract the Western gaze. This summer a group of academics came together at the annual meeting of European social anthropologists in an attempt to somewhat rectify the selective nature of this gaze through a presentation of different reflections on (and of) landscapes of contemporary India. The group, which consisted of both Indian and Western academics, gathered together for two panels, connected by the workshop title 'Indiascapes: reflections of contemporary India'.[1] It was part of a larger academic conference, the 11th biennial conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), which attracted over 1,100 academics. Most participants came from Europe but there were also delegates from Asia, Africa, Latin America and North America. The theme of the conference was 'Crisis and Imagination' and Professor Talal Asad gave the keynote speech. The conference was hosted by the National University of Ireland, Maynooth; the organising team included the local department of anthropology, EASA and NomadIT (a professional event organising team).

The Indiascapes workshop

'Indiascapes' (Dubey and Dubey 2003; Ciocca and Laudando 2008), obviously paraphrased from Appadurai (1996), is a term used to articulate India's cultural richness, its complexity and ambiguity; although it is in itself a cliché it is true to say that India is so variegated that one should perhaps talk about Indias in the plural, rather than the singular. India is often viewed as a country of colours, spirituality and/or poverty. On the other hand, it is a country with a booming IT industry and buzzing metropoles. Our workshop aimed to look at various aspects of contemporary India, going beyond the stereotypical images that first come to Western minds. India is a country of diversity, thus it also offers opportunities for diverse anthropological research.

The aim of our workshop was to generate a sense of the relationality of dynamic, contemporary Indiascapes. The workshop explored, through the presentation of specific case studies, the extent to which imaginings of India are reinforced or undermined by everyday practice. We also discussed notions of change as presenting new opportunities, change as disorientating, tradition as comforting and tradition as constraining. The fact that the workshop participants came from both India and Europe provided a fruitful

forum for diverse discussions. Furthermore, the audience was active in posing comments and questions to the presenters. In spite of the fact that our workshop took place on the last conference day, it turned out to be a very stimulating event.

Religion and puppets

The first panel of the Indiascapes workshop focussed on the way that history is being invoked in new ways to generate powerful landscapes in contemporary India. The session had three presenters: Jonathan Miles-Watson (University of Tallinn), Markha Valenta (University of Amsterdam) and Manpreet Kaur (Delhi University). At the heart of all the presenters' papers was ethnographic description of the landscapes that they had encountered during recent extended fieldwork in India. However, while Kaur's work focussed on an area within which she was already embedded, Miles-Watson's drew from fieldwork with a group with which he had previously been only partially familiar, and Valenta had chosen to focus on a region to which she had few prior connections. Geographically the papers covered an area stretching from Mumbai in the south (Valenta) to the foothills of Himalaya's in the north (Miles-Watson). The papers in this session all focused on urban India, with two of the papers (those of Valenta and Kaur) dealing with megacities and one (Miles-Watson) discussing the landscape of a comparatively small state capital. Religion was a factor in all three papers: two of the papers (Miles-Watson and Valenta) discussed landscapes explicitly associated with world religions and one (Kaur) only implicitly connected with religious traditions and practices.

The session began with a paper by Miles-Watson entitled 'Worshipping with Ghosts: historical presence in the contemporary landscapes of Shimla's churches'. The paper challenged the dominant vision of Christianity in India by presenting the way that personal memory, historical time and mythical time are blended together in Shimla's church landscapes. Miles-Watson began his paper by presenting an image of the Himalayan Mountains which, he argued, resonated with most people due to the power of generalised narratives about such landscapes. He then moved from this general picture of the Himalayas to present a detailed description of life as lived in one particular Himalayan location, that of Shimla (Himachal Pradesh). He contrasted the general understanding of Himalayan landscapes with the sense of dwelling within a particular Himalayan life world. Building on the work of anthropologists such as Tilley (1994) and Ingold (2000, 2007), geographers such as Wiley (2005, 2007), and Tallinn University's interdisciplinary landscape project,[2] he defined landscape as a relational process of constant becoming. This involves the weaving together of human and nonhuman, animate and inanimate people.

The next section of Miles-Watson's paper highlighted Christ Church Cathedral, Shimla, as a key landscape for unlocking the structural systems of contemporary Shimla. Christ Church was once an Anglican cathedral (dating from 1844), but today it is part of the Church of North India. Using a mixture of auto-ethnography and collected accounts he demonstrated that many of the congregation come to understand their present worship as connected with past worship. This allows a connection with the ancestors of the space, which he suggested can be seen to reinforce Ingold's (2000) classic comments about church

landscapes. However, Miles-Watson further suggested that his fieldwork experiences called for Ingold's model to be revised. He reasoned that engaging Ingold's work with complex sites of historical trauma, such as Shimla, leads to a rethinking of aspects of Ingold's analysis that rest on the assumption of population stability. Miles-Watson focussed on Ingold's discussion of the church graveyard and presented a contrasting account of Christ Church's memorials. This was developed by relating three series of church ghost stories. The first of these belonged to long-term, Hindu residents of Shimla, the second to long term, Christian residents and the third to migrant converts. Through an analysis of these stories Miles-Watson neatly demonstrated a range of understandings of the church landscape (or churchscape), which stretched from intimate personal involvement to a sense of being out of place in the church. Strikingly, he argued that although it may seem that some of the people mentioned are more aligned with the humans in Ingold's description than others, they are all actually notably distinct. This key distinction arises from Shimla's traumatic history, which creates a situation where all the people discussed (in contrast to Ingold's example) connect through the church landscape with a past that their genetic ancestors were barred from participating in.

Miles-Watson concluded by suggesting that churchscapes in Shimla seem to go beyond simply connecting with the past in the way that Sheldrake (2001) and Ingold (2000) have described, for they allow for a connection through rupture (Sauer 1925), which is more reminiscent of Lévi–Strauss' (1969) notion of the way that cold-culture myth operates. However, despite the notion of rupture being central to his argument, Miles-Watson maintained that his focus on the ability of Christian landscapes to connect through rupture makes his argument rather different to recent discussions in the anthropology of Christianity, which have been dominated by the trope of disjunction (Engelke and Tomlinson [eds] 2006). During the question period, links were developed between the landscape of Shimla and Colombo, especially as represented in the writings of Duncan (2004) and Stirrat (1992).

Markha Valenta spoke next and shifted the audience's gaze to a Hindu temple in Mumbai for her paper, 'A Moving Sight: lining up for Mumbai's Siddhivinayak temple'. She began by arguing that the dominant view of modern landscapes (as something anti-sedentary) is an overused and somewhat unhelpful narrative (Szerszynski and Urry 2006). Instead, she suggested that we should be approaching modern landscapes as existing somewhere between mobility and stasis. Furthermore, she stated her desire to focus on the way that discontinuity, mobility and belonging become an area of contestation within these landscapes. This she claimed to be rather different to many discussions which focus on the classification of landscapes into static or mobile types. In taking this standpoint she can be seen as following the recent suggestions of Bender (2001) Balzani (2001) and Harvey (2001). Valenta the applied these general discussions to specific data drawn from her fieldwork in Mumbai at the Siddhivinayak temple.

The Siddhivinayak temple has an instantly recognisable landscape and name. This is because it is the temple of choice for the rich and famous in Mumbai. However, this has not always been the case and when the temple was founded in the nineteenth century it was fairly humble. In the 1990s the temple became increasingly associated with famous Bollywood actors who brought it increasing levels of fame and glamour which are reflected in changes in its structural development. Today it draws 200,000

visitors a day, many of them well known popular figures, including famous actors, sports stars and politicians—a second noticeable change in the temple landscape. Valenta linked this last change to an increase in security that has occurred in recent years: the temple's entrance has become like an entrance to an airport, with metal detectors, scanners and vigilant guards. In this way it is clearly part of the wider tightening of security in India's metropoles, as anyone who has recently visited an upmarket shopping mall, or multiplex, in India well knows. For Valenta, an important consequence of this increased security was the restriction of access to the site, which contributed to the increasing elitism of the temple. The geography surrounding the temple that she described seemed to confirm this, with the recent removal of more affordable housing to make room for new luxury apartments. Interestingly, Valenta related that these are sold as having a view capable of giving *darshan* (beholding the Divine, normally at the same time as being beheld).

Valenta also located her work within that of new research into cyberspace worship, such as that of Dawson and Cowan (2004). She recounted how the Siddhivinayak temple now offers the opportunity to book *puja* (ritual worship) online and runs a *prashad* (ritual food offering) home-delivery service. This further alters the physical landscape of the temple by taking people away from it, at the same time as entrenching the projection of the temple (and its activities) as a realm that is increasingly out of bounds for the lower classes. Valenta concluded by suggesting that in seeking to manage who can (and who cannot) engage with the temple landscape, the temple management have inserted themselves into the latest global discourse of exclusivity and immobility. During the question period the strong connection between this case and wider movements to heighten security in India were developed.

The final paper of the first session 'The Puppet in the City' was presented by Manpreet Kaur. This paper moved the focus of the workshop geographically to the capital city of Delhi. It also marked a thematic shift in the discussion, moving from considering how overtly religious spaces sit in the contemporary city landscape to exploring how implicitly religious practices are remade to fit into the landscape of the secular city. Kaur began her paper by outlining the various dichotomies that lie at the heart of the study of puppetry. Drawing upon Tillis (1992) she argued that the puppet has widely contrasting roles, for while it is sometimes considered a momentary appearance of the Divine, at others is merely a figure of children's amusement. This is not surprising as the puppet is a figure of paradox within which the complex relationships between performer and puppet, audience and entertainment, tradition and innovation and the secular and the sacred all come together. In particular, Kaur highlighted two key issues for her study, the aesthetics/skill of the performer and the imagination of the audience. However, Kaur argued that she did not seek to side with one of these binaries, but rather to apply the paradox of the binary to the contemporary situation. In order to develop this theory Kaur presented an overview of Sanjit Ghosh's television program for children, 'Buddha Baba Ki Potli', which draws from the Arabian Nights' stories, and the Ishara Puppet Theatre Trust's performance 'Transposition', which is based on a *Pancha Tantra* (animal) story. Kaur suggested that while the former utilised a childish visual appeal, the latter employed more symbolic methods of representation.

Kaur then briefly talked about the way that post-independence puppetry, in addition to developing as children's entertainment, had also been channelled into approved purposes.

In particular these have taken the form of educational puppet shows, which address often taboo subjects (the use of contraception and the danger of sexually transmitted diseases). Kaur demonstrated that this attempt to make political use of the image of the puppet happened at the same time as attempts to freeze the image of the puppet by incorporating it into institutions, such as Delhi's doll museum. The puppet then was popularised and institutionalised (in two distinct ways) at the same time. Kaur concluded this section with the suggestion that these diverse adaptations of traditional puppetry share an idea that in order to communicate effectively in the modern heterogeneous city the puppet must become more of a sign and less of a symbol (Ortner 1973).

In her final movement Kaur talked about several contemporary attempts to innovatively use puppets in the modern city. These include the Puppet Theatre Trust's performance of 'Transposition' and a recent production of Gandhi's life, which received very mixed responses from the audience. Kaur suggested that the mixed response to this latter show reflects a tension that lies at the heart of what puppetry means in the modern city. The paper concluded by arguing that when spatial movement and the passage of time occur, the result is almost inevitably transformation in traditional visual art forms, such as puppetry. These transformations are the outward manifestation of the rupture of the modern world from its past, which Kaur described as the absence of clear roots. The range of responses to this trauma demonstrates that spatial disturbances do not lead to predetermined conclusions. In response to questions Kaur suggested that the puppeteers do not perceive their varied responses to recreating the art in contemporary Delhi as a battle to be the authoritative representative of traditional puppetry.

Politics and Westerners

The second session of the workshop focussed on India's location within the global economic and political system and on the role of politics in India, especially the lack of political participation at grassroots levels. The session had three presenters: Mari Korpela (University of Tampere), Bidisha Chaudhuri (University of Heidelberg) and Satya Narayan Munda (Ranchi University, India). The papers shed light on the above issues from very different angles. While Korpela was relying on ethnographic data that she had collected during an extensive fieldwork period (see Korpela 2010), Chaudhuri had not yet started to collect her empirical material whereas Munda was discussing an area within which he was personally embedded. Korpela's material was collected in the city of Varanasi, Munda was talking about a small village in Jharkhand while Chaudhuri discussed India in more general terms. Power was a factor in all three papers: two of the papers (Chauhdhuri and Munda) directly discussed political power (or lack of it) and one (Korpela) implicitly, by focussing on the power of the Westerners to use India to their own ends.

Mari Korpela began the second session with a paper titled, 'Living happily ever after or ending up in another crisis? Bohemian lifestyle migrants in Varanasi, India'. Lifestyle migration here refers to a phenomenon where people from affluent industrialized countries move abroad in order to search for a more relaxed and more meaningful life (Benson and O'Reilly 2009). Usually, the migrants' destination is perceived as having a pleasanter climate and lower living costs than their country of origin. Bohemian lifestyle

migrants are distinguished by their artistic, creative and spiritual aspirations. The Western lifestyle migrants in Varanasi fit this description well, they pursue artistic and spiritual goals, they claim to be escaping the 'rat race' of their countries of origin and they criticise consumerism and permanent employment. Korpela, however, pointed out that although it may seem that the Westerners are ideal workers in certain spheres, in that they only want to work in temporary jobs, the other side of the coin is that permanent jobs are not available to them.

Korpela also argued that although the Westerners claim to be escaping the capitalist economy (and the stress that such an economic system causes) they are actually very dependent on capitalism, being privileged actors who are able to use the current global capitalist order of things for their own benefit. In fact, moving to India is a rational choice in economic terms: money earned in the West lasts longer when spent in Varanasi. Thus, the Westerners' Indiascape is a part of global economic inequalities. Furthermore, although the Westerners criticise consumerism, they do not lead ascetic lives; Varanasi offers them a materially higher standard of living than they could afford in their countries of origin. At the end of her presentation, Korpela discussed whether the Westerners' escape to a better life has been successful, or whether they have ended up in another stressful crisis situation. She argued that the relaxed lifestyle does not come without costs and the capitalist order of things is not a friendly or equable regime: returning to one's country of origin after several years' absence may prove to be very difficult and some manage to use the capitalist system to their benefit better than others. Korpela's paper raised questions in the audience about other studies dealing with Westerners in India, and it was pointed out that the Westerners themselves may not feel they are living in a crisis situation although it may seem so from an outsider's perspective.

Bidisha Chaudhuri's paper, entitled 'Good Governance in India: the interplay of politics, culture and technology in E-governance Projects', critically addressed the belief that principles of good governance are universally applicable. She discussed the complex overlap of state and society interactions, pointing out that the significance of particular contexts is very important, especially in India, which is such a vast and diverse country. Chaudhuri suggested: 'E-governance deploys information technology (ICT) for improving information and service delivery to citizens (consumers) by enabling them to participate in the decision making process through a wider network of private and civil society organisations.' The result is supposed to be transparent and efficient—good—governance (Prabhu 2005). There are many E-governance projects in India, operating on both regional and national levels; however, most of them fail to be sustainable. Chaudhuri suggested three main reasons for this lack of sustainability. First, villagers are often unaware of the projects. Second, villagers often need to rely on middlemen to access what limited infrastructure there is (Panda 2007). Finally, both citizens and officials are used to operating within a very hierarchical system and are resistant to new approaches. Moreover, there is a disjunction between the government's vision and citizens' expectations.

Chaudhuri argued that E-governance should not be seen as an administrative innovation but rather recognised as a social process. She asked if ICT-led development initiatives help bridge the digital divide or boost it. This caused her to question the extent to which development initiatives actually contribute to the development of the people's

everyday life. She emphasised that technology is not ethically and socially neutral, as a consequence of which social factors need to be taken into account when initiating and evaluating E-governance projects. Individuals always act within a particular cultural context, and governance lies in an overlapping zone of interaction: between state and society and between political and social worlds. Chaudhuri's main argument was that good governance is a term loaded with liberal values that neglects the context of changing societies and local cultures. Further, she argued that good governance hardly addresses the real issues of governance as experienced by actors within a particular social and cultural context. Chaudhuri thus challenged the universalistic approach of good governance schemes by drawing attention to the continuous flows of knowledge between institutions from both above and below, from both outside and within.

Chaudhuri is a political scientist who believes an anthropological approach would benefit her study. She is at an early stage of her research: only since the conference has she started to gather empirical data in India. Nevertheless, her well prepared, thought-provoking paper raised enthusiastic discussion in the workshop.

Satya Narayan Munda's paper was titled 'A Munda Village, Gabherya, Jharkhand, India: a study in anthropology of the right to health, issues of citizenship, power, and governance'. It introduced us to a tribal village in the state of Jharkhand in Northern India. Munda began by presenting a wealth of statistical data regarding both the physical village and the local as well as tribal populations. His presentation also contained a strong visual (photographic) element and information about both local cultural and economic practices. These highlighted a tension between the rich education that locals receive in traditional environmental knowledge and the limited formal education that they receive from the single government primary school in the region. Munda argued that the Indian government has not provided the village with the services that it is lawfully entitled to; for example, secondary education, an irrigation system and primary health care. Consequently, people in the village may be seen to lead impoverished lives despite their extremely rich range of local environmental knowledge taking the form of wise sayings that inform local practice and allow for sustainable living. One such saying is *dumbur bo bage no lagan tiyan,* which means that when collecting honey care should be paid to ensuring the bees' continued survival. Sadly, Munda related that due to corruption in the state forestry department such traditions are not adequately appreciated by contemporary environmentalists.

Munda discussed the same theme as Chaudhuri, that is, the need to decentralize power and empower the village level. At the moment, the tribal villages are suffering from the neglect of governments in terms of health and education as well as power and governance. Munda's paper was welcomed as an interesting example of the situation of the scheduled tribes in India. It also reminded us that in India, much indigenous anthropological research is based upon collecting statistical data and cataloguing various kinds of everyday facts from remote areas. Such data seldom reaches the European audiences although a dialogue might be very beneficial for both Indian and European scholars.

Emergent themes

The workshop concluded with a general discussion of the dominant themes that emerged from the presentations. It seemed clear that through the presentations (and subsequent discussions) a vision of India emerged that challenged the kind of generalizing descriptions that have dominated the Commonwealth Games coverage. The presentation of India as a timeless place, outside of history, was also challenged by the papers which showed that historical rupture, in both the distant and recent past, had powerful effects on the landscapes and practices of contemporary India. Valenta demonstrated that Hindu temples, despite their association with *illud tempus* (Eliade 1974) also exist in socio-political history, which has real consequences for the contemporary landscape of worship. In contrast, Miles-Watson's discussion of a landscape with a history of massive population movement highlighted the ability of sacred spaces to act as shock absorbers against the traumas of history through the creation of connections across rupture. Kaur showed how traditional art forms are responding to a sense of spatial dislocation and Korpela highlighted the way that in her material the attempt to create a society of what Turner (1969) termed *normative communitas* results in being permanently out of place (Douglas 1966).

In the final analysis the workshop cannot claim to have conclusively (or even comprehensively) mapped the range of landscapes and flows in contemporary India. It simply served to cast light on aspects of contemporary India that are often ignored, both within and outside academia. Although it showed imaginative attempts to deal with the crises of population movement and mass spatial change the workshop did not map an Indiascape, so much as present a series of Indiascapes. Yet, perhaps this humble achievement is more useful than an attempt to add to the many generalizing statements about India. The workshop also opened avenues for future comparative research by organically developing connections between the distinct papers presented. These connections flow from a detailed description of aspects of life in contemporary India that the authors had all come to (in different ways) deeply appreciate. They were not the result of a preconceived notion of what should be important areas for comparative exploration. Yet they reveal clear issues to be profitable for the comparative study of India. Chief amongst these are the response to landscape rupture and the sense of being out of place.

NOTES

[1] The Wenner-Gren Foundation and DoRa kindly assisted some of the workshop participants with their travel costs.
[2] More information about this project can be found at the centre's website: <http://www.tlu.ee/?LangID=2&CatID=3487>

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