

Reconstructing Development through Kerala's Women-Led Environmental Movements

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Abstract

In India's post-independence development trajectory, development-induced displacement has continued to be a problem, especially for indigenous and forest-dependent people. Dams, industrial projects, mining, and infrastructure development are examples of large-scale interventions that frequently cause ecological degradation, land dispossession, and disruption of traditional livelihoods. Tribal communities, whose social, cultural, and economic existence is intricately linked to regional ecosystems, bear a disproportionate amount of these effects. Kerala offers a unique setting for examining the linkages among gender, development, and the environment within this broader national framework. To understand how ecological concerns, displacement, and survival struggles shape collective resistance, this study examines three significant environmental movements in Kerala. Drawing on human ecology and ecofeminist perspectives, the study emphasises how environmental degradation translates into daily vulnerabilities for indigenous populations, especially women. The close relationship between women and nature is exemplified by the leadership of women such as Mayilamma and Geetha, where social justice and communal existence depend on environmental preservation. The study also situates these movements within Kerala's development narrative, highlighting the state's efforts to strike a balance between ecological sustainability and economic growth through decentralised governance, environmental regulations, and public engagement. Initiatives such as Kudumbashree and local self-governments demonstrate that policy procedures are beginning to acknowledge women's ecological knowledge. The study concludes that Kerala's women-led environmental movements offer important lessons for environmentally sensitive areas, as they are collective declarations of ecological justice, gender equity, and sustainable development rather than mere opposition to development.

Development Projects in the Indian Scenario

The displacement of traditional communities from their homeland is not a new phenomenon. Most of these cases in India result from forced displacement due to project interventions. Development arises at the cost of people leaving their hometown (Patwardan, 2012). The less prepared and those worried about their survival are eventually displaced as a result of these initiatives, which also entail significant land acquisition and ecological changes. Tribal or indigenous communities are typically the ones compelled to abandon their homes in the majority of cases. Forced relocation has long been a persistent issue in the debate over the sustainable development model and the pursuit of development-oriented growth. Reports from the ground indicate that this area requires critical attention and in-depth investigations.

Many development strategies are emerging to achieve the country's overall progress in the age of globalisation and privatisation (Edelman & Angelique, 2005). Since gaining independence, India has prioritised the country's growth by implementing specific policies. Infrastructure development was the first step in acquiring tribal and forest land (Xaxa, 2008). The most crucial tasks were building ships and cutting large amounts of wood for railroads. Gopinath (2013) argued that the state and union governments have the authority to purchase land from individuals for development projects intended to serve the public interest, as defined by the land acquisition itself. Aggarwal (2017) says that before British control, the original occupants of the forest, the forest tribes, had complete rights over the land and were free to travel and gather resources. Even after decades of independence, the same custom is still followed. Since the definition of "public purpose" remains ambiguous, governments define and formulate it in their own ways. Recent years have seen several conversations in mainstream culture about development interventions and their ramifications, driven by various people's movements and research on the social, cultural, and environmental impacts (Gopinath, 2013). Engineers and planners are primarily responsible for building dams and irrigation systems. They seem less interested in the political and ecological considerations. When it comes to the benefits that infrastructure growth brings to mainstream society, policymakers and implementing politicians typically take those concerns into account. In these situations, they viewed displacement—particularly development-oriented forced displacement—as an opportunity for the tribal society to grow, with alternate means of subsistence provided in exchange for compensation.

Development projects in forest areas generally have several direct or indirect implications on the immediate environment (ibid.). She also states that "Implementing a project in a rich, environmentally sensitive natural forest area may result in forest degradation, soil erosion, biodiversity loss, flora and fauna loss, or even drought". In addition to all of these, the local indigenous population will be directly affected by environmental changes, which might have a significant impact on their daily lives because they interact with the forest on a daily basis. Therefore, changes in the immediate or indirect environment might have a corresponding direct or indirect impact on the lives of the tribal group members. India has seen instances of agitation and opposition to development initiatives such as irrigation and dam projects. These are not only protests against a particular project; instead, people's understanding of the project's environmental effects is the primary reason for the growth in opposition. Vedanta Bauxite resistance exhibits ecological consciousness and its impact on the tribal population, even in Narmada Bachao Andolan's fight against the Polavaram dam (Gopinath, 2013). It is important to remember the part that women have played in all of these conflicts. Women's place in such environmental initiatives is strengthened by the close bond they share with nature.

Women and Environment Movements in Kerala

Environmental preservation and the survival concerns of local communities in the project region were at the centre of every conflict arising from Kerala's development operations. The role of women in India's many movements is important to consider when researching any of these movements. The most notable instances of women's environmental movements in India include the Narmada River, Chipko, and Appiko movements. An analysis of Kerala's scenario, which provides a list of ecological movements predominantly led by women and tribes, would highlight the importance of women in environmental movements. It has a lengthy backstory as well. The state is well-known for its abundant water resources and biodiversity; ecotourism, centred on these features, is a booming industry that attracts foreign capital. Several lakes, including Pookkottu, Karaladu, and Kuruva Island in the Wayanad district, as well as deer park packages in Thenmala, Periyar National Park, Silent Valley National Park, and Eravikulam National Park, are the primary attractions for eco-tourists.

Throughout Kerala's environmental campaign history, several movements have been spearheaded by tribal communities. Save Silent Valley Movement (1973), Muthanga Land Struggle (2001), Chaliyar River Agitation (1998), Struggle against Industrial pollution in Eloor-Edayar region of Ernakulum district (2004), Kathikudam Agitation against Nita Gelatin Company (2013). The opposition to the Athirappilly hydroelectric project is regarded as a significant environmental campaign (Gopinath, 2013). Political or environmental campaigns progressively provide a forum for civil society discourse about Kerala. People's increased awareness of environmental issues leads to lively discussions. The people of Kerala, a highly literate state, care deeply about protecting the environment. Their high level of political knowledge also contributes to this awareness. This section discusses the major movements against the development intrusions, including the ongoing tribal movement against Athirappilly Hydroelectric projects, the Save Silent Valley Movement, and the Plachimada battle.

The Plachimada Agitation

In Kerala's Palakkad district, the residents of Perumatty Panchayat spearheaded the Plachimada movement to protest the Coca-Cola Company's excessive use of drinking water (Wranner, 200). The Plachimada hamlet is about five kilometres from the Tamil Nadu border. In the Plachimada neighbourhood, the majority of Tamil migrants were employed as wage workers; during that time, male workers were paid 100 rupees per day, while female workers were paid 75 rupees. Additionally, most of them settled permanently in Perumatty Panchayat. Hindustan Coca-Cola Holding Private Limited directly affects the villages and the two tribal communities, Marasar and Eravalur. Nearly 1000 Malasar and 19 Eravalur tribal families had a severe water shortage in 2003, according to a report by the non-governmental organisation Jananeethi (Wranner, 2004). There are even more villages affected by the industry. As the situation deteriorated due to the Coca-Cola factory's operations, public dissatisfaction grew and eventually developed into a widespread campaign against Hindustan Coca-Cola Holding Company. By using bore and open wells to extract around a million litres of water from the community, Hindustan Coca-Cola overused groundwater. Initially, the company bought water from another private company. However, they eventually turned to their internal water sources, which were sufficient to provide the volume needed for their operations (ibid). Consequently, exploitation causes a shortage of drinking water in neighbouring areas. The factory was built on 15 hectares of fertile, multi-cropped paddy land, which had a significant impact on the food crops grown by locals. They extracted water from two central open ponds and 60 bore wells. The natural water sources and wells dry up, and the remaining ones become contaminated.

Along with drinking water, it also directly affected the agricultural industry. Thus, in April 2002, the tribes and peasants of the Plachimada area began protesting the enterprise. A tribal woman from the Eravalur tribe, Mayilamma, led the campaign. She dealt with the paucity of drinking water and was crucial to the campaign. The Anti-Coca-Cola Struggle Committee's founder, Mayilamma, was primarily responsible for the agitation—the initiative called for the permanent closure of the Plachimada Coca-Cola factory (Wranner, 2004).

Save Silent Valley Movement

Save Silent Valley is another significant environmental movement in Kerala (1973). Another societal effort is the preservation of the Silent Valley, an evergreen tropical forest in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It began in 1973 to prevent flooding of the Silent Valley Forest caused by a hydroelectric project. The valley was designated Silent Valley National Park in 1985, following the movement's widespread advocacy. The dispute over the valley is still going strong, however. The Kunthippuzha River, which flows southwest of the Silent Valley, is the Kunthippuzha. It comes from the verdant forests; this region was perfect for building a hydropower project in Kunthippuzha. Studies revealed that it would be a good location for a 120-megawatt hydropower project costing 17 crores. The location becomes the centre of Save Silent Valley, India's most distinctive environmental battle of the decade, following the project's announcement.

The Western Ghat Region is home to this old-world monkey, which has an endemic conservation designation. Among the rarest and most endangered primates is this one. The problem later attracted widespread public notice. Romulus Whitaker, the founder of the Madras Crocodile Bank and the Madras Snake Park, was most likely the first to raise awareness of the initiative in isolated and small towns (Parameswaran, 1979). The Kerala Research Institute conducted an ecological assessment of the area in 1977 and suggested that it be designated as a biosphere reserve (ibid.). The project was approved in 1978 by the Honourable Prime Minister of India, Smt—Indira Gandhi, who stated that the state government should enact legislation to provide the required protections. The state government chose to proceed with the project's implementation and took the land off the list of protected areas. Similar to the Plachimada movement, SSSVM was significantly influenced by the Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad (KSSP[4]). They brought this matter to the notice of a large number of people. Additionally, they released social-political and techno-economic analyses of the Silent Valley Hydroelectric Project. Sugathakumari, an activist poet, was crucial in spearheading the movement. The intellectual community was shaped by her work, "MarathinuStuti" (Praise the Tree), which served as a protest emblem. In the majority of SSSVM campaign meetings, the poem was used as the opening song and prayer. In 1989, the project was cancelled after a visit to the valley by Dr Salim Ali, the distinguished natural historian. In response to a writ case challenging the widespread forest clearing in the region, the Kerala High Court halted the clear-cutting. Renowned agricultural scientist Dr MS Swaminathan, then Secretary of the Agriculture Department, visited the site. He suggested adding Quiet Valley, Amarambalam, Attappady in Kerala, and the Kunda region in Tamil Nadu to the National Rainforest Biosphere Reserve to protect significant species in the area (Swaminathan, 1979). In light of this, the prime minister asked the state administration to halt all additional project-related activities. The project area was later excluded when the state government designated the region as a national park.

The protest against the Proposed Athirappilly Hydroelectric Project.

To address the lack of electricity, the Kerala government proposed constructing dams and hydroelectric projects in the Athirappilly area of Thrissur district in the Western Ghats (CPF, 20027). Tribal people are opposing the Kerala State Electricity Board's proposed hydropower project in the ongoing Athirappilly campaign. The Kadar villages in that region are adamantly opposed to the project, proposed by the KSEB decades ago, because they would suffer immediate harm if it were carried out. Kadar is a primitive community with a much smaller population. According to the projected census of 20- 21 (goi, 2019), the anticipated population of this primitive group is 2266, with 86 households spread across 21 villages in the Western Ghats. The proposed hydropower project in their area is completely opposed by the Kadar, who rely only on the forest and activities related to forest habitation. The project's proposed locations, Athirappilly and Vazhachal, are rich in biodiversity and home to rare species. There will be a risk of displacement for the Kadar who have established themselves there. Numerous development interventions have already harmed them. Since the colonial era, their forefathers have been exploited in numerous small-scale dam projects and were compelled to abandon their community in the name of progress (CPF 2007). They are repeatedly made to pay for growth without receiving any benefits. When the KSEB finally proposed the Athirappilly project in 1982, they faced the possibility of being displaced once more.

A 160 MW hydropower project with an estimated cost of Rs. 6755 crores is to be built across the Chalakudi River. According to a 2007 Chalakudi River Protection Forum assessment, the project would negatively impact downstream irrigation, drinking water, and agriculture. The watershed of this region contains a sizable low riparian forest (ibid). The lives of tribal communities, wildlife, and people who rely on the Chalakudi River for drinking water, agriculture, and irrigation would all be disrupted entirely as a result. Thus, protests against the project are also being held by members of the indigenous population and other locals. Due to environmental concerns, the proposal was initially rejected by the Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF). The KSEB conducted an environmental evaluation after submitting a revised plan. By adjusting its parameters, the Tropical Botanical Garden Research Institute (TBGRI) conducted an EIA in 1994. The project was put out to bid to the HCC-BHEL consortium in 2000, following the MoEF's 1998 environmental permission. After this, there were many public hearings and meetings as the agitation grew more intense. The MoEF again revoked the approval in response to the PIL filed by the Chalakudi Puzha Samrakshana Samithi (Chalakudy River Protection Forum) (Gopinath, 2013).

After examining the ecological issues, the Western Ghat Expert Ecological Panel (WGEEP), presided over by Prof. Madhav Gadgil, recommended that the Athirappilly project in Kerala and the Gundia hydropower project in Karnataka, both located in the Western Ghats, be abandoned. The MoEF received the report. The local indigenous tribal community was also taken into consideration by the Gadgil committee. The project site is within 500 meters of the town of Kadar, one of Kerala's primitive tribal groups. The community was uprooted

from its original location during construction of the Poringalkuthu dam and is now at risk of relocation. They face the possibility of being uprooted once more. Through the Gadgil committee report, even the people of Kerala gained more knowledge about the group. It then became a fight for the Kadar community's survival as they received overwhelming public support. The following committee on the Western Ghats, led by Kasthuri Rangan and organised by WAPCOS, made some controversial recommendations to the MoEF in favour of the project's execution. The committee ignored the Kadar community, and there was no habitation of the Kadar community in the project area. The central government approved the project, and the state government formally began implementing it based on Kasthuri Rangan's recommendations. With public backing, the Kadar community organised several gatherings and protests as the battle gained momentum. People's organisations and the KSSP supported the project. The implementation of this project is being vigorously pushed by the governments of the United Democratic Front (UDF) and the Left Democratic Front (LDF) (Gopinath, 2013). This tribal fight to preserve their land and forest is a significant topic in Kerala's current development discussion. Under the strong and aggressive leadership of the tribal head woman, Geetha, tribal women actively participate in this ongoing struggle.

She was able to garner significant external support. Despite several threats and harassment from political parties, she bravely defended her forest and people. Her strong leadership has brought considerable attention to the protest against the counting and numbering of trees in the tribal hamlet known as "Intha Adavilu Dam Venda" (We do not want any dam in this settlement). Following this demonstration, several conversations took place. The project will not be carried out if everyone opposed it, according to MM Mani, the then-electricity minister (2020). Without the opposition's approval, the administration would not move forward. The struggle of indigenous peoples can even be seen as the cause of this. Nevertheless, no formal statement about the project's termination has been issued by the government. Particularly in Kerala, these actions are the most striking illustration of the illogical use of natural resources.

These disputes are seen as a struggle for the fundamental rights of the indigenous people. In the Plachimada battle, individuals fought against a significant global corporate force to meet their basic demand for water. Thus, it is never possible to view it as a straightforward fight for resistance from a human ecological perspective; instead, it appears to be a conflict between the rich and the poor. This is occurring in various forms throughout India. The idea of an ecosystem, which in this case relates to humans against omnivores, could be used to describe these. These three movements have several important characteristics and are regarded as the main environmental movements in Kerala's ecological history. These are mass movements of individuals opposing development operations that negatively impact the environment and nearby communities. People in a particular area came together to agitate, regardless of their age, caste, or religion.

A glance at each of the provided moves clearly demonstrates the crucial role that women play. Two tribal women, Mayilamma (Plachimada) and Geetha (Athirappilly), are the leaders of the Plachimada movement and the ongoing Athirappilly battle. They might organise a large number of tribal women to lead the fight against the omnivores. Sugathakumari, a poet and environmental activist, plays a crucial role in each of these situations. She effectively educated people about the importance of efficient environmental protection through her writings, particularly poems. Her poems are still being recited in environmental collectives today.

Kerala's take on environmental concerns

The Kerala government has repeatedly shown an unwillingness to compromise on people's environmental concerns, even as it has recently placed a high priority on growth. In the Indian context, Kerala's development model is notable for its efforts to balance ecological sustainability and economic progress. Because of the state's distinctive topography, which includes the Western Ghats, a lengthy coastline, wetlands, and a dense forest cover, environmental conservation is not only a matter of policy; it is essential to the state's existence and long-term well-being. Since the Kerala government has embraced a people-centred approach to development, local groups' environmental concerns often shape policy choices. Environmental impact assessments, public consultations, and ongoing monitoring are all part of the process for large-scale development projects in environmentally vulnerable areas. Given climate change and the frequency of natural disasters such as floods and landslides, the state's cautious approach to quarrying, sand mining, and deforestation reflects an awareness of the delicate ecological balance and the dangers of unchecked development.

The acknowledgement of women as important players in ecological sustainability is a noteworthy feature of Kerala's environmental governance. Through their work in agriculture, fishing, water collection, forest-based livelihoods, and household management, women in Kerala, especially in rural, coastal, and tribal communities, maintain close contact with natural resources. The government has come to recognise that women are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation since it increases their caregiving responsibilities, jeopardises their livelihoods, and affects their health and access to food. Kerala has incorporated women's perspectives into environmental decision-making through decentralised governance structures such as Kudumbashree and local self-governments. Women-led projects may enhance ecological preservation and social empowerment, as demonstrated by Kudumbashree's engagement in waste management, organic farming, biodiversity conservation, and climate-resilient livelihood programs. In addition to encouraging sustainable habits, these initiatives provide women at the local level with chances for leadership and income. The state's response to climate-related issues also underscores its commitment to gender-sensitive environmental policy. Women's unique vulnerabilities and capabilities are increasingly taken into account in post-disaster rehabilitation and resilience planning. Women's collective activity and local knowledge are frequently used in training programs, self-help groups, and community-based disaster management projects, thereby reaffirming their status as ecological stewards rather than helpless victims. Kerala's strategy aligns with ecofeminist viewpoints, which highlight the connection between gender justice and environmental sustainability. The government opposes technocratic development paradigms and shifts toward more inclusive and sustainable alternatives by recognising women's ecological expertise and lived experiences. This is especially important at a time when ecological integrity is seriously threatened by the growth of urbanisation and infrastructure expansion. In conclusion, the Kerala government has demonstrated a positive, progressive commitment to environmental conservation and women's ecological concerns, even as growth remains a top priority. Kerala provides a significant development model that emphasises ecological balance, social fairness, and women's leadership in environmental sustainability by fusing environmental protections with gender-sensitive policies and participatory governance.

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