

NOTE

Climate Refugees

KPS writes :

VERY SOON, THE ENTIRE Kuttanad will be under the sea, since this area is under the sea level and the distance between sea and the backwaters is only a few metres in some places. The life of the famous rice bowl of Kerala and the main symbol of 'God's own country campaign' of the Tourism Ministry in Kerala, is only limited to few years.

For the 8,000 residents of Baliwara and other villages in a little island called Mousuni, facing the Bay of Bengal, the debate on climate change is no academic exercise. The rising sea levels have destroyed several homes in the region. Similar threat is also faced by the thousands who live in the 12 sea-facing islands of South 24 Parganas district West Bengal.

The fishing community is among the first of the climate refugees. Many have already become refugees in the coastal land itself. For one thing, the scare without political solutions to the fishing community may be of no help, and a lobby comprising the Government, international agencies and a number of commercial/industrial organizations can use the scare to effectively remove the fishing community and thereby add further misery to the existing problems of the fishing community. They have effectively done this, using the Tsunami scare to displace many coastal villagers in Tamil Nadu. Many of the culprits are looking forward to the discussion on climate change from this direction. Thus, like any other disaster, the issue of climate change also can be a boon to many.

If the past disasters are any indication, the climate change disaster will only provide luxuries to some, while wiping out a large population in many ways through floods, storms, disease, loss of crops and hunger. With one sixth of the humanity in the Indian subcontinent, no Government or NGO will be able to deal with the disaster unless certain major political issues are resolved.

The average Indian produces one ton of carbon dioxide to the average American's of 20 tons. While per capita emissions are low in India, because of its huge population, India is already in the map of world's leading emitters.

However, the low per capita emissions of an Indian has already provided powerful arguments to the Government of India as well as many NGOs in the international community.

Then, who is this average Indian determining the rate of emissions? The divide in India is huge. A large section of the adivasis, dalits, fisher people and traditional farmers live with practically insignificant emission and where it happens, it is nowhere near the rate one ton of an average Indian. They are also contributing a lot to the reduction of carbon dioxide through their sustainable practices. But a small minority in this country are emitting with a strong competition to their American partners. On the other hand, many of the hazardous industries which have come here as a part of imitating the western model of development gone worse in their pollution standards than most of the western counterparts. The chemicals banned in the United States and many other developing countries are not only produced and widely used, some of them are produced by the Indian Government itself. Which Indian are they talking about? Why does one Indian representing a hazardous development model become a threat to the existence of another Indian who tries to live in a sustainable way?

India is planning to spend 200 million dollars to protect its forests as a step towards dealing with climate change. However, it is not clear what kind of forestation has the government in mind. At a time when the existing programmes to promote monoculture in the name of forests have generated wide-scale ecological and social hazards, this agenda will always be seen with suspicion by the activists. In any case, when the rate of depletion of forests in India is something that cannot be guarded by the forest department, the political mileage for the existence of forests in India need not be a strong point for the negotiation of the State. The adivasis (the indigenous people) function as the main protectors of forests. Instead of strengthening the conservation culture of the adivasis, the State has done everything to marginalize this population.

Forests also function as the main link between adivasis and fisher people. The humus from the forests brought down to the sea through a number of rivers is absorbed as one of the main sources of food, both by the fish population in the rivers as well as the sea.

The only permanent answer for problem of climate change is the restructuring of the existing production process and its replacement with sustainable agricultural production, sustainable industrial production and sustainable energy production. This is certainly a more complex revolution than all the revolutions in history so far. But such a move will strengthen the lives of the majority of Indian people for generations to come. Unfortunately, the Government of India is heavily promoting unsustainable agriculture, unsustain-able industries and unsustainable energy production. □□□