



SWEDISH  
COLLEGIUM  
for ADVANCED STUDY

## REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

**Session:** Action Research for Change: Applied Sociology and the Emerging Social Justice Movements

**Session Convener(s):** Jeffry A. Will, University of North Florida, Jacksonville; Jay Weinstein, Eastern Michigan University and University of North Florida, Jacksonville

**Chair:** Jeffry A. Will, University of North Florida, Jacksonville

**Comments:** -

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I) *BSP and Social Justice among Dalits/Ex-Untouchables in Uttar Pradesh, India*  
Ali Mehdi, University of Freiburg

II) *Attitudes Toward Dam Construction in the Garhwal Himalayan Region of Northern India*  
Denise Benoit Scott, State University of New York, Geneseo  
Annpurna Nautiyal, H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand

III) *Norwegian Sociology and the Recognition of the Saami Minority*  
Hans Petter Sand, University of Agder, Kristiansand

IV) *From Survival to Social Justice: Converging Media and Movements in India*  
Kiran Prasad, Sri Padmavati Mahila University, Tirupati

V) *Globalization, Human Rights and Public Sociology*  
Fatos Tarifa, European University of Tirana

## ABSTRACTS

### Session description

Over the past several years the world has seen dramatic changes across the social and political landscape in virtually all regions of the globe, culminating most recently with the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East and North Africa. Rather than resulting from fundamentalist religious fanaticism (as was feared by many Western Nations), however, many of these social movements appear to be driven by desires for political and social freedom, and led by predominately college educated and professional “secular actors.” In this session we plan to bring together Applied Sociologists from diverse societies who are conducting engaged research approaches to better understand and assist emerging movements to promote social justice across the globe. Our theoretical focus will be on the intersection between public sociology and applied sociology. Reflections on the role of Western involvement are welcome, but not required.

### Papers

I) *BSP and Social Justice among Dalits/Ex-Untouchables in Uttar Pradesh, India*

Ali Mehdi, University of Freiburg

Caste has historically been one of the principal axes of social injustice in India, and numerous movements have emerged over the years to challenge it. One such movement has been led by the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in the conservative north-Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, where it has been ostensibly trying to bring about self-respect and social justice to Dalits through political means since its formation in 1984. While it has revolutionized the political landscape of India's most populous and politically significant state – presently ruling it for the fourth time, with a majority – analysts argue that it has treated Dalits as its ‘vote-bank,’ indulged in opportunistic alliances and social engineering to capture political power, largely benefitted a section of Dalit elite, while gains for ordinary Dalits have mostly been symbolic in nature.

Though scholars have analysed the influence/impact of BSP on Dalits with reference to their self-respect/-confidence, cultural capital, socio-economic and political empowerment, human development, etc., no study has systematically evaluated the success of BSP in bringing about social justice to Dalits in the state. It is possible that some of these studies may have intended an analysis of social justice, but a systematic evaluation should explicitly spell out its choice of the ‘focal variable’ for the assessment of social justice, and argue why other variables are not suitable from a theoretical/empirical perspective. Other relevant questions to be addressed are – most primarily, what should be the conceptual framework for our assessments of social justice: BSP's/Indian government's/people's notions of social justice, or one of the theories of justice from ethical/political philosophy? Should we refer to ‘perfect justice’ or reduction in ‘injustices’? Then arises the issue of central focal variable. Should it be means-/process- or ends-/outcome-oriented? For instance, do we look at the schemes and programmes (design, allocation, implementation etc.) for Dalit welfare put in place by the BSP, or do we assess the socioeconomic/human development status of Dalits, or their level of happiness or well-being (as King of Bhutan, Nicolas Sarkozy, David Cameron and others shall advise), or something else? How do we use the focal variable? – do we compare the situation of Dalits in the state pre- and post-1984 in terms of the selected variable, or do we compare it with that of other social groups in the state for this time period, or with that of Dalits in other states where such a movement has/hasn't existed? Should we look at Dalits as one undifferentiated group, or by sub-castes, gender, religion, residence, wealth or educational status, etc.? So on and so forth.

This paper will address these questions in a general and a particular way – how do we assess the success of social movements/BSP in bringing about social justice to target group/Dalits? – by means of a literature review of

theories/debates on social justice in political philosophy as well as BSP's notion of social justice. Thereafter, it will choose an appropriate conceptual framework, focal variable and comparative method for the assessment of social justice among Dalits in UP after weighing the relative merits of various options, and use quantitative data from various rounds of India's National Sample Survey, National Family Health Survey, etc. as well as qualitative evidence from relevant field-studies to analyse the extent to which the BSP has been successful in bringing about social justice to Dalits, and the institutional and non-institutional obstacles that exist in such a pursuit.

## II) *Attitudes Toward Dam Construction in the Garhwal Himalayan Region of Northern India*

Denise Benoit Scott, State University of New York, Geneseo

Annpurna Nautiyal, H.N.B. Garhwal University, Srinagar, Uttarakhand

Social and political scientists, government officials, environmentalists, and engineers have all weighed in on the outcomes of dam construction projects on the lives of village residents in the Himalayas of northern India. On the positive side, some argue that the projects produce jobs, which in turn enhances the local economies. The dams also help provide the region with electricity. In a region where electrical power is intermittent or nonexistent, the dams have the potential to be a significant energy source. Others argue, in contrast, that the dams have caused major problems for the people of the area, which can be grouped into four categories: environmental, health, economic, and religious. Studies show that the natural environment has been negatively affected by dam construction. For example, paving the way for construction depletes surrounding areas of fertile land for planting. In some cases, problems with construction have caused flooding. Dust from dam projects has been related to health problems, as has sound pollution. Dam construction in some areas has forced residents to move to safer ground. As in the case of the Teri dam project, entire villages have disappeared. Along with the loss of land and natural resources, dam projects have also threatened sacred religious sites.

Since the beginning of the project, there has been a myriad of delays and problems, such as the collapse of a coffer dam and controversy over the dimensions of the dam. The danger of flooding is very real and would displace many people in the area. This project also threatens religious sites, such as the sacred Dhari Devi shrine, which the dam company has proposed to "relocate." In the area of the dam, dust and sound pollution are evident. The once serene and scenic Alaknanda River is now covered by a cloud of dust and surrounded by the rumble of heavy construction vehicles.

Although mass protest against business and the state on environmental and social justice issues is not uncommon in the hill region, residents of the areas in and around the dam project have been relatively silent with regard to the construction and related problems. In fact, little is known about the attitudes of the people in the region beyond assumptions made by policymakers and academics. This study sheds light on the conditions, experiences, and concerns of residents of the villages most affected by the dam project. The findings of this study are important for informing public policy in areas where these kinds of major "development" projects interact with, and have the potential to deeply affect, the surrounding environment.

In November of 2010, with the help of a team of student research assistants, 61 residents of two villages in the Chauras region were interviewed. Using an interview schedule consisting mostly of open-ended questions, 40 men and 21 women were asked about their knowledge of the dam project, the compensation package offered by the dam company, and their views on the environmental, health, economic, and religious effects of the construction. They were also asked about their participation in political activity with regard to the project. Interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes.

Preliminary results show that women, more than men, have a somewhat negative view of the dam project, particularly with regard to religious issues. When asked whether they were in favor of the Dhari Devi shrine being relocated, 40 percent of women compared with 75 percent of men reported affirmatively. Sixty percent of women, versus only 25 percent of men said that there “must not be any tampering with the original structure.” With regard to environmental issues, the biggest concern by far was reported to be the pollution caused by the construction project. Over half of the men and a third of the women said that the dust and sound permeating the air is a constant source of discomfort. They also reported that the damaged and uneven condition of the roads in the vicinity of the dam makes travel difficult if not impossible at times.

Surprisingly, although they did report some concerns, most of the residents interviewed, both men and women, say that they are well informed about the Alaknanda dam project and other major hydroelectric projects in the area and are generally supportive of the project. Although many have lost land to the construction, they report that they are satisfied overall with the compensation package provided by the dam company. More specifically, they are satisfied with the monetary compensation offered and employment opportunities offered by the company. In fact, those interviewed reported that every affected villager who lost agricultural land to the project was offered employment. Probing further, we found that typically one member of the family received employment, most likely the male householder. Due to the overall level of satisfaction with their treatment by the dam company, none of the residents reported that they had engaged in political activity with regard to the construction project.

We are currently in the process of further analyzing the data and constructing a conceptual and theoretical framework for the paper. A tentative conclusion is that, although residents of the villages most affected by the dam construction know that there are negative environmental, health, and religious consequences and feel these are important, economic factors are the driving force behind their generally positive attitude toward the project. This would make sense, given the fact that people in the area, deprived of land for farming, are increasingly dependent on a money economy. The lack of wage work in the area means that village residents are grateful for the employment opportunities offered by the dam company. They do not seem to know, or care, that these jobs are not necessarily permanent or that living and working in the area may lead to long-term health problems. Their satisfaction in turn reduces the potential for mass resistance or organized political activity of any kind. The dam company has done a very good job of satisfying the immediate need for jobs and money income (in part caused by the project due to loss of agricultural land). In doing so, the company has effectively squelched a possible popular uprising in the area that could cause delays in construction or prevent the building of the dam altogether.

These findings point to several possible policy implications. In the short term, public policy should address the problem of air pollution. Although they may not surface for some time, sound and dust pollutants will eventually result in health problems for the workers and the village residents. Additionally, public policy should address the issue of maintaining the roads surrounding the construction site so that residents can freely travel to and from their homes.

In the long term, public policy should address the issue of job creation so that residents are not solely dependent on the dam company for survival. This would give them more leverage to fight for decent roads, air, and the care and maintenance of important religious sites – all of which are important for the well being of people of this area. Policy makers should work together with the local business and academic communities on economic development in this region.

These findings also have implications for the work of both applied and public/activist sociologists. Regardless of the soundness of their work or the beneficial nature of their recommendations, major change is unlikely to occur as long as residents of the affected areas are placated by large companies. Applied and/or public sociologists are therefore

unlikely to affect or instigate large-scale popular movements in these areas unless they take into consideration the nature of these powerful forces.

### III) *Norwegian Sociology and the Recognition of the Saami Minority*

Hans Petter Sand, University of Agder, Kristiansand

It can be argued that Norwegian sociology played an important part in the ending of discrimination and the recognition of rights for the Saami minority, mainly living in the north of the country.

In the early postwar years, sociology professor Vilhlem Aubert and others conducted a local community study in a mainly Saami local community. The researchers found that the residents were very poor compared to the rest of the Norwegian population. The research turned into action research, where the researchers helped the people of the community to obtain welfare benefits they were entitled to, but had no knowledge about.

In the 1960s, educational sociologist Anton Hoem documented how the children of the Saami population were sent to boarding schools where they were forcefully taught Norwegian, denied to use their own language. At the same time, social anthropologist Harald Eidheim did a study documenting the discrimination against the Saami population and their language by the majority Norwegian population. In the 1970s, sociology professor Per Otnes wrote a book on Saami activist organizations. These studies heightened the awareness of the Norwegian population about the problems of the Saami minority.

Around 1980, there was an organized action against a dam building project that would affect Saami local communities. Some activists chained themselves at the dam-building site. They were carried away by the police in a spectacular action that was shown on TV all over the country. One of the activists in media focus was sociology professor Nils Christie.

Later on the Saami population has been granted special rights on land use in the northernmost county of Finnmark, they have got their own institutions like University, cultural centres and Parliament.

### IV) *From Survival to Social Justice: Converging Media and Movements in India*

Kiran Prasad, Sri Padmavati Mahila University, Tirupati

Globalization has set in motion a process of change in the South Asian countries. In a race for fast economic growth and prosperity, there has begun a serious introspection where development ends and destruction begins. In India, people are particularly challenged by the collapse of welfare measures leading to the campaign for the right to information grounded in an ideology of the people's right to a decent living and a more humane approach to development. This campaign is a striking one and worthy of emulation in many poorer parts of the world, especially since it is the ordinary, illiterate and oppressed rural folk who spearheaded it and not the educated, politically aware people of urban centres. This mass campaign generated grassroots participation and has snowballed into an anti-corruption movement that has gained wide support as a symbol of the aspirations of millions of people battling for survival. With the campaign gaining momentum, the patterns of communication have become more dynamic, with different symbols and codes. The long standing tradition of Gandhian fasts, indigenous channels of communication including popular public hearings, theatre, songs of social awakening, have converged with the mass media and new technologies including the internet and social media through which the anti-corruption movement raises a host of questions to which they seek truthful answers. This paper analyses the transformation of people's

struggles for survival to the demand of social justice against elite globalist development through the convergence of media and movements in India.

V) *Globalization, Human Rights and Public Sociology*

Fatos Tarifa, European University of Tirana

Human rights have become increasingly the focus of research and debate in sociology. The great expansion of human rights legislation and culture in recent decades have occurred in the context of—and in response to—economic globalization, which has accelerated poverty in many countries, has fueled migration, has destabilized communities, and has led to the rapid deterioration of the environment. They have occurred also at a time of new democratization movements that increasingly engage citizens in civil society and governance. Building on Michael Borawoy's, Judith Blau's and Bryan S. Turner's work on human rights and the role of public sociology, this paper argues in favor of a critical public sociology that recognizes the global character of public issues and takes as its first principle the investigation of the institutional context of human rights.