Geographers may beg to differ, but I believe that India and the UK share a common border. Linked by history, economics, bureaucracy, the English language, cricket and curry, it is hard to imagine one without the other. I have spent most of my life along the border between India and the UK. Born in Calcutta (now Kolkata) to missionary parents, India was my home until I was ten, and gave me a love for wildlife, cricket and virtually all things Indian. I went on to study Gandhian politics and then Comparative Religion at University, and, worked in turn as a teacher and advisor in Muslim-majority schools in Bradford, and a curate and vicar in Sikh-dominated Southall. Since 2000, I have remained in Southall, but as UK Director for A Rocha, the international Christian environmental mission (www.arocha.org). A Rocha’s rapid international growth has left me with an additional brief to work alongside the emerging A Rocha India, leading to visits in 2000, 2003 and 2004-5 totalling 4 months. This paper is a very personal reflection, from somebody whose heart is in cross-cultural mission, and who has stumbled unexpectedly into environmental concerns as a direct consequence of biblical missiology.

Introducing A Rocha

A Rocha is an unusual beast. On the one hand a Christian mission agency, on the other a scientific conservation body. With projects in 15 countries and growing, we have close links with CMS, Crosslinks and Interserve, and also with BirdLife International, IUCN (the World Conservation Union) and the UNDP. We are members of the Evangelical Alliance and core staff are committed Christians, yet we work with those of all faiths and welcome volunteers from many backgrounds. We don’t fit neatly into traditional missiology, but believe our approach to mission and the environment is biblical, and are increasingly finding that it challenges both church and society.

Some have tried to squeeze us into a mould whereby environmental work is legitimate as long as the primary aim is evangelistic. Whilst passionately believing that every Christian is called to share Christ with their neighbour, I’m uncomfortable with this. In practice we often find that those who would never attend a church are attracted by the combination of sustainability and spirituality, and forced to re-examine a Christianity they had rejected. As evangelist Rob Frost says: “When you take the earth seriously, people take the Gospel seriously.” However, even if nobody became a Christian through A Rocha’s work, I would defend it as mission, because mission is, by definition, everything that God sends his people into his world to accomplish. The Lausanne Covenant speaks of mission as “Using the whole church to bring the whole gospel to the whole world” and the well-known ‘Five Marks of Mission’\(^1\) are a helpful exploration of the parameters of our mission under God. An illustration from India brings home the importance of this full understanding of mission.

\(^1\) The Five Marks of Mission:
1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the earth.
Message from the Mangroves

As the Boxing Day tsunami illustrated, India’s east coast is vulnerable to the sea. Each year it suffers major floods caused by tropical storms in the Bay of Bengal, with devastating results. Whole towns are swept away, leaving ruined crops, dead livestock and land rendered infertile by salt water. Rather than simply rebuild homes to be destroyed by the next storm, one Christian project has begun to tackle a surprising underlying cause - mangroves! Mangroves grow in brackish inter-tidal tropical waters, and are uniquely able to draw nutrients in this habitat, supporting a vast range of crabs, mudskippers (the extraordinary fish with lungs), prawns and other fish (which spawn at sea but use the mangroves as a nutrient-rich nursery), kingfishers, bitterns, egrets, herons and waders. But mangroves have many threats – draining for irrigation and farmland, over-grazing, chopping for firewood. In eastern India, the twentieth century saw massive destruction of mangroves, leaving millions vulnerable to the effects of tropical storms. It has been shown conclusively that, after such storms – and indeed after the tsunami – areas protected by mangrove swamps have suffered far less than areas where they have been destroyed, with the mangroves absorbing the impact and preventing erosion and flooding.

In the Krishna river delta of Andhra Pradesh, the Full Gospel Churches of India were working in evangelism and church planting. They began with an inherited Pentecostal understanding of mission as ‘saving souls’. As they travelled to remote coastal villages, they were shocked by what they found. The villagers were poor, illiterate, disease-ridden, eking out a living from saline soil, destroying mangroves to provide firewood. Forced to rethink their missiology, the Full Gospel Churches of India eventually set up a “Christian Coastal Development Project” (CCDP). Starting with church planting and discipleship, the work grew to include education, medical help and rural development. Then the problem of the mangroves was diagnosed. Most villagers had lost relatives in previous floods, and the once extensive local mangrove forests had gradually diminished. The CCDP researched the possibility of a mangrove regeneration project, and now, with funding both from the Indian Government and international development agencies, has seen over 100 hectares regenerated. When, at an international mangrove consultation, they were asked how they achieved their remarkable success rate, they replied simply: “We pray for every seedling when we plant it.” By restoring the natural environment, the needs of a community of people have also been met. My very small involvement came about when I received an e-mail out of the blue from one of the mission’s leaders. He asked: “The Holy Spirit has led us into caring for the mangroves and protecting the environment, but we don’t have a theology to explain this – can you give us one?” In May 2000 I conducted a two-day workshop, translated into Telegu, on “A Biblical and Practical Approach to the Environment” for about 50 workers from the Full Gospel Churches and World Vision. Theology was challenged and changed, as God’s loving and saving purposes for the whole world were explored and the term ‘Full Gospel’ finally came home – mission as going in Jesus’ name to share the good news of his Kingdom with all creation.

A Rocha in Southall

For me this fuller understanding of mission came into sharp focus as I sought to reconcile my love for mountains, islands and bird-watching, with a calling to urban cross-cultural mission in Southall. As vicar of a church with the highest proportion of ‘other faiths’ in London (and 4th highest nationally)², I found our local mission strategy hampered by the sheer invisibility of

² St. George’s Southall: 76.5% ‘other faiths’ - figures taken from the Church of England ‘Presence and Engagement’ survey and based on 2001 Census Returns.
the local churches. Why should people consider Christian faith, when churches were only open on Sundays (unlike Gurdwaras, Mandirs and Mosques), and when Christians were making no tangible impact locally? If only we could find an area where Christians could be seen to be salt and light, perhaps the community would sit up and notice. I also came to understand the causes of urban alienation as profoundly linked to people’s relationship (or lack of) with God’s creation. Fly-tipping, concreted gardens, social fragmentation, and the deep purposelessness and powerlessness many feel, are all intrinsically tied to an alienation from the creation and the Creator. We are created to be rooted. Rooted in communities, rooted of course in God, and also rooted in creation. Jeremiah 29 has become a key passage in understanding Southall, where the vast majority of residents are, or are descendants of, ‘exiles’. The message to those nostalgic for a distant ‘home’, who feel negatively about the Babylon they’ve ended up in is clear and challenging. Put down roots! Build houses, plant gardens, start families, and pray for the peace and prosperity of Babylon, Southall or wherever God has planted you.

For me this meant that, rather than counting the days until I could escape urban Babylon for island holidays, I was to find sustenance and meaning – and God – whilst exploring the Grand Union Canal and the derelict rubbish-laden 90 acre Minet site on Southall’s edge. As I did so during 1998-2000, a vision began to emerge. My wife and I had already experienced A Rocha’s first project in Portugal – a community of Christians studying and protecting creation in a place of stunning beauty. But what if something like this were to happen in Southall? What if the Minet site were to be transformed from a tip, into a place of peace for people and wildlife? Words that I kept reading on Council documents began to connect with my theological studies as I explored what ‘regeneration’ might mean for the Minet site, and ‘community transformation’ for Southall. Eventually we took the plunge, left parish ministry, formed A Rocha UK, and set up the ‘Living Waterways’ project. Over the past five years we have seen the vision realised in ways beyond our expectation. The Minet tip, cleaned, landscaped and replanted has now been open for two years as ‘Minet Country Park’ and is attracting a wonderful diversity of wildlife and people. A Rocha, always explicit about its Christian ethos, is now seen as the leading Southall environmental agency. Hundreds of local school children are learning about their local environment in hands-on ways, through A Rocha playschemes, after-school clubs and school trips. Sikhs, Muslims and Hindus have participated, volunteered, shared meals with our team, and are well aware of how our faith inspires all we do and are. Whilst there is an enormously long way to go, Southall is taking faltering steps towards recovering a sense of community identity, and Christians are engaged at every level. Although the context could not be more different to the mangroves of Eastern India, the principle of mission as God’s transformation of areas of life is the same. We pray ‘your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ and Hans Küng has said well that God’s Kingdom is ultimately ‘creation healed’ – the shalom of healed, whole relationships with God, each other, ourselves and God’s world.

Back to India

When I visited India in 2000, I was trying to plant seeds for A Rocha, but – as so often – the seedlings that have emerged sprouted independently, and give further expressions to the integration of environment and mission.

Dr Vijay Anand, based in Bangalore, is a gifted worship leader and an expert on human-elephant conflict. Under his leadership A Rocha India is grappling with problems caused by competing pressures for space in a country of a billion people. Each year, forests that have historically supported India’s elephant population are nibbled away at, and even Government wildlife reserves cannot protect the age-old long-distance migratory routes which these
extraordinary pachyderms take in times of drought. As a result, people and elephants are increasingly coming into conflict, often with tragic results for both. Frequently, there is an impasse between the conservation lobby and the development lobby – respectively supporting elephants and poor people. With a Christian view of conservation as part of a wider understanding of mission, A Rocha has been able to play a conciliatory role – seeing both elephants and people as part of God’s overall good plans. Interestingly, A Rocha in Kenya and Ghana are finding themselves uniquely placed to fulfil exactly the same role.

In India, where life and faith have not suffered the same compartmentalisation as in the West, Hindus and others have also welcomed A Rocha’s faith-based stance. At a time when many missions in India have found opposition and persecution due to the rise in Hindu fundamentalism, A Rocha has so far established good relationships. Visiting A Rocha India’s work in January 2005, I was taken to meet local government officials for whom A Rocha has conducted its research, and leading academic experts on Indian elephants, as well as Church leaders, bishops, and the General Secretary of the Indian Evangelical Mission. All saw the integration of Christian faith and environmental concern as quite normal and natural. It seems to be only in our post-enlightenment Western confusion that we have fragmented God’s plans, and see him as interested solely in disembodied souls, or in people but not planet. A Rocha India’s volunteers challenged me in how environmental work was simply one part of their faith. I met a young Christian who worked night-shifts in a call centre and gave hours afterwards as a volunteer in A Rocha India’s office. I met a lady theology lecturer conducting bird surveys for A Rocha on Bangalore’s water-supply reservoirs. I met a church-planter amongst tribal villagers who helped A Rocha tackle the illegal trade in rare Indian Star Tortoises. For each of these, environment was not an overwhelming passion at the expense of other dimensions of faith, but part of an integrated understanding of the earth as the Lord’s and everything in it (Psalm 24.1).

As well as visiting A Rocha’s work in Bangalore, I was privileged to spend three weeks in Mizoram, squeezed between Bangladesh and Myanmar in India’s far north-east. There are two very relevant statistics about Mizoram. First, it is 82% virgin forest and part of a unique, and still poorly studied global bio-diversity hotspot. Second, 95% of the state’s population are affiliated to the Mizo Presbyterian Church (as a result of Welsh missionary endeavours 100 years ago). The Mizo church is amazingly active, sending out more cross-cultural missionaries per head of population than anywhere else on earth. It is also very powerful, and if the Mizo Synod decides something, the State Government jumps to follow. I was there at the invitation of the Mizo Presbyterian Synod, to speak on a biblical approach to the natural environment. What an exciting opportunity! In the past, the reputation of Mizoram for wildlife conservation has been poor. Dualistic theology has meant some pastors are well known for leading worship before entering the forest to shoot whatever moves. There are problems from deforestation and slash-and-burn farming. But imagine the potential if this corner of India could instead create a reputation for biblically-motivated sustainable care of creation? The power of the Synod, and the responsiveness to biblical exposition give great hope. One memorable incident, after a day’s seminar for government wildlife officials, was when a formidable older lady stood. “In the past”, she said, “we have glorified hunting and idolised great hunters in our Mizo society. Now we know that God made all animals in love and we should respect them. We should not idolise the hunters, but rather those who protect the animals.”
The Last Word

Southall, Andhra Pradesh, Bangalore and Mizoram all share the common border between India and the UK. They also each illustrate something of how mission and environmental concerns are being woven together in many parts of the world. If Christian mission means going in Jesus’ name to show God’s love to God’s world, then it must include rejoicing in and caring for a world made ‘by him and for him’ – a world that ‘holds together in him’\(^3\), and falls apart when we fail to express his Lordship over it.

\(^3\) Colossians 1.15-17

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