



Changing climate discourse and politics in India. Climate change as challenge and opportunity for diplomacy and development



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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the study of changing climate discourse and policy in emerging powers through a case study of climate discourse in India since 2007. Based on interviews with key actors in Indian climate politics and textual analysis, three general climate discourses – the Third World, Win–Win and Radical Green discourses – are identified. The discourses are characterised by different constructions of India's identity, interests, climate change exposure and climate policy orientation. At the most general level, the article finds that there has been a general discursive shift from the Third World discourse to the Win–Win discourse, and that the latter discourse is in broad agreement with the dominant international climate change discourse of ecological modernisation and thus supports an alignment between Indian and international climate politics. We also find, however, that India's domestic climate politics is marked by co-existence and tensions between the three climate discourses, producing a complex and at times contentious discursive politics over climate change, identity and development. The case study presented in this article moreover demonstrates how national interests are socially constructed and how changes in policy reflect changes in the dominant discourse.

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Introduction

International climate negotiations have shown signs of changing discourses despite a lack of substantive progress towards new comprehensive agreements. Since the climate negotiations in Durban in 2011, the main focus in international climate politics has been on the design of a new climate agreement that is supposed to be finalised in 2015, and the critical question of effort sharing in emission reductions. 'Developed countries', on the one hand, envision an evolving and dynamic framework that would dismantle the 'firewall' that has existed between developed and developing countries in the Kyoto Protocol from 1997. 'Developing countries', on the other hand, commonly argue that industrialised countries in the global North have to accept the responsibility for climate change and emission reductions. In this context, it is notable that a group of 'rising powers' in the global South, especially India, Brazil, China and South Africa, increasingly have accepted that climate change mitigation – efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and enhance carbon sinks – is a shared international challenge and responsibility and thus an unavoidable element in national development strategies.

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This article seeks to contribute to the study of changing climate discourse and policy in these emerging powers through a case study of climate discourse in India since 2007. India is a prominent case of the new climate diplomacy. The Indian government has taken a number of significant steps in developing domestic climate policy, such as the launch of the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) in 2008. In the lead-up to the climate negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009 India made important shifts in her approach to international climate negotiations, most notably by taking on a voluntary carbon intensity target. At the climate negotiations in Cancun in 2010 the Indian Minister of the Environment and Forest Jairam Ramesh stated: "All countries should take binding commitments in an appropriate legal form" ([Times of India, 2010](#)). This statement provoked a heated debate in India. The Centre for Science and the Environment (CSE), a leading Indian non-governmental organization (NGO), observed that Ramesh had dropped a 'bombshell' ([CSE, 2010](#)), while a former Indian government official criticised Ramesh for departing from India's official position ([Thaindian News, 2010](#)).

These brief remarks point towards changing positions on climate change mitigation in India's foreign policy, but also that these are politically contentious. While there are a number of studies of material aspects of climate politics in India, there are relatively few studies that investigate ideational aspects of these changes, i.e. the

discursive constructions of identity and interests that frame India's climate diplomacy (Atteridge et al., 2012; Bidwai, 2012; Dubash, 2012a; Sengupta, 2012). The aim of this article is to further the existing knowledge on climate politics of India, and emerging powers more broadly, by analysing contemporary climate discourses and how these shape climate policy. More specifically, we examine discourses about climate politics among key actors in the national climate debate and policy-making, how they have changed in recent years and how these discursive shifts have been reflected in changes in Indian climate politics. By 'Indian climate politics' we mean political strategies and policies at the national level, regarding both domestic policy and the international climate negotiations under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The delimitation to 'recent years' refers to the period since 2007, when India started to develop national climate policies.

Discourse analysis has become an important entry point to environmental politics. Hajer observes that environmental politics "has increasingly become a conflict of interpretation in which a complex set of actors can be seen to participate in a debate in which the terms of environmental discourses are set" (1995:15). A discourse can be defined as a certain way to talk about and understand the world (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). The conceptual question of how discourse analysis can be used to examine climate politics is addressed in the next two sections. Thereafter follow three analytical sections. The first one identifies and analyses the emergence of climate discourse in India and a general shift from a 'Third World' discourse to a 'Win–Win' discourse. The second section examines the impacts of changing discourse on domestic and foreign policy. Finally, the third section examines how hegemonic climate discourses have subjugated an alternative 'Radical Green' discourse on climate change. At the most general level, the article finds that there has been a general discursive shift from the Third World discourse to the Win–Win discourse, and that the latter discourse is in broad agreement with the dominant international climate change discourse and thus supports an alignment between Indian and international climate politics. We also find, however, that India's domestic climate politics is marked by co-existence between the three climate discourses, producing a complex and at times contentious discursive politics over climate change, identity and development.

Analysing climate change discourse

Discourse analysis is concerned with studying meaning, and does that where meaning arises – in language. Discourse analysis seeks to make sense of the regularities and variations in what is being said and written, and to try to understand the social background and social effects of modes of talking (Hajer, 1995). Hajer defines discourse as "a specific ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations, that are produced, reproduced and transformed in a particular set of practices and through which meaning is given to physical and social realities" (1995:44). Similarly, Laclau and Mouffe (1985) understand discourse as a fixation of meaning within a certain domain. A discourse is established by meaning crystallizing around nodal points; that is, privileged signs that other signs are organised around and get their meaning in relation to (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Discourses are established as totalities when signs become stable moments through relations to other signs, thus excluding other meanings that the signs could have and the other ways they could have been related to each other. There is, however, never a total fixation of meaning since they are always being constituted in relation to other possibilities in the discursive field. This gives room for constant struggles between different discourses to obtain a hegemonic position. For Laclau and Mouffe the task of the discourse analyst is to follow these struggles over defining society (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002).

Adger et al. (2001) argue that discourse analysis involves three main steps: (i) analysis of regularities in expressions to identify discourses, (ii) analysing the actors producing, reproducing and transforming discourses, and (iii) social impacts and policy outcome of discourses. Our study uses the steps of discourse analysis identified by Adger et al. (2001) as a heuristic device while seeing discourses as a performative totality. This means that there is no distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices, and materiality is thus also discursive. Starting with the identification of discursive regularities we will especially emphasise different constructions of Indian identity and interests. Neumann (2001) observes that in a discourse analytical approach identity is political and constitutive. This is in contrast to an understanding of identity as given, where identity is traced back to material or national interests. Hopf (2002) advocates empirical and inductive research on the construction of identity as a basis for understanding interests: "A constructivist account of identity at the domestic level promises to endogenize the formation of interests by connecting them theoretically and empirically to identity and its associated discursive practices" (2002:16). In agreement with this perspective, our analysis emphasises how the Third World, Win–Win and Radical Green discourses in India construct different meanings of national identity and interests in regard to climate change.

Actors in climate discourse and politics

Discourses are embedded in actors, institutions and politics, and are thus not only text and speech 'floating around' (Neumann, 2001). In agreement with Adger et al. (2001), discourse analysis should thus pay attention to the actors who produce, reproduce and transform discourses through written and oral statements as well as policy. Without actors promoting discourses, struggles between them would never exist (Liftn, 1994). Actors also relate to each other, and although they "do not necessarily know each other, or may not even have met [...] they place themselves around certain discourses which they employ when they engage in the discussions about climate policy" (Hovden and Lindseth, 2004:66). Investigating how actors create and use discourses yield knowledge about power in the form of differentiated abilities to articulate and set the terms of a discourse, and the way actors get the discourse to which they subscribe accepted by others (Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007; Dryzek, 2005).

This focus on actors raises critical questions about the relationship between agency and structure, and especially about discourses as structures that exclude other possibilities. Foucault (1972) observes that discourses structure behaviour and is normally seen as placing more emphasis on the constraining function than the enabling effect. Dryzek (2005) diverges from Foucault on this issue, stating that discourses are powerful, but they are not impenetrable. Hajer (1995) similarly argues that more attention should be given to actors' strategic actions. This is even more prominent in Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who have been criticised for overstating the possibility of change in discourse and underestimating the structural limitations on actors, and for neglecting that not all individuals and groups have the same possibilities to articulate elements in new ways and thus create change (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002). We seek to chart a middle path here, seeing discourses as enablers and constraints, and, much like Hajer (1995) and Dryzek (2005) emphasising how actors produce and transform environmental discourses.

The notion of agency in discourse analysis has been further developed through specific concepts such as 'knowledge brokers', 'policy networks' and 'discourse coalitions' (Bulkeley, 2000; Bäckstrand and Lövbrand, 2007; Hajer, 1995). A knowledge broker is a person or institution serving as an intermediary, with the aim to develop relationships and networks between producers and

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