

New Environmentalism of Kerala for Sustainability

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Abstract: Kerala is widely well known as the ‘God’s own country’ because of its scenic beauty and bio-diversity. But the multinational companies have exploited the natural resources of Kerala after globalization. In Kerala, the nature lovers, environmental activists, Adivasis or Tribal people, the poor and the marginalized people launched various movements against polluting industries, pesticides, construction of dams etc. They have defended their environment in rural areas and their concern is with livelihood, environmental justice and protection, thereby contributed to the environmental sustainability of the economy. The environmental movements in Kerala are the Silent Valley movement, the Mullaperiyar Dam issue, Save Chaliyar movement, movement against endosulfan and Coca cola.

Keywords: Endosulfan; Environmental Movements; Marginalised people; Sustainability; Subaltern consciousness

Introduction

Kerala is widely well known as the ‘God’s own country’ because of its scenic beauty and bio-diversity with rare species of plant and animal life and abundant natural resources. But the multinational companies have exploited the natural resources of Kerala after globalization. In Kerala, the nature lovers, environmental activists, *Adivasis* or Tribal people, the poor and the marginalized people launched various movements against polluting industries, pesticides, construction of dams etc. They have defended their environment in rural areas. Their concern is with livelihood, they struggle for environmental justice and thereby they contribute to the environmental sustainability of the economy. Such environmentalism of livelihood is often expressed as the defense of legally established old community property rights.ⁱ

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Bruntland Commission) defined sustainable development as “industrial progress that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.ⁱⁱ

The important environmental movements in Kerala are the Silent Valley movement, the Mullaperiyar Dam issue, Save Chaliyar movement, movement against Endosulfan and Coca cola. The present paper is an attempt to re-look and reinterpret the environmental movements of Kerala in the historical frame of new social movements, especially of post colonial Kerala in the theoretical frame of rising subaltern consciousness after globalization of the economy. The environmental movements in Kerala can be identified as part of the rising subaltern consciousness mainly under subaltern theories of Ranajith Guha, Gayatri Spivak and Antonio Gramsci.

Methodology and Data Source

Analytical method is used to identify the new environmental movements in Kerala as part of rising subaltern consciousness. The disadvantaged subaltern sections of Kerala society act as an alternative agency of social change and hence this is a methodology of participatory mobilization, creative action and critical intervention. Both primary and secondary sources are used for this paper.

Objectives

- To understand the growing consciousness of the environmentalism of the poor.
- To classify the movements under the historical context of ‘new social movements’ after independence.
- To examine the failure of the post-colonial government of Kerala State to offer a sustainable and eco-friendly development strategy for the state.

Historical Background

The genesis of environmental movements in India can be traced to the *Chipco* movement started in 1973 in the Uttar Pradesh state. An organized resistance spread throughout India against the destruction of forests. The people from the villages especially women hugged the trees to prevent the contractors from felling them and hence the name of the *Chipco* movement came from the word 'embrace'. Between 1970's and 90's there were several struggles in India around issues of right to forest and water which raised larger ecological questions like rights of communities in forest resources, sustainability of large scale environmental projects like dams, issues of displacement and rehabilitation etc. *Narmada Bachao Andolan* was the social movement against the construction of dam across River Narmada in Gujarat State. *Adivasis*, environmentalists, farmers and human rights activists participated in this movement.

The Indian environmental movements are against the colonial model of development pursued by the post-colonial governments. The post independent governments failed to build a development agenda based on the needs of the people and continued to advocate the modern capitalist agenda which led to the destruction of environment, poverty and marginalization of rural masses. All environmental movements of Kerala are the people's protest against the policies of the post colonial state policies. The developmental strategies in the state of Kerala do not reflect the needs and demands of the people and ecology of the state.

History from Below

The subaltern analysis of history emerged as a 'historiography of protest' against the elitist school of thought and this mode of explaining history also known as 'history from below' aims to construct the paradigm of subaltern consciousness manifesting in different forms, different places and in different time. The theoretical root of subaltern studies was well-defined and explained by Ranajith Guha, which is applicable in Kerala environmental movements also. The role of the subaltern people and their spontaneous action in the environmental movements of Kerala have been traced from Antonio Gramsci's theory. Gayatri Spivak's theory is also applicable in the people's movements of Kerala which is against the multinational bio-piracy.

Important Environmental Movements of Kerala

Silent Valley Movement

It was a remarkable people's movement that saved a pristine evergreen forest in Kerala from destruction by stopping a hydro-electric project across the *Kuntipuzha* River in Palakkad district. In 1970, the Kerala State Electricity Board proposed to build a hydro-electric dam that ran through Silent valley. If the project was materialized, 8.3 square Kilometres of virgin evergreen forest would have been destroyed. Kerala is blessed with abundant natural resources and rare species of plant and animal life. People protested against the Government of Kerala when the government decided to construct a hydro-electric project at Silent Valley. The dam site consisting of nearly 8952 hectares of forest is one of the virgin forests abundant in rare species of flora and fauna. The lion-tailed macaques of this area play an important role in maintaining the eco-balance by eating the poisonous thorny bushes in those forests. Ecologists and environmentalists argued that the deforestation in Silent Valley would endanger the eco-balance and would change even the climate of Kerala state by diminishing the rainfall. Thousands of people effectively involved in the movement against the Silent valley project for ten years. People protested using every possible means available i.e, letters to the editors of variable news papers and magazines, seminars, widespread awareness campaigns, petitions and appeals in court etc. Nature clubs were organized all over Kerala to fight against the Silent Valley project. The movement that started as a local movement became national and international in nature because of the wide propaganda and the joining of the famous environmentalists and writers. The Silent Valley Samrakshana Samiti and Kerala *Sastra Sahitya Parishad*, a voluntary organization conducted protests and demonstrations against the decision of the government of Kerala. They sent a petition to the government, tried to educate the public about the evils of deforestation by conducting silent demonstrations, rallies, debates, street dramas and writing articles in leading newspapers. This enabled the movement to turn into a mass people's movement. The cry of the people was so loud that the government was forced to promulgate an ordinance and later an Act- the Silent Valley Protected Area (Protection of ecological Balance) Act, in 1979 to protect the eco-system of Silent Valley. Later, the project was completely dropped by declaring Silent valley as a National park in 1985. People's action was so powerful that the government was forced to leave the project.

Mullaperiyar Dam Issue

The people of Kerala agitated for the protection of Mullaperiyar dam in Idukki district which was constructed in 1895 A.D by John Pennycuick to divert water to the then Madras presidency which consisted of present Tamilnadu state. It is constructed over the River Periyar using rubble and lime surkhi (burnt brick powder). Normally the life span of a dam of this type is only fifty years. Now after 120 years, the entire structure is unsafe. There was a lease agreement between the State of Travancore and the Madras presidency in 1886 to supply water to the latter for a period of 999 years. The state of Tamilnadu has demanded for the raising of water level so as to get more water for its agricultural lands. Considering the dangerous condition of the dam, the Kerala government refused the proposal. Moreover, the dam is situated at a place which has high seismic potential. The Periyar National Park, Thekkady is located around the Periyar Reservoir formed by the backwaters of this dam. It is a highly protected tiger reserve and the presence of 62 different types of mammals have been recorded in Periyar area. According to the report by the Kerala Forest Research Institute, the protected area around the dam and reservoir is a bio-diversity hot spot. The people of Kerala wanted the protection of the dam. Though the Kerala State government has proposed to construct a new dam to protect the people from destruction, this has not been materialized and the people living in the nearby areas are under the shadow of fear and despair. Their life is unsafe and hence the government of Kerala has to take immediate steps to find alternative arrangement for the safe rehabilitation of the people.

Save Chaliyar Movement

In the case of the Chaliyar River in Kerala, the exploitation of water by Gracim Rayons Company was followed by the reactions and struggles by the local people to protect the river. Rayon grade pulp and fibre plant started functioning in 1963. The company was given freedom to take maximum water from Chaliyar River for industrial use and to empty the wastes into the same river. Chaliyar River plays a very significant role in the lives of the people living on the banks of it. The people have been bound for years to it not only for livelihood but also for various religious, traditional, recreational and cultural reasons. It has been a means of transportation for the people since early times. Agriculture was the main source of income of the people and the river paved the way for many other livelihood options. The local people used the water for drinking, cleaning, bathing, cultivation etc. The disposal of waste materials and the extraction of excess water from River Chaliyar caused serious environmental problems such as resource depletion, pollution of the air, water and growth in the levels of solid, toxic and hazardous wastes. As air and water pollution rose to dangerous levels, the local people could feel the incidences of diseases growing in the factory area. The number of cases of malformed babies multiplied. There were high incidences of chronic bronchitis, Pneumonia, skin diseases, cancer, cardio-pulmonary afflictions, chronic asthma, tuberculosis, ulcers, kidney troubles, vision problems due to the air and river water pollution. As the pollution problem increased, the people of the area became more active with protests, demonstrations and submission of memorandums. Ultimately, the Kerala State Pollution Control Board ordered the closure of the plant and the polluting factory was closed down in 2001. The Chaliyar agitation against Gwalior Rayons factory is a success story of a people's environmental movement for the restoration of the Chaliyar River to its original state in order to save the river and guard it for their posterity.

Movement against Endosulfan

The endosulfan spray issue goes back to 1976 when the first experimental aerial spraying was carried out on cashew plantations in Kasaragod district, owned by the Plantation Corporation of Kerala which is the largest plantation company in the public sector. This continued three times every year for twenty five years over an area of 12000 acres in nine villages. Endosulfan was sprayed by using helicopters and small aeroplanes to eradicate tea mosquitoes in the cashew plantations. This dangerous pesticide dissolved in the drinking water of the people of this area and the consumption of this water resulted in diseases of various types ranging from physical deformities, cancers, birth disorders and damages to brain and nervous system. Congenital anomalies, cancer, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, physical deformities, epilepsy, hydrocephalus etc were visible among the children. More than 50000 persons have been impaired while more than three thousand live in utter misery with irrecoverable diseases. Ordinary people of Kasaragod district were at the forefront of the battle to ban the use of endosulfan, a toxic pesticide that has been used for decades in India. Endosulfan's impact is evident in the maimed, mentally and physically disabled children and in the illhealth of men and women. A study conducted by the Centre for Science and Environment highlighted the impacts of endosulfan poisoning and spraying death on the residents of that area. After the study, government scientific institutions had also confirmed the harmful effects of the aerial spraying of endosulfan in Kasaragod district. After a tremendous public and media pressure and intervention of the courts, the aerial spraying of endosulfan was stopped in 2001. The use of endosulfan had been banned in the state of Kerala by the Union Agriculture Ministry of India. Studies conducted show that even after the stoppage of the aerial spraying of

endosulfan, higher concentration of the pesticide is present in the soil, water and human blood resulting ailments at a high rate. Even today babies are born with disabilities and people die of cancer and other diseases. The bad effects of the endosulfan can last for many more years and for generations. Though the government has taken some steps for the amelioration of the problems caused by endosulfan, the compensation is not enough compared with their sufferings. Kerala government has not yet settled the claims of the victims for their fair compensation. A case is pending in the High Court of Kerala seeking a final decision on the compensation and free medical treatment of the affected people.

Movement against Coca- Cola

The Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages Pvt. Ltd established the Coca-Cola unit in a 40-acre land at Plachimada in Palakkad district in 1998. Palakkad is known as the rice bowl of Kerala. 80% of the population of Palakkad is engaged in agriculture. Fifteen million litres of ground water was extracted per day by Coca-Cola free of cost. Bottles were washed using chemicals and the effluents were released without treatment. This contaminated the ground water creating water crisis for the tribal people, dalits and the farmers. The foul smelling dry sedimented slurry waste was sold as fertilizer to the farmers in the earlier days. But later, it was given free. When the people began to protest, the waste materials were dumped on the wayside and on fields at night. The ground water as well as the water from the open wells have rapidly depleted in this perennially rich paddy growing belt. Calcium and magnesium were found in high levels in the drinking water around the factory area. Paddy cultivation was abandoned by the farmers and the landless *adivasis* lost their jobs. The water turns turbid or milky on boiling and is unfit for drinking, bathing, and washing clothes etc.

The struggle against the Plachimada plant of Coca Cola was launched on 22 April 2002 by the anti-Coca-Cola Peoples' struggle Committee with a symbolic blockade and an ongoing continuous picketing (dharna) by mainly the *Adivasis* particularly by women and children in front of the Coca Cola plant demanding the closing down of the plant. As the struggle progressed, hundreds of *Adivasis* and activists were arrested. The protesters demanded for the closure of the Coca Cola factory and make it liable for the destruction of livelihood resources of the people and the environment. As a result of the protest and objection of the natives of Palakkad, finally the company was closed down in 2006. In 2011, Kerala cabinet decided to form a tribunal for securing compensation and relief for the environmental degradation caused by the Coca-Cola Company at Plachimada. A Committee was set up to study the issue, estimated that the people in the area had suffered a loss of 21,626 million rupees due to the pollution and water shortage caused by the operation of the plant. This is not merely a struggle against Coca Cola but against destroying lives, resources and environment of the inhabitants.

All these environmental movements were mass movements by the marginalized sections of the Kerala society against destroying the resources and the environment of the state. These can be identified with the so called historical context of new social movements in post 1960s which signifies a paradigm shift in the international political and intellectual discourse which ultimately leads to the formation of new social movements all over the globe.ⁱⁱⁱ The people need a development which is participatory, liberating, collaborative, consensus-building and equitable with strong considerations of social justice and environmental values.

Greening the State Programme

Scientists are of the opinion that the harmful effects of pollution can be minimized if one third of the land area is under forest cover. This awareness has inspired the people and the government to undertake social forestry programmes so as to increase the tree cover. In Kerala, the State Forest Department has implemented such programmes with the active participation of school and college students. Seedlings have been planted on the sides of roads with the participation of head load workers. With the help of fishermen community, seedlings are planted on the coast-lines also. The *Harita Keralam* programme has been launched with the objective to grow one crore trees outside the forest area with the help of all the nine hundred and ninety nine Grama Panchayats of Kerala State.

Conclusion

In the environmental movements in Kerala, it is evident that the poor people have defended the environment in rural areas. These ecological and environmental movements are the examples of the collective action of several social groups irrespective of caste and class. The subaltern masses agitated for their control over their resources, the right of the indigenous people to preserve their culture, protection of environment and maintenance of ecological balance as the government policies affected the human life to a great extent. Environmental movements in Kerala encompass the enhancement in the quality of life through recognition of people's right over their natural resources, their right to live with dignity and their participation in the decision making. This is against the modern capitalist agenda of the

state government which led to the destruction of environment, poverty and the marginalization of the rural masses. The developmental strategies of the governments in Kerala do not reflect the needs and demands of the people and ecology of the state. Massive struggles against the government policies and their success led to the development of a new environmental consciousness among the people of Kerala, i.e., the New Environmentalism or the Environmentalism of the poor which has a significant role in shaping the governmental policies, i.e., protection of environment as an integral part of development planning.

End Notes

ⁱ Joan Martinez, Alier, *The Environmentalism of Poor*, Paper prepared for the conference on *The Political Economy of Sustainable Development: Environmental Conflict, Participation and Movements*, 30 August 2002, p.1.

ⁱⁱ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1987.

ⁱⁱⁱ Robin Cohn, Shirin M. Raj, (ed.), *Global Social Movements*, p. 18.

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