A Gandhian conundrum: The ethical dilemma in the Indian sustainability discourse

While environment and sustainability are rapidly gaining currency within global discourse, fundamental constraints continue to obstruct the meaning negotiation of these terms at the community level. Drawing on symbolic interactionism, which postulates that meaning is negotiated and not inherent in objects or terms, a qualitative interpretive study was undertaken to analyse the views of opinion leaders from diverse sectors of the Indian English-speaking community. The study suggests that environment and sustainability communication needs to be synchronous with national historical and cultural narratives and value systems in order to encourage public engagement in the meaning negotiation of these terms.

Keywords: sustainability, environment, environmental communication, ethics and values, public discourse

Introduction
With rising recognition of the need for sustainable development at the national and global level, there is growing interest in exploring processes of contextual negotiation of meaning relating to the terms ‘environment’ and ‘sustainability’ within public discourse. In the years after the Brundtland declaration (of 1987), many questioned the advisability of the term ‘sustainable development’ which appeared to inspire an ongoing battle between positive and normative propositions for optimal development in its apparent attempt to fuse technical characteristics with moral injunctions (Beckerman 1994). Terms such as sustainability and the environment being socially constructed narratives, their meanings are unstable and changing, reflecting not only the natural but also the social, cultural, economic and political context of each society (Benton and Short 1999).

While the language of the sustainability discourse is characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, the concept is said to have spawned ‘a sprawling network of politically active rhetoric’ (Borne and Martell 2010: 27). The sustainability discourse has been called a discourse of modernity (Cheney, Nheu et al. 2004), while the language of sustainability has assumed the institutional authority of the international development industry that debates the relevance and appropriateness of multi-tiered societal goals on local, national and global fronts (Ratner 2004). The discourse has also been viewed as being primarily responsible for papering over the conflict between conservation and development goals with players in the development industry focusing on the sharing of the discursive vocabulary relating to sustainability rather than the values or beliefs that underscore it (Beder 2006). Nevertheless, there is a consensus that the sustainability discourse must essentially be a dialogue of values relevant to each society. Presently the discourse has also served as a platform where critical sustainability tenets are obfuscated in the constant reification of market processes, values and ideals by mainstream economic, social and political interests (Alexander 2009).

Sustainable development engenders the imbrication of individual and societal needs within global resource realities that include both inter-generational and intra-generational equity concerns. Sustainability questions the neo-classical market-centred justification of unlimited personal or group greed in a global context of fast depleting resources and unmet basic needs of the vast majority of humanity. Unsustainable attitudes, values and aspirations as expressed in lifestyle choices remain one of the greatest challenges in all societies. However, creative responses in terms of values, techniques and technologies that may serve to address this challenge could just as easily originate from old societies as from the most developed nations of the world (Atkinson, Graetz et al. 2008).

Media scholars have suggested that there exists a developmental sub-text that could encourage ethics and value-based communication in media
led discourse in new nations (Steenveld 2012). Thus a study that is focused on India’s discursive experience with mediating sustainability could be of particular value and interest in view of its complex and dynamic socio-cultural heritage and traditions that continue to evolve in response to massive socio-economic, political and environmental change.

**Sustainable development**

The concept of sustainable development is prescriptive, directional and aspirational in nature, calling for the development of ‘resonant’ indicators that need to be developed and negotiated within societies and communities (Levett 1998).

The desire to improve the standards of living of their people to the much higher levels enjoyed by citizens of the developed world inspired many new nations freed from colonialism in the 1940s and 1950s to adopt the development strategies used in the successful reconstruction of post-war Western Europe. That the strategies were employed without much reference to the particular socio-cultural, economic and environmental realities that constituted each national context meant that things did not go to plan. It became clear that developing nations needed uniquely tailored and self-generated plans and strategies rather than the broad universality of the mainstream development paradigm (Haynes 2008: 8). Over time, the ideal of development as a goal has been gradually commuted to that of sustainable development, incorporating multi-layered contextual considerations into the articulation of directions and goals for individual societies (Blewitt 2008).

Sustainable development can be uniquely defined by each society in terms of vision, values, skills, attitudes, action plans, policies and practices while drawing best practices from developing as well as developed societies. Accordingly, developing a blueprint for sustainability would necessitate a discursive process of articulating a common future which is of interest and significance for each society.

**The global environmental discourse**

Initially, the global environmental discourse revolved around the realist view that saw environmental damage as an inevitable consequence of unsustainable growth and development. The realist position was then overtaken by a constructionist approach emerging from research that suggested that perceptions about environmental issues were socially defined and constructed.

Sustainable development is considered a discourse of and for global civil society (Dryzek 1997). Sustainable development has also been viewed as the subject of a fluid discourse covering issues that range from changing consumer attitudes and values to deep changes in society and economy in ways that have significantly influenced ecological thoughts, consumption habits and structural practices over the past several years since the first global conference in Rio (Koch 2006). The global sustainability discourse turns on the need for public understanding of the basic fact that global problems and concerns are caused by all and affect all and that it is only through consultative discussion between stakeholders and actors at every level that the common future of all can be secured (Ferguson and Thomas-Hope 2006).

System theory experts including Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Howard T. Odum, Fritjof Capra and Margaret Mead have been in the forefront of scholars advocating the need for trans-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and multi-perspectival understanding that constitutes the foundation of sustainability thinking (Bausch 2001). The systems view of reality as a complex multi-layered process directly challenges the one-way causality that dominates the Western world view while accommodating Eastern and Buddhist notions of mutual causality and self-organisation that govern physical and mental phenomena as well as the dynamics of natural systems (Macy 1991).

The values and attitudes emanating from the recognition of the fundamental causal interconnectedness of all phenomena are being seen as more appropriate to the understanding and practice of sustainability, even as ecological crisis is increasingly being viewed as a corollary of the insular one-way causality inherent in mainstream development strategies that were once popular across the globe. The issue of values and attitudes that are appropriate to sustainable development is of particular relevance to the Asia-Pacific cluster of nations which, while widely diverse in ethnicity, language, religion and culture, constitute a region that has recovered strongly from the global financial crisis (Heyser 2011). Sustainability experts warn that ongoing industrialisation and modernisation are continuing to compromise traditional lifestyles, value systems and cultural practice that had once ensured a form of social and ecological
stability by bringing in ill-planned urbanisation and industrialisation and with them the disastrous repercussions of environmental and social instability (Fien and Tilbury 2002).

India and sustainable development
As the world’s largest democracy and one of the fastest growing economies of the Asia-Pacific region, India was one of the first nations to acknowledge the rising challenge posed by its environmental problems with particularly disastrous consequences for the majority of its poor citizens. Indira Gandhi, India’s then-Prime Minister, was the only head of state to attend the 1972 Human Environment Conference at Stockholm and the first to formally use an international platform to publicly articulate the worrying link between increasing poverty and environmental degradation against the dismal backdrop of inequitable growth.

Exploring the discourse on sustainable development in the context of a country like India enables the identification of the political, economic or cultural origins of various discursive themes that could aid the understanding of what has been termed the heuristic value of non-Western value systems, experiences and knowledge systems to processes of social change (Melkote and Steeves 1952). This is doubly pertinent in the light of the impact that the choices made by 17 per cent of the world’s population are likely to have on the global sustainability of this planet. The problem was succinctly and effectively articulated by Mahatma Gandhi when he said: ‘God forbid if India were to take to industrialism after the manner of the West … keeping the world in chains. If [India] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts’ (Gandhi 1928).

However, the significance and value of studying the public discourse on sustainability in India cannot be limited to the undoubted impact of India’s developmental choices for or against sustainability but can, in fact, be extended to the more universal issue of how different societies approach and develop their own unique values-based responses to global policy imperatives through internal processes of dialogue and communicative action.

Methods and conceptual framework
The study is based on qualitative interpretive research drawing from symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) which postulates that meaning in discourse is an essentially contested domain dependent upon negotiation in the Habermasian tradition of mutually respectful dialogue (Habermas 1987). The research questions of the study were: What does sustainability mean to the Indian public and how can sustainability be reframed to gain greater public support and involvement for sustainable development within the country. Using elements of grounded theory and strategic frame theory, the research questions were addressed through the qualitative interpretive content analysis of data gathered from intensive semi-structured interviews of influential communicators and experts representing media, government, not-for-profit, academic and corporate sectors of Indian English-speaking society on environment and sustainability-related issues.

Experts were interviewed based on the reasoning that their access to information and knowledge through a range of networks including media makes them best placed to gauge the multiple public mind. Being engaged in a co-dependency relationship with their peers, media, the public and the state, experts are generally well apprised of the entire range of views on the subjects about which they are experts (Chitty 2011). The study was limited to English-speaking respondents based on the rationale that English in India has long been the language of the elite, the administration and of the pan-Indian press. English-language newspapers continue to enjoy an influential readership while the English-speaking community has always led opinion in India (Hohenthal 2003).

The selection criteria for the interviewees included visibility and prominence in their field and particular sector, equal representation of different sections of the English-speaking community as well as adequate regional coverage with the interview locations including the four major Indian cities of Delhi, Bangalore, Ahmedabad and Hyderabad.

Data
Experts and policy elites were interviewed for opinions regarding the meanings attributed to sustainability and the environment in public discourse and the ways in which media, government, academia, business and the non-governmental sector framed these concepts as well as opinions on whether the current discourse served to create an understanding of sustainability that was locally relevant. The data was contextualised to enable an analysis of interlinkages between the views of participants.
The interview process sought to enable reflexive thinking through the mining of personal views and attitudes on the subject of sustainability in public discourse in India. With regard to the objectivity of the interview process, care was taken to ensure that there was, as far as was possible, freedom from bias and inter-subjective consensus on questions being asked even while interviewees were encouraged to express any view they cared to with no prior knowledge or discussion of the researcher’s own views on the subject.

Analysis

All interviewees were invited to offer their opinions on what constituted the problematics that inhibit contemporary discourse on environment and sustainability in India. Themes and patterns emerging from the interview transcripts were identified across the range of responses to each question. Recurring themes were shortlisted and interpreted. Following an inductive approach, coding was developed based on elements of grounded theory and the data was then re-examined to establish the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis.

What ails the sustainability discourse in India?

Respondents were requested to broadly discuss general factors that inhibited the sustainability discourse in India as a way to identify and further explore underlying conceptual barriers. Credibility and lack of depth were recurrent themes.

‘The main problem is the lack of credible and hard facts that are seen to come from a relatively unbiased source. Who do we trust – the UN or the local NGO? The credibility of raw data is the main problem,’ said M22 from the media sector. According to N28 from the NGO sector: ‘The discourse is shallow.’ N30 from the NGO sector had a similar view and put the shallowness of the discourse down to the superficial, sporadic and event-based coverage of environmental issues: ‘I think there is the problem that there is a lot of focus on events. A deeper engagement is required and not tokenism. Mostly the coverage is just about showcasing events.’

From the government sector, G18 said: ‘As far as environmental issues are concerned we should not have personal opinions. It is more important to have scientific evidence and facts – factual data is needed. Research-based analysis is not being presented.’

Emerging from the general discussion on the inadequacy of media treatment of sustainability in terms of credibility and depth was the strikingly unique constraint that we termed the Gandhian conundrum. The Gandhian conundrum which was explicitly mentioned by one of the interview respondents, at once appeared to encapsulate the unspoken expectation of the Indian public for values-based leadership while showing recognition of the intensely moral nature of the sustainability challenge which required change in lifestyles at the personal level.

Lack of sincerity in communicators and communication of environment and sustainability issues: The Gandhian conundrum

Seven respondents suggested that in the Indian context the lack of sincerity or depth in media representation of environmental and sustainability issues encouraged a deeply dismissive treatment of these issues by the public. Describing the discourse as shallow, N28, CEO of a well-known not-for-profit organisation, went on to say: ‘This idea of tree planting – now, that’s an expression of an attitude to the environment which is easy and not challenging. There is no discussion about lifestyles. Media has a concern for tigers but there are much bigger issues. What do you need to do to preserve tigers? Who benefits? Is it just for tourism?’

But for M20 from the media sector, it was the NGO sector which was guilty of insincerity and lack of commitment. ‘It’s ended up being a discourse and nothing else. [We have] more seminars, workshops and publications from the NGO sector, and still no change. Still, trees are being chopped and no NGO really cares. People may be familiar with the term “sustainability” but that is not equal to understanding it.’

Academic A2, the vice chancellor of major Indian university, felt that insincerity was widespread and palpable among those involved in the sustainability discourse in India from all sectors and he attributed this to what he called the Gandhian conundrum. He said:

The Gandhian conundrum is when the professional and the personal values and behaviours of an individual are in conflict with each other, whereas, in a non-Gandhian frame, there is room for such inconsistency. In a non-Gandhian situation, I can be a heavy smoker and write articles on the problems that smokers and tobacco
cause for others without feeling guilty about the inconsistency. I can write about the need for prohibition [of alcohol] and drink in private. My lifestyle really harms the environment but I can continue writing against what I do without changing anything I do. Intellectually and professionally raising issues and acting as though your lifestyle and behaviour is not part of the problem is considered acceptable in the West. But this is a Gandhian conundrum that must be resolved if we want to bring sincerity into the discourse on sustainability. This is what I mean by inter and intra self–harmony which is required for sustainability. Those in the forefront talk as if they are not part of the problem. But when Gandhi spoke of swadeshi or of any principle for that matter, he practised before he preached.

From the corporate sector, C9 spoke of the self contradictory nature of the messages delivered by media: ‘There is a dilemma, a contradiction. On the one hand you are being persuaded to consume, consume, use, use and dump, dump. On the other, sustainability implies care, to be aware, to think about tomorrow and about the next generation. You get the feeling from the way people act in supermarkets that only greed is being promoted today. Greed is market-sponsored and strategy-driven while sustainability is innocently or rather naively promoted.’

N30 from the NGO sector said: ‘Deeper engagement is required. Not tokenism.’ Seven respondents said there was a problem with the way environmental and sustainability issues were being approached. From the corporate sector, C7 called it myopia. ‘There is severe myopia in looking at the issue. You need an integrated approach because a piecemeal approach is so much more expensive. The root cause is the way we approach sustainability. We can’t do an end of pipe approach.’ From the government sector, a high powered advisor, G15 said:

The main problem is the import of methods that are developed in the West. When I say the West, I mean largely the American milieu where, for instance, you have the idea that you can buy and sell carbon. That is a very American concept. It is essentially driven by the market, that you can exchange carbon credit for money, exchange carbon credits for profits and so on. The idea that everything should be driven by the market is fundamentally, in my opinion, a wrong concept. Nature does not intend a surplus that can be transacted. Nature has only complete systems. Nature has a system of generation and degeneration so intrinsically linked that it doesn’t create surpluses. The whole application of a Western business-driven transactional analysis is one of the main maladies in India now.

The internationally known CEO of a not-for-profit sector, N29 said:

The public obviously goes by what the media says. I don’t think the media understands it. They don’t understand the holistic nature of sustainability. In India we have people in a village who think they can throw their waste out. This didn’t create problems in a situation when the waste was largely organic. But when they moved to an urban area, the same practices became problematic. The transition from rural to urban sustainability hasn’t happened. The leapfrog issue is to avoid making the mistakes of the West.

Also from the NGO sector, N28 said: ‘I don’t think we can begin to change lifestyles unless we change deep values. I am afraid I don’t see an easy way to make a transition to a different world view. I don’t see how it can be done easily or without pain. I think we have to keep at it. I think environmental educators have to address deep attitudinal change and the deep underlying assumptions. We need to focus on that.’

Media expert M23 suggested that the approach was incorrect because it appeared to largely involve an evangelical element with the developed world advocating sustainability to the developing world. ‘The main problem is that the wrong people are teaching us sustainability,’ he said.

Five respondents were of the view that the sustainability discourse was most negatively circumscribed by the lack of prioritisation of sustainability and environmental concerns in national policy and practice. Academic A6 said:

At the IUCN meeting, the Addis Ababa principle of sustainability was discussed. Many countries are signatories but not many have followed up. Absolutely nothing has happened, not just in India, but also in the developed nations. In the IUCN, even among the different commissions – the education commission has done very little – it is no one’s problem. There is more focus
on conservation. Have they been able to influence or impact any of the issues to an extent that media or intelligentsia will look into it? I don’t think so.

From the corporate sector, C8 said: ‘Sustainability is not getting disseminated properly. It is only discussed within closed walls. Actionable points are not happening. Local people need to be engaged. Lay people must understand.’ G16, a senior bureaucrat from the central government, also spoke of the fact that matters relating to the environment are on the concurrent list and come under the purview of the state government. ‘The central government can only remind the state government and can’t take action. By the time action is taken, it is too late.’

Also a senior public servant from the central government, G14 discussed the problems with prioritising sustainability at the policy level. ‘Unless you integrate sustainable development across all sectors it cannot have the desired effect. Sustainability is not just the baby of the concerned ministry of the central government. It is the concern of every ministry. All policies and projects have to mainstream and integrate sustainable development into their concerns.’

Several issues related to the discursive construction of sustainability were also raised and discussed during the interviews. These were:

Premature polarisation of issues
Three respondents offered the opinion that the sustainability discourse remained stunted primarily as a result of the Indian media’s tendency to present issues in a way that prematurely polarised them along familiar environment versus development battle-lines. From the corporate sector, C12 said:

I see the main problem as being the sense that it is an ‘either/or’ situation. You can have more electricity connections or save a thousand trees. The frame is always ‘either/or’ and there is an ideological framing which does not allow rational debate. Equally, it takes away from looking at innovative or new solutions, technological solutions or the social dimensions of the debate. The media just polarises the issue even before solutions are looked at.

NGO respondent N29 agreed that there was clearly a problem with media ‘keeping the discourse at a contradictory level and promoting confusion’. NGO respondent N27 suggested that if issues were presented in a reasonable and comprehensive manner with careful avoidance of polarisation or the ‘either/or’ frame, the discourse would gain depth and wider public involvement.

When coastal issues were considered by media, it was always the poor who lost out in the economic race. That’s particularly so because in the country today, with 9 per cent growth, no one wants to talk about stopping anything. They say ‘be positive’. Everyone wants to deal with solutions without polarising issues. There was a time when people wanted to listen to another point of view. Now you are considered a loser if you are talking about the negative aspects of growth.

Poverty is a more pressing concern for India
One respondent, a CEO from the corporate sector, C11, was unequivocal in his insistence that the discourse on environment and sustainability was a luxury in a country like India which could not be considered ready to address sustainable development before it addressed its most pressing concern which was to feed its poor through education, training and the creation of job opportunities. C11 was of the firm view that job opportunities and the skilling of the masses could only be accomplished through industrial growth and governmental initiatives.

How do you resolve poverty? Self reliance is the key issue. It’s a step-by-step process. Give people the type of education that makes them self-reliant. The financial discipline will come when the person is happy. Then he can understand softer issues like sustainability. First things must come first. Policies need to address what’s at the bottom. Conferences on the environment should not be held at five star hotels. There is a need to make people happier at the grass root level (Brulle 2010).

Discussion
As part of an interpretive, qualitative analysis, the study takes the approach that all articulated themes are valid and significant (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Mitchell and Jolley 2010) within the carefully chosen rich and representative sample. The views of experts that constitute the rich data of this study need to be considered in the context of the leadership role played by critical communities or critical thinkers who generate new values and approaches that initiate
cultural and social change (Rochon 1998). Critical communities and social movements constitute the social authority that is critical to the creation of an alternative social map for advocacy and the mobilisation of individuals (Brulle 2010).

The themes and issues identified from the data appear to endorse the view that there are elements of a values-based culturally and historically constructed developmental sub-text within media-led discourse on sustainability.

Table 1. The Developmental Sub-text of Media-led Discourse on Sustainability in India

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<tr>
<th>Themes identified in the sustainability discourse</th>
<th>Elements of the developmental sub-text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Credibility/ lack of trust/ shallowness</td>
<td>Divergence from acceptable ethical norms and expectations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Western neo-liberal approach makes media treatment of sustainability superficial</td>
<td>Sustainability is consistent with Indian spiritual traditions, values and ethics and needs to be treated as such rather than as a Western-generated reformist movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Absence of leadership that is acceptable to the public</td>
<td>Need for individual leadership to steer and spearhead change for sustainability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guidance needed at the personal level to change lifestyles</td>
<td>Leadership must demonstrate core values and personally exemplary behaviour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public cynicism about governance, corruption and inconsistencies in policy</td>
<td>Sustainability leadership must address the need for a high standard of ethics and values in the public sphere</td>
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The themes identified from data testify to the existence of the Gandhian conundrum. It was apparent from the study that Gandhian standards are still used to measure leadership competence in the public sphere in India. The moral and intellectual inadequacy implied in the Gandhian conundrum was variously alluded to by all respondents in one way or another during the course of the interviews and seemed to echo a familiar cultural theme ubiquitous in ancient Indian proverbs and parables that underscores the dangers of inadequate leadership and guidance. As evident from table 1 above, the themes and issues identified from the data reveal elements of a culturally generated values-based sub-text that could contribute to better public acceptance of sustainability. Running through the opinions of all respondents was the central concern that the ideals and values inherent in the concept of sustainability needed not only to resonate at a personal level for the Indian public but that sincerity and commitment needed to form an essential element of the discourse.

Gandhi and his lived ideals connect modern India with its ancient heritage of myth and history populated by exemplary folk heroes and saints who taught generations of Indians their lived lessons of integrity and wisdom while continuing to inspire an often expressed yearning for similar spiritual and ethical leadership in contemporary public life. Gandhi’s own preoccupations with sustainability, decades ahead of the Brundtland commission, inspired economists like Schumacher into considering alternative economic models based on integrated community development rooted in shared democratic, socio-cultural values.

Deploring the fact that the world chose to listen to Keynes rather than Gandhi, Schumacher quotes Gandhi on the issues of constraints to economic growth: ‘The earth has enough for every man’s needs but not for anyone’s greed’ (Schumacher 1999: 20). Gandhi had rejected the concept of limitless generalised growth, which was widely accepted before 1950, as being entirely invalid and even dangerous. However, not even Gandhi’s political allies, closest friends and contemporaries chose to listen to his world views (Cox 2008), resulting in India embarking on the path of large scale state-sponsored industrialisation based entirely on the Western development model under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru (Rothermund 1993). Yet Gandhi appears to persist as India’s spiritual leader, haunting virtually every sphere of public discourse with his non-violent methods of resistance constituting standard political practice to this day.

Recent research reveals that leadership prototypes in India tend to draw from ideals and values that are reflective of a complex amalgam of myth and history in India with the predominant style being that of benevolent paternalism based on the ideals of spiritualism and duty rather than materialistic individualism.
Benevolent paternalism implies the derivation of authority through the demonstration of personally exemplary and morally scrupulous behaviour such that compels trust and compliance from followers (Pellegrini and Scandura 2008). Pellegrini and Scandura (ibid) also cite recent research evidence that points to the widespread acceptability and acceptance of benevolent paternalism in non-Western cultures where those vested with authority are followed unquestioningly largely due to the cultural and traditional familiarity and trust implicit in this familial style of leadership.

It is unsurprising in the Indian context, therefore, that the issue of insincerity or lack of commitment appeared central to the core concerns of personal lifestyles, ideals and values as part of the sustainability discourse in India. The perception that political leadership was unconcerned with the values and ideals inherent in sustainability troubled all respondents at some level. The identification of the Gandhian conundrum needs to be viewed in the light of the benevolent paternalistic style of leadership exemplified by Gandhi in India. Gandhi consciously crafted his own style of persuasive, albeit authoritarian, leadership through the personal demonstration of benevolent concern which was additionally buttressed by moral virtue and the self-sacrificing behaviour of Indian spiritual leaders and sages of bygone eras. The current study suggests that the impact of Gandhi’s leadership continues to reverberate with the Indian public in a way that has sharp implications for the sustainability discourse.

Brulle (2010) concurs with Habermas (1996) and Rochon (1998) in the need to engage rather than manipulate public opinion while asserting that there can be no separation of ends and means in the area of democratic politics. Gandhi’s stringent personal ethic rejected the justification of the means by the ends. Calling the ends and the means completely convertible in his philosophy, he considered the relationship between them inviolable and binding as that between the seed and the tree (Avery 2008). The need for ethics and sincerity in the discursive construction of sustainability goals and agenda within the organic context of a society appears compelling. All respondents spoke as well of the global discourse being coloured by the irony that sustainability was being advocated by the developed world after high standards of living and prosperity had been achieved at the expense of the environment and the welfare of the colonised nations of the world. Nevertheless, while the issue of sustainable lifestyles may yet remain politically unpalatable in first world societies (Death 2010), the study reveals that personal ethics and values are regarded as being central to the sustainability discourse in India.

Conclusion

That the environment and sustainability discourse in India is considerably limited in scope and nature at the policy and practical level is reasonably apparent from the study. As a nation with a rich history of culture surrounding the interpretation of ethics and values, there is clearly a role for ‘countervailing cultural power’ (Curran 1996) as expressed by strong idealistic and charismatic opinion leaders that could serve to modulate the discursive arena and steer it towards sustainability outcomes.

However, existing constraints encompass the absence of adequate discursive opportunity, weak policy commitment and inadequate media representation resulting in a gap between global and local discourses due to what was perceived as a failure by environmental communicators and opinion leaders to contextualise and personalise issues and concerns. The study also suggests that core values such as sincerity, commitment to ethical perspectives and lifestyles are already embedded in the meanings attributed to sustainability within current public discourse thus constituting the litmus test that will determine whether communication relating to environment and sustainability rings true for the public in India.

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