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1. Introduction

1 In this interview, Leo Saldanha and Bhargavi Rao discuss the activities of the Bangalore-based NGO the Environment Support Group (ESG) in the field of solid waste management.[1] ESG was created in 1998 as an advocacy organisation with respect to a variety of issues related to environmental sustainability and social justice. Leo Saldanha coordinates ESG activities and Bhargavi Rao was a trustee at ESG until 2016.[2] Having initiated several campaigns demanding the establishment of new legal norms and effective action, Saldanha has wide-ranging experience of mobilisation in the areas of environmental law and policy, urban planning as well as human rights and development-related issues. While supporting local communities to secure justice through legal action and advocacy, Saldanha has argued, in person, as a party in several public interest litigations (PILs). PILs, widely used in India, refer to litigation for the protection of the public interest, introduced in a court of law by the court itself or by any other private party even if that party is not directly affected by the matter themselves. For the exercise of the court's jurisdiction, the person or groups whose rights have been violated need not personally approach the court. This legal instrument can be seen as providing access to justice for the poor, directly or through social movements or NGOs as mediators, though it has also been used by a variety of stakeholders, sometimes with interests divergent from those of displaced, dispossessed or otherwise vulnerable communities. The PILs discussed in the interview were aimed at the BBMP (Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike, the governing body for Greater Bangalore) and government agencies, and were filed in the High Court of

Karnataka in the context of Bangalore's garbage crisis (see also Lutringer and Randeria, 2017, this issue).

2 Both activists interviewed here played a key role in these PILs and in the broader advocacy campaign of which they formed a central part. The court cases addressed issues surrounding the landfill in the village of Mavallipura, about 15 km from Bangalore. The city's largest landfill, the facility, which was operated on a public–private partnership model on land acquired by the municipality of Bangalore, had no functioning effluent treatment plant. The harmful effects on the health of the villagers prompted the mobilisation of the affected communities, who—with the support of ESG—petitioned to close down the landfill and to process the accumulated waste in a manner conducive to public health and environmental protection. In 2006, 2009 and 2012, ESG had also conducted a series of water analyses, which substantiated extensive pollution of surface- and groundwater sources, and consequent health impacts, and thus formed the background to the case along with health surveys of the people in the affected villages. The Karnataka State Pollution Control Board was thus forced to conduct another series of water analyses of its own in the region.

3 In their interview, Leo Saldanha and Bhargavi Rao highlight the interventions by different actors in the court case and also, more broadly, in the field of solid waste management. They point to the complex interplay between the municipal, state and central levels of India's environmental governance. The central government Ministry of Environment and Forest adopted, in 2000, solid waste management rules that set out the responsibility of municipal authorities for the collection, segregation, storage, transportation, processing and disposal of municipal solid waste. Local bodies need to ensure that waste is handled in compliance with the environmental standards set by the Central Pollution Control Board and to seek authorisation from the State Pollution Control Board for setting up waste processing and disposal facilities. However, regular status reports at national and state levels have shown that these rules have been only partially and selectively implemented at the local level. Leo Saldanha and Bhargavi Rao analyse various factors, institutional and political but also social and cultural, that affect the entire cycle of solid waste management. They help us understand the range of social practices that enable the entire system to function. The impact of policies and rules, therefore, needs to be situated within this broader social context. Consequently, policy efforts aimed at improving the functioning of the solid waste management system must start from the household, restaurant, office or community level if they are to be effective, as the other contributions to this special e-issue argue. The media also plays a critical role in social and environmental campaigns, as discussed here by Leo Saldanha and Bhargavi Rao.

2. Interview

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: The focus of our research is on sustainable food consumption and solid waste management. In Bangalore, your NGO—ESG—has been a leading actor in the past decade in this field. ESG, registered as a Public Charitable Trust since 1998, has been working for a variety of environmental and social justice initiatives across India. Your own involvement has included working directly with waste collectors and documenting their lives, including in a film. But you have also used the courts to bring about major changes in the waste management system and its workings in the city. I would like to discuss this particular aspect of your advocacy work here. What led your NGO to file the

High Court case in October 2012 as PIL on the issue of solid waste management? What was the outcome?

BHARGAVI RAO: What triggered us to go to the court were the huge illegal landfills for solid waste at Mavallipura on the outskirts of Bangalore, which were being used as dumping grounds for the ever increasing solid waste of the city. Because of our efforts, Mavallipura landfill was shut down in July 2012. Once Mavallipura was closed down, the city did not have a place to dispose of its growing amounts of solid waste, which led to a crisis. Bangalore, known as the 'Garden City', became the 'Garbage City' of India! There was garbage piling up on every street and the solid waste workers were completely confused as to where to take it and what to do with all the waste. Citizens started raising their voices against the non-clearance of waste all over the city. In desperation, they started burning waste out in the open in the streets. At one point in time, the city looked like it had been bombed because there were fires everywhere from people burning waste. What happened was, the then Home Minister even ordered all the waste back to Mavallipura. There was also a lot of protest in Mavallipura against the illegal dumping of waste there. Villagers refused to allow any garbage trucks to come there, and in that protest one man even lost his life. There was intense public pressure on the Chief Minister, the Home Minister and the municipality of Bangalore, the BBMP, to solve the issue. Meanwhile there was a PIL petition already filed in the High Court of Karnataka asking the court to address the issue of waste piling up in all our streets, which would lead to a serious public health problem. People feared a Surat-like scenario, where plague broke out as a result of utterly unhygienic conditions.[3] Especially after the media coverage on the situation in Surat people were very conscious about what was happening. [...] So, at that time, we were afraid that the Mavallipura landfills might be reopened through a court order due to the pressure to act quickly. So we intervened then and explained the entire problem with illegal waste disposal in Mavallipura since 2001-02 in our petition; it outlined the history of how one landfill was shut down and another one was reopened, and what kind of false promises were made by the company responsible for the landfills. We also pointed to the crucial shift in government policy and the implications of the government-run system being changed to a privatised system, which was interested in profit instead of public health and hygiene.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Why do you refer to it as a privatised system?

BHARGAVI RAO: Management of waste today has been privatised in Bangalore. These private companies, who now have the contracts, want to make money out of garbage. They simply remove the garbage from within the city and dump it outside city limits. Just for transporting it from the city to the outskirts, the private contractors make *crores*[4] of rupees. The city municipality thinks that just by investing in high-tech trucks, which can carry this waste in a compressed form without it flying all over the place as it used to from the older, open trucks, they have arrived at the solution. But they do not understand how toxic the Mavallipura landfills, which have been created in the process, can be in the long run.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: So the process of privatising waste collection and management happened before the campaigns for segregating waste at source?

LEO SALDANHA: In 1999, the Chief Minister of Karnataka state was very keen on modernising the city. The first project for a privatised municipal service in the state of Karnataka was the solid waste management system in Bangalore. As far as I recall, at

that time the city employed some 12,000 workers for waste collection, known as the *pourakarmikas*. They were employed by the city administration, paid salaries depending on the years of work they had put in and were permanent employees. The new government intended to modernise the system with the help of World Bank consultants. The World Bank promoted the idea of privatisation as being the panacea for the waste management problems of the city. But private sector companies could not be brought in since there was a large public workforce, backed by unions. So a private-contractor system was instituted to replace public sector workers who would retire in the next two to three years, either voluntarily or forcibly. Legally their services could not be terminated but conditions were created such that many of them took the 'voluntary' retirement package. By 2003, the 12,000-strong workforce in waste collection had come down to 5,000 or 6,000 employees. So there was huge demoralisation in the public sector work force. Our NGO, ESG, had already been working with *pourakarmikas* since 1999. These solid waste workers are usually women from lower castes.

The United Nations and NANO programme[5] gave us a tiny grant for this project on solid waste management. We started working in one ward of Bangalore, documenting the lives of 50-60 waste collection workers over a period of six months. What we discovered was that they were perhaps among the most efficient workers in the city. They came to work at 6 a.m. and worked till 2 p.m. They were doing the worst possible work. One of the interviews, I still remember, was with a man in his late 20s or early 30s. His father was a street cleaner; his grandfather was a street cleaner. And so, he said, it was in their genes now. He said he could no longer eat with his hands because the waste he touched was so horribly dirty that his hands stank. Another woman talked about how she had done the dirtiest cleaning that one could imagine, even medical waste and so on. A third woman talked of—these are the interviews that stick in my mind—how people would just throw waste from balconies and how she actually had to get stitches in her head. This was the case in one of the most progressive parts of Bangalore, Basavangudi. The average literacy there is graduation; it is a locality with a high concentration of PhDs and postgraduates. We were wondering about the contradiction here—why is such an educated class of people so brutal and insensitive? In order to change this, we started working with the waste workers. We realised that they were skilled at collecting and sorting waste and knowledgeable about the habits of households and behaviour patterns of different neighbourhoods. We promoted them as people with this expertise and asked politicians and the city administration to talk with the workers about their experiences. UNEP supported us, and then, with some small support from the state government, we made a short film called *Nagara Nirmalya*,[6] which is being shown even today. It has become timeless. The film reflects our belief that one cannot dehumanise waste work and stigmatise waste workers. We need to 're-humanise' ourselves by the way in which we treat waste.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Your campaigns on waste management had several facets. How did your NGO proceed to work on this broad topic of solid waste management?

BHARGAVI RAO: Our court petition set out the problem in great detail. It collates all the existing laws of the state of Karnataka and the country and it also refers to one of the Supreme Court guidelines of 1999, which was followed by a whole set of rules. So, to the court we basically said that there were all these existing laws; there are these policy shifts taking place, but there is also this injustice towards the residents of villages like

Mavallipura, that bear the brunt of illegal solid waste dumping. We also drew attention to the older system in place with solid waste workers directly employed by the government and whose livelihoods are threatened by the shift towards privatisation, which makes waste a commodity. This is the cause of problems we are facing in the city today. Our petition helped the court to look at the issue in a very systematic way. The court gave some very good interim judgments in our case. The first thing it ordered was that waste be segregated at source. Secondly, the court ruled against the use of landfills for solid waste. Besides our petition, there were a couple of others too. The court combined all the cases related to solid waste and started looking at the problem in a very comprehensive manner. It heard everybody. And it understood where each petitioner's focus was. So it started looking at the rights of the solid waste workers; it started looking at the entire system. It also started looking at the vast amount of corruption in the system. It also understood that there were special interest lobbies, which were trying to promote incineration. The court disallowed incineration in the first decision of its kind in the country. And then the court got into the rules of the solid waste management system as a whole.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Would you describe the ruling of the court as progressive? How did it try to get the views of all the different stakeholders?

BHARGAVI RAO: Yes, the court was very fair to everybody. I do not like to use the word stakeholder, but everybody from the affected community was given a hearing and all interests were taken into account.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Did you expect such a helpful and positive decision from the court?

BHARGAVI RAO: No, I did not. Leo was very hopeful with respect to the judiciary. Sometimes, I lose hope.

LEO SALDANHA: She was rather sceptical of the court.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: How do you explain this progressive judgment?

BHARGAVI RAO: As the case moved forward, and the interim judgments kept coming, I started feeling very hopeful. I think it was that the judges themselves got seriously involved in the issue and they came and saw the landfills for themselves. They stood on the landfill and they understood the scale of the problem.

LEO SALDANHA: You should also see this from another perspective. Usually people go to court to get a judgment for or against a type of situation. In a PIL, it is a matter of principle. Everyone could and should be involved in addressing the issue in all its complexity. PILs can help solving a problem and coming up with jurisprudence that will have a lasting impact.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: So the use of the legal instrument is important here.

LEO SALDANHA: The legal instrument is important, but for a decade before we went to court we had already started looking at legal instruments to advance the issue. Let's go back to 1999, when we worked with *pourakarmikas*. One of the fundamental questions we asked was why they didn't have health benefits. As they are among the most vulnerable in the city, the most exposed to the worst waste of the city, every day, they need support. They bend down and sweep the streets, which exposes them to dust that has got a lot of hydrocarbons, which are cancerous. And vehicles pass by, injuring many *pourakarmikas,* who have reported accidents. The city administration pointed to a law

that gives them the right to use one of the principal hospitals and get a free check-up, and believe it or not, not one person knew about the government order, not even in the government bureaucracy itself. We insisted that they be given the benefit of what had already been decided by the state. The humane approach to their plight goes back to the report of a committee headed by I.P.D. Salappa in the 1970s to look into the condition of the *pourakarmikas*.[7] The report reflects the humaneness and progressive nature of that committee, which talked about reshaping society as a whole. So, all this is in the form of policy recommendations; administrative orders are also part of the framework of law, not just taking the matter to court. Our question in the 1990s was why the city administration had not been using the I.P.D. Salappa report for some 20 years. What does it take to end exploitation and transform the historic practice of violating some people's rights—people who serve society and work to its benefit?

In the Mavallipura issue, it was not just the *pourakarmikas* who were affected but also communities living close to the landfills. Their common lands, their forests have been taken away[8] in order to turn them into landfills. The resulting contamination goes into the groundwater, polluting the drinking water. So with the local community we raised the question: why is the waste from the rich neighbourhoods of Bangalore being dumped in our village surroundings? Why is our land taken away, our water and air polluted to benefit your parks, your residential areas like Lalbagh, Cubbon Park or Palace Grounds? We do not dump any of our village waste in your streets; if you are generating so much waste in the city, it is your waste—keep it there. That kind of reversible logic must also be made part of jurisprudence. The logic of the municipal administration was, 'dump waste from the city outside Bangalore'; we reversed it, saying, 'take your trucks back to the city'. This led to the first mantle of the landfill being shut down, which set the stage for further groundwork. This was the groundwork based on which we could petition the court in 2012 to shut down the other landfills too. The other landfill was opened in 2007 as part of the private sector entering waste management. The company that was contracted to deal with waste was given so many resources—100 acres of land, 250 rupees per ton of waste, which they would clinically, 'scientifically' segregate and make it look like the state of the art. But what they ended up doing is simply dumping it outside the city in a landfill. They thus magnified the damage already done in the neighbouring forest. People started dying due to ulcers, contracting new chronic ailments. And, it was not just in Mavallipura, but also in Mandur, which is in the eastern part of Bangalore, where we found that up to 20 landfills had been created. Bangalore, a world-class city but for whom? And at whose expense?

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Was there no administrative mechanism, for instance from the State Pollution Control Board, to regulate and control the company's activities at the landfills?

LEO SALDANHA: Yes, of course. We had laws from 1974, which mandate the Pollution Control Board not only to clean up but also to regulate the environment. There was another issue we took up: right next to an airport at the Yelahanka air force base we have a landfill 5 km away and between the two we have a big industrial company called 'Wheel and Axle Plant', with large refineries for fuel and furnace oil. A plane could crash because a bird, which has come to eat the garbage left open to the skies in the landfill, gets sucked into the engine of the plane, and that could lead to an explosion at the Wheel and Axle Plant. We took this matter to the court too and requested the

judges address this obvious failure of regulation. This is also a massive failure of governance. It is not just a garbage problem. If you want to fix it, you have to fix the way in which the city's governance system works. Our argument was that the system is dysfunctional because everything is centralised and thus becomes not transparent, and when it is not transparent, corruption becomes possible. We asked the court to order that it be decentralised, and to make every operation transparent because it is not a defence secret we are talking about, it is garbage.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Was this point addressed by the court in its judgments?

LEO SALDANHA: They took it very seriously. [...] As Bhargavi stated, the fact that the judges went to the landfills and saw every detail for themselves opened their eyes. You have to go to the landfill; you have to smell the stink; you have to see the water; you should see villagers draw that water and give you black water and say this is what they drink every day; and it changes your perception. They brought the water to the court and showed the water they got in the morning; they opened the bottle in court and you got the smell of methane and H2S, and have to breathe it, right? It became a very personal matter even to the judges, who ensured that the City Commissioner come for every hearing. The Pollution Control Board officials were there too for every hearing. Any official who we requested was required by the court to attend every hearing. And this sensitised the entire administration.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: How are these developments related to the fact that in Bangalore citizens are increasingly aware of environmental issues? Have there been changes in how residents perceive the problem of waste and of *pourakarmikas*?

BHARGAVI RAO: I don't know if everybody is sensitive to the role of the *pourakarmikas*; we still have a long way to go, but there is definitely a change in terms of understanding one's own responsibility for the environment. For the first time, the city elites started talking about waste issues in Bangalore. The academic elites, the social elites or the social clubs like the Rotary Club, the Lions Club, especially the women in these clubs started talking about issues of waste. Moreover, they realised that they could do something, so they started organising workshops on the segregation of waste, composting, on organic terrace gardens etc., so the ideas of waste management spread like a fire among upper-middle-class people; they are now percolating down to the middle class and the lower-middle class too, but it is a slow process.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: What role did the media play during this so-called garbage crisis in 2012?

BHARGAVI RAO: Yes, the media did report the issues, but I was dissatisfied with the media stories because they did not look at waste from the perspective of a solid waste worker. I never saw the story of a solid waste worker that conveyed the message that it is because of the way we live that she must touch the waste with her hands and her health is at stake. The media is capable of conveying that guilt, that responsibility to every person. Yet it has never done so. The media largely catered to the upper-middle class, reporting that 'all waste is piling up in the city and the Mayor has said this, the Chief Minister or the Home Minister has said that, and this much money will be shelled out and there are the companies that will take care of the problem'. Or, for example, there were lots of stories on the possibilities of generating electricity from waste. But I still have to see a story where the media is arguing why incineration is bad; how it produces toxic gases all around and will affect the health of the people living around the incinerators. But praise where it is due, to an extent the media has driven home the

point that we all have to be responsible for waste management. However, the details of the public health impact are still largely missing.

LEO SALDANHA: I think it is important to see the media's role in transforming the consciousness of the public at large. This is also directly related to the depth in which the media understands and portrays the issue [...] Very rarely nowadays some independent portals or independent journalists are writing stories where there is substance and nuance, there is some notion of humaneness. For the rest, we see the usual cut and paste. The stories of the people of Mavallipura or Mandur remain untold.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: You refer to a new awareness or sensitivity of the middle class in Bangalore, with collective initiatives for on-site composting, for example. How do you explain this kind of neighbourhood activism in some parts of the city?

BHARGAVI RAO: Parts of the city are rich neighbourhoods, which are mostly gated communities or enclaves, or apartment complexes where there is a mix of people who have returned from abroad, or academics, who understand the problem. So, in those kinds of pockets, they have come together as Residents Welfare Associations[9] to ensure that they teach people in the neighbourhood to segregate waste, the need for composting and for recycling, the need for reducing waste, the need for using cotton bags instead of plastics. A good example is Koramangala. Then, you also have Malleshwaram, where it is mostly the elite women, who are often members of the Rotary Clubs and the Lions Clubs. This is not the new high-tech Bangalore, but the old Bangalore citizen networks. It is largely women who have taken the leading role in teaching people how to compost and using that compost in kitchen gardens. It is a beautiful cycle of waste being composted, being used in these kitchen gardens, terrace gardens, to grow organic food on a small scale. There are web pages and Facebook pages, where people share experiences and there are so many workshops on these subjects at weekends. They are also spreading awareness to the younger generation. When mothers and aunts take a key role, obviously children will cooperate and vice versa.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: To get back to the role of the court, what can you say about the implementation of the court's orders?

LEO SALDANHA: This has been frustrating [...] the court acknowledged a governance failure, and asked for ward committees to be instituted by the government but there is so much resistance. It was very frustrating working with bureaucracy. For instance, in Mavallipura there has been no safe drinking water provision for 10-15 years. This has been a long, long cry. We went to court with the villagers and argued with them and on their behalf successfully. That is when everybody felt that they could also argue in court. So, the middle class also joined court petitions.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Did you also get the middle classes involved?

LEO SALDANHA: Yes, we also managed to change the nature of the court process; it was no longer just lawyers arguing against other lawyers. We insisted that the affected public must be heard on this issue. So the court hearings became like a public space in a small town, where the judges actually are just allowing people to talk, then asking questions about the missing solution and administrative inaction. For instance, in Mavallipura, water quality improved because of reverse osmosis [RO] plants when the court gave a direction that if it didn't see the RO plants installed within a week, somebody in the city administration would lose their job. Suddenly, what had been

impossible for ten years happened in a week. Money was found and 28 plants were sanctioned; at least five to six are still working today. The villagers can at least drink water that doesn't cause serious illnesses.

BHARGAVI RAO: And also health camps[10] took place.

LEO SALDANHA: Health camps started working in eight villages, where we gave the court a plan. The court ordered the city administration to work along lines suggested by us. So, through the court cases we have changed the nature of the dynamics between the poor and the rich and the disempowered and the empowered, wherever the court has upheld the needs of the disempowered and given them agency.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Do you think that what has been achieved here is unusual in India?

LEO SALDANHA: It is absolutely unusual. I don't think anywhere else in the country this type of deep democratic engagement with the judiciary, with the bureaucracy, has taken place.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: The court acted in a progressive way, taking into account the concerns, the needs and the problems of the urban poor. Do you think this is representative of a general pattern?

BHARGAVI RAO: It is very specific even for Bangalore; it is unique to the solid waste management case, and like I said, it is tied to the judges in this particular case.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: What influence did the court order in Karnataka have at the all-India level? Did it have an echo in other cities of India?

LEO SALDANHA: As Bhargavi explained earlier, there were municipal solid waste management rules in 2000 as an outcome of yet another PIL after the crisis of the late 1990s. The rules were progressive for those times, but they did not take into account the scale on which consumerism tends to develop today. So there was a demand to refine those rules. Even as we were in court, there was such a demand because the rules were not meeting the needs. There was no emphasis on segregation. While we were fighting the case, the municipal solid waste management rules were redrafted, not only for Karnataka but also for the entire country. The central government's Ministry of Environment and Forest responded in our case. The ministry redrafted its rules of 2013 and came up with a fresh draft in 2015, which is very progressive with a few exceptions as it adopts almost everything that the court has ordered in the last two and a half years.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: How do you explain this?

LEO SALDANHA: The court's directions were for the state of Karnataka, but their influence was felt across the country because we worked with groups in Hyderabad in the neighbouring state. Also, there is a very large network of waste workers in Pune; they have heard our stories there. I have been to Bombay and spoken; we have been to Chennai, and we have been to Delhi and Calcutta.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Is your network with NGOs or trade unions?

LEO SALDANHA: Both, and we have a good media network as well. *The Telegraph* from Calcutta has reported on our cases, so has *Business Times* but also *Kashmir Times*. Even in north-east India and in Rajasthan there were media reports. Our cases influenced the language in which the issue of waste is now discussed; the discourse has changed to 'segregation is possible'. Bhargavi always starts a presentation by saying, 'we were

culturally attuned to segregating waste and composting at the household level and we lost these culturally ingrained habits because of the consumerist trend. We were told that it can all be dealt with in a more efficient way by companies and private contractors. Let us go back to what we knew best.'

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Besides the court, how do you assess the chances of political mobilisation around waste management?

BHARGAVI RAO: In the recent municipal corporation elections, all party manifestos had waste segregation at source as the number one solution. It has become a platform across political parties.

LEO SALDANHA: In the 1980s there was lot of work that was done with waste pickers,[11] and they were collecting waste manually because we were not segregating in the home, just dumping waste on street corners. These workers had already started the movement against their exploitation and stigmatisation. In a sense we are just building on that. We have tried to scale it up to try to include changes in policy, law, regulation etc., but also turned it into a matter of our duty as consumers and waste producers. Our work gave the impetus for the changes needed at all levels, from the household to the lawmakers and judges.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: How do you see the links between different environmental issues, for example the issues of solid waste and of water? Do you think the conditions now are more conducive to solving other environmental problems in Bangalore?

BHARGAVI RAO: Yes, people are suddenly waking up to the fact that it is because waste is not segregated that it is being dumped elsewhere, that the lakes are also getting polluted and it is the lakes that eventually provide water, either through the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board (BWSSB) or through the river. All our lakes are connected and they all eventually reach the river Cauvery at some point, and people do know that if we mess with water, there is going to be a huge water crisis. So people are becoming more conscious now.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: I would like to ask you some questions about your own personal trajectories as activists. What have been the kinds of urban environmental issues that you and your NGO have been working on?

BHARGAVI RAO: We have worked on a number of environmental issues. In fact, we started our work with big issues like raising questions about the location of thermal power plants, the siting of chemical dye manufacturing plants, petrochemical industries, then dams, paper pulp industries, mining—these are some of the really big battles we have fought in the past. Initially, once people got to know that we work on environmental issues we used to get calls asking us to do something about particular issues. The seriousness of the problems reported at local or individual levels got us into looking at the policy and addressing legal aspects as well as seeking legal remedies.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: It is now for some twenty years that you have been working in this field?

LEO SALDANHA: Yes, first independently and then through ESG.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: When you look back, what have been your main successes and failures during these years?

LEO SALDANHA: I think the main success for us is that we can now bring the needed complexity to these issues due to our expertise and our experience. People now realise that these are complex issues. This is important, instead of the search for quick-fix,

easy solutions. The realisation of the complexity and interlinkages leads to radical shifts in some aspects, to moderate shifts at other levels. We have also helped people understand the ways in which their own actions can make a big difference. We have also helped frame an issue in a way that it may not be seen in antagonistic terms. Overall, we have helped broaden the framework in which environmental issues are situated. Our sense of environmental justice is not based on the inclusion of the affected community alone. It certainly is the most vulnerable and needs the most immediate attention. But it does not mean that the rest of the people involved do not have issues of their own. Sometimes you also lose an issue in the short term or in terms of immediate aims. But that does not mean the struggle was futile, as we manage to enhance the quality of understanding of the complexity to a totally different level, and therefore it is not a failure. If we had not intervened, nobody would have been aware of some of the issues, like the grasslands.[12] It only became a matter of public debate after we took it up. Our role in society is perceived differently depending on whom you ask. We are hated by some, but liked by others. Even the government has given us consultancies to study the entire decision-making process in the state. I think that there is a constant battle in society. Groups like us have a role to play though there will be efforts to shut us down or make it difficult for us to work. We have to survive; we have to learn to survive till the end; it is a good challenge actually. [...] I think most of the activist groups have forgotten their core mission... because they have worked with the World Bank, they are under all sorts of pressures from international financial agencies, funding agencies, they do not have a sense of their own autonomy and independence. You need money to work; that does not mean you have to bend over backwards and make compromises. I think here we have to work to build the strength among the groups on the ground. The people of Mavallipura are the victims; they are not getting money from anybody. If you see the whole problem through their eyes, then you can see the real solutions that are required. If you see the problem through the *pourakarmika* lens, you know what steps need to be taken to clear up the mess. And the judges have now started looking through those lenses.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: How does ESG manage to be independent and not to rely on any external funding? How do you fund your campaigns?

BHARGAVI RAO: We do a lot of educational work and get some funding from that. We engage critically with the student community. That also gives us an opportunity to share our work with them and that is how we fund ourselves through small donations from the academic milieu—that has been our funding model from the start. We have never taken any large grants from any big foundation, organisation or the government. So, I think that has given us the independence not to succumb to any kind of pressures. [...] We fight alongside the local communities. [...] They have the strength and we try and find it within ourselves. If funding agencies want to give money to us, they need to give it in terms that dignify us and dignify them. If there is any sense of indignity, we just walk away from it. We have gone through years without salaries; we have gone through very, very difficult times; yet we have worked on the issues. There was nobody who came and asked, 'how did you pay the rent, the electricity, or the phone bills?' Six to eight months sometimes, we have worked without salaries. I remember Bhargavi worked without a salary once for three years. This has strengthened us.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: A final question to each of you: Bhargavi can you say something about how you got involved in social and environmental justice issues?

BHARGAVI RAO: I think it was there somewhere in me in high school. In the summer, I used to participate in some activities. There was then this local initiative called the *Karnataka Rajya Vighnana Parishat*; it is a government-run body, autonomous, but financed by the Karnataka government to help raise the scientific temper in the students. The people who conduct its activities gave a little knowledge of environmental science to the students. So, when I was as young as a student of class six or seven, we had gone to the Vrishabhavati River to collect water and test water samples. When I came to class twelve, in India teachers and parents say to you, 'you have to become an engineer or a doctor'. When I told my parents I did not even want to sit the entrance exam for medicine or engineering, they were very disappointed. But then, the environmental science undergraduate course had just started; it was just three years old. I studied pure science; I did some teaching but I kind of lost interest in formal teaching in a typical lab-related research work. I wanted to do something different. ESG conducted a workshop at that point in time. I participated in the workshop and that is when I decided to volunteer for some time. I volunteered and then I continued.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: And what about you, Leo?

LEO SALDANHA: Again, from my student days I was involved with a lot of social action, critiquing ideas of development. There was a European network of young people. It was called a post-war young Christian workers' network, which became part of student movements as it is an inter-religious and not a Christian group. It gave me a lot of critical understanding of the idea of India, the idea of development, and that work continued into a kind of political space later when I got involved in the anti-nuclear movement of the 80s and early 90s. I was part of the anti-Narmada Dam movement[13] for two to three years. That helped me to work with the National [Alliance of] People's Movements,[14] from its origins for several years during which time I engaged with many developments that are taking place in a post-liberalisation phase—for example, massive industrialisation was promoted on the west coast. One of the groups I helped found was CIVI, in Bangalore. I worked with them for several years, so that shaped my understanding of governance and the importance of decentralisation and transparency, accountability and so on. But there was a need to create something on the larger environmental justice question, which nobody was asking. I was already working with the Save Dakshina Kannada campaign[15] on the west coast then. It started as a small initiative, just a couple of us here, and a few months later we decided that it is not enough just focusing on the Western Ghat issues. We started conducting workshops, where Bhargavi participated, and once she decided to start working full-time it also became a much more formal space for us. It was actually very informal until then. I think both of us have helped shape ESG since then because we brought different streams of understanding. She had already worked with formal system of teaching and research in science. I had worked in the informal sector for almost a decade with street children, the working class, with dam-affected communities. So, both these streams were important to creating an understanding of environmental justice that was much more responsive to the impact on local communities. We decided that we would not necessarily reject any issue that comes to us, but we would try and see what we can do. And any community that comes to us has stayed with us for a long time till their issues

have been resolved; Mavallipura is one. Many other communities have had their issues resolved at and up to various levels. Some we have not been able to resolve because the situation has drastically changed. I guess we see ourselves as in the process of now using all those examples to formulate policy and law at a meta-level. This has had a cross-cutting impact across sectors and we really have responded to issues from an interdisciplinary perspective. I think, personally, it has been a journey, which will continue. I do not know if we are mid-way or only a quarter of the way into that journey. I still feel we are only a quarter of the way sometimes. Life tells you we are in the middle of life, so that struggle goes on.

CHRISTINE LUTRINGER: Thank you very much.

NOTES

1. The interview was conducted by Christine Lutringer at ESG premises in Bangalore on 27 August 2015.
2. She left the organisation in late 2016.
3. In September 1994, the city of Surat in the western Indian state of Gujarat faced an outbreak of plague. It was attributed, among other factors, to the failure of the management of waste, and led to large-scale changes in urban infrastructure and municipal management systems.
4. One *crore* is 10 million.
5. The programme was part of a project of the Human Health and Well-Being Division of United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).
6. This could be translated as 'Unstained City'.
7. The Committee on Improvement of Living Conditions of Sweepers and Scavengers was appointed by the Government of Karnataka under the chairmanship of Mr. I.P.D. Salappa in 1976. Subsequently Mr. Salappa was appointed Vice-Chairman of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis, an Indian statutory body established in 1994 to promote and safeguard the interests and rights of the *Safai Karamcharis*—i.e., the communities working as sweepers and waste workers. He is remembered for his laudable efforts to improve their living conditions and to secure fair and respectable treatment for them. For more information on this issue see B. Pathak (1991) *Road to Freedom: A Sociological Study on the Abolition of Scavenging in India* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers).
8. The municipality of Bangalore acquired what were 'common' lands used as pasture by some village communities.
9. See Ganguly, S. and C. Lutringer (2017) 'Changing Practices of Water and Waste Management by the New Middle Classes Within Gated Communities in Bangalore', *International Development Policy*, 8.2, DOI : 10.4000/poldev.2482.
10. 'Health camps' refers to free medical check-up services that are organised in rural areas.

11. Waste pickers collect and sell, for their livelihood, reusable and recyclable materials thrown away by others. Along with scrap collectors, traders and recyclers, they form part of the informal system of waste management, which is the very basis of waste collection services in all Indian cities, at no cost to local authorities or residents. In fact, households often prefer to sell scrap and old household goods to them directly as they come to one's doorstep and pay for the materials they cart away.
12. ESG has been campaigning for democratic planning and conservation of environmental resources, such as wetland ecosystems. Wetlands are seen as a vital element of local ecosystems and economies.
13. The construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in the Narmada Valley, partly financed by the World Bank, started in 1987. However, it led to the displacement of tens of thousands of people and widespread environmental damage. Since 1989, the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), or the 'Save Narmada Movement' has mobilised resistance against this project at the local, national and global levels and filed cases before Indian courts. It has also proposed various alternatives, such as decentralised methods of water harvesting or even lowering the height of the dam, while demanding the accountability of the World Bank for the project. See S. Randeria (2003) 'Glocalization of Law: Environmental Justice, World Bank, NGOs and the Cunning State in India', *Current Sociology* 51(3-4), pp. 305-328, DOI: 10.1177/0011392103051003009.
14. The National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM) was created in 1992 as a collective of Indian social movements, including the NBA, which struggles 'against injustice, exploitation and communal, ethnic-, caste- and gender-based discrimination'. See http://www.worldbanktribunal.org/national-alliance-of-peoples-movement.html (accessed on 28 April 2017).
15. Dakshina Kannada is a coastal district of the state of Karnataka, where environmental degradation due to industrialisation has been a matter of controversy for decades. Social movements, such as the Save Western Ghats Movement, have—since 1989—organised widely in the region to protect the environment and the livelihoods of communities living in rural, costal and forested areas.

ABSTRACTS

Christine Lutringer's interview with Leo Saldanha and Bhargavi Rao reflects the pivotal role of their NGO, the Environment Support Group (ESG), in bringing about changes in practices and policies of solid waste management in Bangalore. The campaign for a new solid waste management policy, which was co-organised by ESG, underscores the significance of the legal activism initiated by civil society groups. The public interest litigation (PIL) that united the various affected parties was key to transforming the solid waste management policy of the municipality. Saldanha and Rao discuss the strategy of their NGO while showing how a progressive ruling by a court led to the decentralisation of solid waste management. They also point to the challenges of implementing the judgment and to the fact that processes of waste collection and disposal are not merely technical, administrative matters but are eminently social and cultural issues. ESG's advocacy activities have, therefore, aimed to secure fair and

respectable treatment for solid waste workers, an aspect that has otherwise been eclipsed in the public debate on waste. The interview concludes with reflections on ESG's endeavours over the last twenty years to promote environmental and social justice in Bangalore.

AUTHOR

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