

Alternative life projects in rural South Asia: Reflecting on post-development through a study of diverse emplaced collectives

28, 29 & 30th October 2024

École française d'Extrême Orient, Pondichery, India

Workshop organized by EFEO, IFP and UMR Passages



This workshop is part of a long-term project entitled “Alternative life projects in rural South & Southeast Asia: Reflecting on post-development through a study of diverse emplaced collectives” (AltLife-SSEA), initiated at the École française d'Extrême Orient (Paris) by a team of researchers from EFEO, the Research Institute on Contemporary Southeast Asia (Bangkok), the French Institute of Pondicherry, and UMR Passages (Bordeaux).

The aim of this three-day workshop in Pondicherry is to bring together representatives of alternative collectives in rural areas, in order to share their experience with researchers on the issues and objectives of this research project.

Research's positioning and theoretical objective

All over the world, rising social inequalities, and a disenchantment with Western modernity have been prompting experiments in alternative ways of living. Climate change and the necessary "environmental transition" have only made such projects more urgent, as post-development theorists have shown (Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992). The aim of this workshop is to capture this debate and to present alternative living projects that have taken shape in rural areas of South and South-East Asia and that share both a critical stance towards established development and an aspiration for a meaningful existence. With Mario Blaser, we conceive of life projects as “oriented to the sustenance of emplaced collectives”, that is, “heterogeneous assemblages” of human and non-human entities that “‘take place’ in a specific location” and are related by mutual obligations (Blaser 2019: 84, 86).

By looking at alternative life projects of a broad spectrum of collectives, taking into account the constraints each of them faces, we seek to elaborate on the distinction between “alternatives to development” and “alternative development” that was so vividly formulated by Arturo Escobar (1995: 215). Rather than trying to categorize life projects as either radically rejecting the entire paradigm of development—operating a clear-cut “post-”development—or working within this paradigm, we consider the collectives under study as expressing a range of critical engagements with dominant development

Research framework

Three types of emplaced collective are taken into account, considering that they are all affected both by the consequences of unrestricted development and by critical discourse on this development.

- **Established emplaced collectives** have existed in a place for generations. While, in alternative circles, these collectives tend to be presented as paragons of an interconnected and solicitous way of being in the world, they have also been subject to mainstream development politics that extol modernity and promote a “will to improve” (Li 2007).
- **Intentional emplaced collectives** have been intentionally created and involve people from a diversity of places. Although disenchanted with modernity, these collectives are likely to maintain ties with the “first world” through at least some of their members.
- **(Re)converting emplaced collectives** comprise local people who, in interaction with external agents of change, have chosen to revert their way of living, in part back to what it was before it was transformed by developmental modernization.

By thinking together through three types of collectives that have tended to be siloed, it will show the circulation of actors, practices, ideas and values, as well as processes of appropriation, translation and vernacularisation. These three types of collectives will not be approached as enclaves within countries or regions. Part of the research will focus on their social, cultural, and political environment, with the hypothesis that this environment can influence a portion of their life projects.

Three lines of analysis

Following the methodology elaborated in the research, the workshop aims to make comparisons so that we can highlight the specific nature of each life project, as well as a common set of lines that have specific but interrelated entrances—material, social, ideal. Three lines of analysis were identified to be discussed during the workshop:

- First, we study emplaced collectives’ material arrangements and spatial (re)rooting, asking how they live from and with the land on which they are dwelling. While all emplaced collectives strive toward self-sustainability by trying to regain sovereignty over water, food, energy, or technology, we ask how this quest is influenced by their technical and economic situations.
- Further, we explore the social and institutional reconfigurations that occur in emplaced collectives as they engage in alternative life projects. We examine how people give form to their aims of living meaningfully together and articulating sovereignty and interdependence and how collectives combine local and immediate imperatives with supralocal and long-term issues.
- Lastly, we compare the (cosmo)political imaginaries and subjectivities in motion, as they shape alternative life projects and are reshaped along the way. We examine how different types of emplaced collectives contest dominant modernist development, with particular attention to their mobilisation of local wisdom and values, to propose different ways of relating to fellow humans as well as to other-than-humans.

Organisers / Chairs

- Maria Chauveau, anthropologist, EFEO
- Joy Ganguly, Social Worker and Environmental Conservationist, Svarnim Puducherry-Sri Aurobindo Society
- Venkatasubramanian G., sociologist, IFP
- Xavier Guillot, architect, EFEO / UMR Passages
- Lakshmi K., doctoral student in sociology, IFP
- Frédéric Landy, geographer, IFP / University of Paris Nanterre - LAVUE

Speakers / Invited members of emplaced collectives

- Joss Brooks, Pitchandikulam Forest, Auroville
- Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, social scientist, Auroville
- Cansu Gurkaya, doctoral student in sociology, EHESS, Auroville
- Yorit Rozin, Sadhana Forest, Auroville,
- Kirpa Ram, geographer, FGM Government College Mandi Adampur, Bishnoi community, Haryana/ Rajasthan

PROGRAM

MONDAY October 28 th : full-day workshop at EFEO center

***Morning* : Presentation of collectives by their members and discussion.**

Chair: Venkatasubramanian G.

- 8h 15 – 9h 00 : Coffee / Welcoming by Dominic Goodall / Introduction of the workshop.
- 9h00 – 10h 00 : Sadhana Forest, Auroville, by Yorit Rozin
- 10h00 – 11h 00 : Bishnoi community, by Dr Kirpa Ram Bishnoi
- 11h 00 – 11h 30 : Coffee break
- 11h 30 – 12 h 30 : Pitchandikulam Forest, by Joss Brooks
- 13h 00 – 14h 30 : Lunch at EFEO

***Afternoon* : Discussion / Round table on the three lines of analysis based on the previous description :**

- 14h 30 - 15h 15 : Material arrangements and spatial (re)rooting, chair : Xavier Guillot
- 15h 15 - 16h 00 : Social and institutional reconfigurations, chair : Frédéric Landy
- 16h 00 - 16h 30 : Coffee break
- 16h 30 - 17h 15 : (Cosmo)political imaginaries and subjectivities in motion, chair : Maria Chauveau
- 17h15 -17h 45 : Conclusion of the day by Lakshmi K. and introduction of the next day's visit.
- 19h 00 : Diner (not included) in town

TUESDAY October 29 th : Visit of collectives located in Auroville and meeting of their inhabitants :

- 9h-12h : Visit of Pitchandikulam Forest
- 12h-13h30 : Lunch at Pitchandikulam Forest
- 14h-17h : Visit of Sadhana Forest
- 17h : Tea at Sadhana Forest
- 19h00 : Diner at Auroville or Pondicherry

WEDNESDAY October 30 th (morning): Workshop at EFEO center : Academic approaches of community projects in India and discussion :

- 9h 00 – 10h 00 : Cansu Gürkaya : *Utopian Dreams and Subaltern Realities in Auroville*.
- 10h00 – 11h00 : Suryamayi Clarence-Smith : *Auroville : Prefiguring an Alternative Society*.
- 11h 00 – 11h 30 : Coffee break
- 11h 30 – 12h 30 : Discussion/ round table
- 12h 30 – 13h 00 : Conclusion by Joy Ganguly
- 13h 00 – 14h 30 : Lunch at EFEO and end of the Workshop

The Workshop is open to all but registration is required to facilitate organisation. You must register before 19 October. For those who wish to join us by visioconference, a connection link will be sent on request a few days before.

Contacts - Maria Chauveau : mariamelchauveau@gmail.com

- Xavier Guillot : xavier.guillot@bordeaux.archi.fr

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