

Of Wayanad and Starvation

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Since the last several years disease and ill-health are affecting the people of Wayanad. These range from sickle cell anemia, cancers of various kinds, birth deformities, deafness, eye sight problems, chronic back and head ache, respiratory problems, mental retardation, and a whole host of minor but persistent health problems. Unidentified ailments are also common. No proper comprehensive survey has been done up to this time by the public health authorities or any private body on the health status of the people of Wayanad. Unconfirmed reports state that the district has the highest incidence of cancer of various kinds. In stark contrast, the facilities for treatment are scanty and people with serious health problems have either to go all the way to Mangalore or Kozhikode. Private hospitals are very expensive while public health facilities are in a miserable state.

Sickle cell anemia is a crippling disease mainly affecting the Adivasis. Doctors treating this disease do not guarantee a life span of more than forty-five years to a patient. Moreover, without any scientific backup they propagate that this disease is genetic or even racial. These pronouncements are made without any serious investigation or enquiry. The treatment is very simple—folic acid is the only medicine that is given to the patients. While it may be true that inbreeding over a long period of time can result in genetically transferred diseases, in the case of sickle cell anemia this is being asserted without any concrete study. Sickle cell anemia is prevalent mostly among children but it is also present to a considerable degree among adult men and women. The whole body shrinks up and immunity gets lost. Physical and mental activism is severely handicapped and the children are not able to attend ordinary schools. And there are no facilities for special children's education with the result that these children (their number is a growing phenomenon) get no education at all. Of late the propaganda that this killer disease is present only among Adivasis is being proved patently false and misleading. It is present among other sections also and there are many examples of deaths among them due to sickle cell anemia. It is a growing trend among non-Adivasis too: the number of cases reported from among the settlers including Chettis, Gounders, Muslims and Christians are rising. This single characteristic casts serious doubts on any allegation of the disease being one that is genetically transferred among the Adivasis exclusively. It is currently a common disease in the district. Among the Adivasis it is more common than among others. But this is probably due to extraneous social and economic factors like poverty and increased exposure to whatever are the disease-causing factors.

POSSIBLE REASONS

It is not possible to assert with certainty the reasons for the very high incidence of killer diseases in the district in the absence of scientific studies pertaining to the soil, water and food items in use. Such a study is beyond the scope of the present work and we can only hope that such a study will be done without delay so that solutions can be arrived at. But even in the absence of such a comprehensive scientific study one can arrive at certain tentative conclusions. This author has seen big plantations where almost everyone is ill in one way or another, many with serious problems. Parrysons tea estate near Kattikkulam in North Wayanad. is one such instance.

Most of the big plantations in Wayanad are colonial legacies, which have changed ownership several times after foreign ownership was made illegal since the early 1950s. Of late, the plantation sector as a whole is facing a serious crisis with the result that reinvestment and maintenance is on a very low level. The emphasis for the owners is on real estate value and with Wayanad fast becoming a tourist area the real estate value is still holding steady irrespective of declining profits and productivity. The permanent workers are organized in trade unions belonging to mainstream political parties. Any number of examples can be cited to show that the trade union bureaucracy is very much in league with the management and even endorses the moves to reduce wages to below the legal minimum wages in the name of dwindling profits and rising losses. The conditions of the workers are miserable on all counts. Lockouts and closures are routine and even in estates that are working normally many of the perks for the workers have vanished. In the estates the policy followed by the management is to extract the maximum possible and this is facilitated by the mindless use of chemical fertilizers, and various brands of pesticides and insecticides cum weedicides. The stipulated doses are not adhered to and the workers do not even have protective gloves and face masks while applying the deadly poisons. Scientifically it has been proved that there is a positive correlation between agro chemicals and certain types of cancers. A recent study by Greenpeace on the Theni region of Tamil Nadu clearly brings out this correlation. And these cancers are very much present in good number in Wayanad.

It is not only the big plantations that are the sites for killer diseases. Of late, banana, ginger and arecanut palm growing have become the rage in Wayanad among all classes of cultivators. The cultivation is done on previous paddy fields. The cultivators from Wayanad are extending this cultivation to places as far off as Goa and the entire Konkan belt. They lease in land, take bank or private loans for working capital and hire contract labor from Wayanad. All this is done in the expectation of huge gains but has disastrous ecological implications. Where intensive cultivation of these crops is done even the color of the soil has changed. In Wayanad itself this intensive cultivation has replaced paddy cultivation to such an extent that droughts and depletion of ground water have become common over the last few years. Above all, the cultivation of ginger and bananas is heavily chemical-dependent. Within Kerala itself there are several big markets where Wayanadan bananas are banned from sale. People are very much aware of the poison content of these bananas but cultivation is on an ever-increasing scale because of the lucrative nature of the cultivation. In fact, a few suicides due to ginger crop failures and the resultant indebtedness have already been reported from Kodagu. Such cases, in all probability, are bound to increase. The cultivators themselves often do not consume what they produce, but there is a market mainly outside the State.

In banana cultivation the seed itself is soaked in poisons before planting and at every stage in the growth of the sapling heavy doses are applied. When the flower emerges the tip is cut and poison is directly applied to the cut tip so that the fruit will be heavier and larger. It is poisonous from beginning to end. It is the phenomenal price crashes of pepper and coffee coupled with the increasing unremunerativeness of paddy cultivation that is driving the growers to these crops. This also shows how far agriculture in Wayanad has become a pure and simple gamble. The statistics that within the last twenty years there has seen a decline of 56 percent in the cultivation of paddy while banana cultivation during the same period registered an increase of 1660 percent is very unnatural but very revealing. This statistic is very obviously an underestimation because village studies show that more and more villages are becoming totally devoid of paddy

cultivation. When ginger and areca palms are added to bananas the picture becomes even more complex.

Maximum profit within the shortest possible time is the only criterion –all else is discounted. It will take several years for the soil to recover even partially. The paddy fields were always the retainers of water but banana and ginger rule out any accumulation of water because the crop will decay if water is allowed to accumulate. So what is happening in Wayanad today is the desertification of paddy fields. The irrational application of chemicals creates a momentum of its own resulting in ever increasing usage and cost escalation besides hiking up the use of water while not allowing the water to sink down. This is a proven reality not only in Wayanad but in all the ‘green revolution’ areas around the world. Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh are notable cases.

The application of chemicals in the case of cash crops like tea, pepper, ginger and bananas is higher than in the case of paddy and wheat. Wayanad is a good illustration. Here the intensity of chemicals usage is compounded with the loan system. The banks themselves are the direct promoters of chemicals by stipulating that half or even more of the loan amount is to be used to procure chemicals. In some cases they themselves supply the chemicals and in any case the purchase receipt has to be submitted and they verify the authenticity of purchase too. Coupled with the belief that the more the usage of chemicals the more will be the output and hence income prompts the farmer to go to any extent in its application. The cumulative result is that the soil of Wayanad is saturated with deadly chemicals and this has killed the micro organisms in the soil and poisoned the water and air. There is also a drastic decline in the variety of bird species in Wayanad. Some reports point out that more than twenty species of birds have become extinct. Many of the chemicals used so prolifically are notorious carcinogenic agents (e.g., Monsanto’s Roundup) and is one of the principal reasons behind the widespread prevalence of killer diseases in the district.

The chemicals residue in the food, soil and water in Wayanad also needs to be urgently examined. The fact that it is the workers who are in constant contact with the soil, water and chemicals and are the most affected by these diseases points at a possible positive correlation between the chemicals and diseases. There are also sufficient indicators to prove that the spread of these diseases is not confined to workers alone. The poor plantation laborers and other agricultural workers, particularly the Adivasi workers, who are the poorest of the poor, find it very difficult to go in for proper treatment and the chances of them becoming the casualties is that much higher.

ALCOHOLISM, STARVATION AND DISEASES

Alcoholism, undernourishment and diseases are common in the district particularly among the Adivasis and TB is very common among them. The immediate provocation for the setting up of refugee camps in front of the State secretariat in 2001 was the death of more than 30 landless Adivasis in Wayanad due to starvation during the previous year. The government denies starvation deaths and explains them as being due to undernourishment.

Among the Adivasis in Wayanad the incidence of starvation is high but other parts of the State are not immune from it. Low or no income certainly results in diseases and also prevents people from taking treatment. Public health facilities are grossly inadequate

and private hospitals are beyond the economic means of the poor tribals. Sustained undernutrition makes them unfit for work, which means further erosion of the means of living. Already the availability of working days has dwindled to half of what it was a few years back due to the severe agrarian crisis. A good example is the Koraga community in Kasaragod district. This small community of Adivasis is on the verge of extinction due to starvation, diseases

They are a hardy stock. Sections among them were warriors and expert hunters with great knowledge of the intricacies of tropical forests. Some other sections were expert paddy growers and all of them had great resilience against inclemental natural conditions. Even after being deprived of their means of production by the feudals and colonialists and turned into slaves they continued to make both ends meet in a tolerable manner. With the dominance of the settlers—economically, socially and politically—the Adivasis became destitutes and dispossessed from the means of production. Forest laws prohibiting them from hunting and food gathering exacerbated the situation further and they started facing starvation and semi-starvation.

A typical Adivasi colony in any part of Wayanad and Kerala presents a sordid picture, where not even a single person is in good health! Unhygienic living conditions, children with bloated bellies and wheezing and coughing women and men are a common sight. Adivasi men who could climb a hill carrying even a hundred kilo sack on their backs are things of the past. The difference in health levels between landowning Adivasis and landless Adivasis are clearly visible. What is needed is not medicines but healthy living conditions. And for this occasional free food rations are not the solution at all. Only serious attempts to economically empower them on a permanent basis is the way out. But this is precisely what no government of the land is interested in.

It is in this background that the struggle for land has to be viewed. There are several thousands of hectares that are under the illegal occupation of big plantations and there are tens of thousands of hectares, which had been expropriated by the small and medium and big settler migrants. Even a mere ten percent of these lands due to them are sufficient to economically empower the landless Adivasis. The agrarian crisis being faced by the settlers ought not to deflect the focus from this basic issue. The landless Adivasis are certainly much more exposed to the deadly chemicals being liberally used in cash crop cultivation because they are in direct and constant contact with these chemicals.

Of course, the destruction of the environment and its resultant ill effects will certainly affect those who do not have means of subsistence more acutely and in this manner the Adivasis become the worst casualties. The second worst affected group are the plantation workers. The third most vulnerable group are the small and marginal cultivators whose income levels were always low and who themselves engage in most of the labor on their land. The situation is built-in with gross inequality. Not only the people of Wayanad but all those who consume the products from Wayanad are also very much susceptible.

ALTERNATIVE

There is a growing awareness on the need to change the industrial model of agricultural production into more eco-friendly methods. There are individual farmers who have been practicing organic agriculture for a fairly long time. But this has serious limitations. Small individual farms on which organic agriculture is practiced are not really feasible, if your neighboring farms liberally pump in chemicals onto their farms. What this

limitation amounts to is that there has to be a blanket ban on the use of chemicals and the chemical companies should be made to compensate for the losses incurred during the gestation period of recovering the land. Cuba is probably the only country that has implemented organic farming on a nation-wide level and its experience shows clearly that organic farming does not decrease output in the long run. It decreases cost of cultivation without affecting output levels. Initially, there are marginal declines in output levels but these even out once the soil and water are brought back to their natural quality.

Of late another development has become discernible in Wayanad. This is the church-sponsored venture, which will ruin the very purpose of organic farming. An organization has been formed on a shareholding basis composed of more than 2000 relatively prosperous farmers with the objective of marketing organic products abroad, particularly in Europe, which promises increased income and profits from agriculture. There is at least a 20-30 percent difference between organic products and chemicals based products in the European market, and exporters and those who supply them stand to gain significantly. This sort of promotion of organic agriculture does not at all visualize a local market and even if there are a few outlets in the urban markets they are exclusively meant for the elite consumers due to the significant price difference.

Such a move will empower those already empowered and the West will reap enormous profits through the production and marketing of agro-chemicals in the less developed countries. Earlier, agro chemicals were exported and then production was started locally using abundant cheap labor. With growing awareness in the West on the harmful effects of agro-chemicals the production and marketing of organic products promise super profits. And if they are produced in the poor countries the profits will be all the higher because of the lower cost of production. The church institutions, which never miss out on any chance to make profits, have understood this potential and the new move in Wayanad is testimony to this. The elite among them will be saved from the harmful effects of chemicals-dependent agricultural products and at the same time, by exporting organic products, they stand to gain tremendously. It is a win-win situation for both sides.

This sort of organized move to promote organic farming does not benefit people. The very fact that only duly certified farms will be acceptable as organic farms is itself testimony to this perverse move. This certification has to come from Europe directly or through their agencies working in the form of donor agencies and NGOs here. And to obtain certification is not very cheap. The common man is the victim of the warped pattern of development and the poor from the same region are made to sweat it out to make dependable foodstuffs for the imposers. The Cuban case is exactly the opposite. They are growing organic food for the consumption of their own people and only excess production is exported. When the capitalist-imperialist forces understood that organic farming is something that could profit them, they had no qualms in supporting organic farming, though they are the same forces that promoted and still promote chemicals based agriculture. One of the most personalized illustrations of such contradictions is that of the scientist M S Swaminathan who is generally heralded as the architect of the agro-chemicals based 'green revolution'. Now he is a great advocate of genetically modified seeds technology. But the ridiculousness of his position is that during a single day he can promote both GM technology and organic farming. He does not find it contradictory at all to promote these two acutely contradictory agricultural processes in the same breath.

What is actually needed is a pro-people organic agricultural programme. This has a lot to do with the landownership structure itself. Equitable land distribution can trigger the productive potential of people and sustainability principles can be learned on the basis of traditional experiences that are still around you. When an agricultural production system based on one's own and collective experience is developed that draws the appropriate lessons from past mistakes and reclaims the great traditions with organically evolved modifications, then it has to be necessarily political in the sense that there will be a decisive break with exploitative, ruinous practices that serve only to enrich the imperialist bourgeoisie. International experiences clearly point out the concrete possibility of such a course of development. Rejecting the mechanical materialist position of one-sidedly emphasizing the development of productive forces and at the same time rejecting the other side of the coin, which is the stranglehold of imperialist relations and mode of production, a people can steer their own path to attain self-sufficiency and sustainability.

In Wayanad's case the unsustain-ability of the prevailing process of production is very clear. The most telltale illustration of this unsustain-ability is the vicious debt trap in which the majority of the cultivators are chained hand and foot. The ever-increasing cost of so-called modern agricultural inputs has played a significant role in shaping their debt trap. The same inputs are desertifying the land and mental health of the people is seriously affected. The increasing incidence of serious diseases among the people has become a clear enough indicator of this aspect of the crisis. ~~XXXX~~

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