

TAMIL NADU - KERALA ROW

## A DAM, REGIONAL CHAUVINISM, AND DEVELOPMENT MODEL

T G Jacob

Dams, water management, and the conflicts therein, are not at all new to post-1947 India. The composite issue is sub-continental too in its political and economic dimensions. There are disputes with Bangladesh, Nepal, China and Pakistan. Inside India, because most of the important river systems are inter-State, there is no lack of conflicts. Some of them, like the Sutlej-Beas dispute in north western India and the Cauvery dispute in peninsular India are notable because of the violence engendered. The emerging conflict in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Chinese occupied Tibet on the questions of diversion and utilization patterns of the Brahmaputra, the fourth largest riverine system on the planet, is continental in dimension.

In fact, Tamil Nadu is involved in disputes on water with all the three major neighbouring States of Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. The dispute with Karnataka is on sharing the waters of Cauvery, the dispute with Kerala is on the ownership of a dam (and now on the proposed construction of a check dam in Palakkad too) and numerous other potential conflicts as and when the interlinking of rivers programme is pushed through, and dispute with Andhra Pradesh is on the proposed location of a dam(s) there. The projected conflicts are often on the basis of anticipations.

All the disputes are based on water for irrigation (which also involves power generation) and its management with the former ensuring emotionally charged reactions from large numbers of people. Tamil Nadu has huge arid, rain shadow areas while both Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh are not entirely devoid of such swathes of land. These three States are front-ranking States of the country in terms of mega investments in industry and services by multinational capital, which also means Indian big businesses. In the map of the global neo-liberal economic regime this area as a whole is significant like Maharashtra and Gujarat in Western India. As energy is a perennially increasing necessary requirement for such a growth pattern it has become a chronic problem involving big dams and even more reckless and unsafe projects like nuclear reactors. If Jaitapur is in Maharashtra, there is Koodankulam in Tamil Nadu and Haripur in West Bengal. There is no end in sight to the unfolding story. The declared policy is a liberal littering of nuclear reactors for the power needs of big capital. Of course, the direct linkages with the crisis-ridden global nuclear industry are self-evident.

Since the 1960s the vast agricultural sector has been steadily conditioned as a water guzzling, non-traditional system thoroughly dependent on the global chemical industry for inputs such as seed technology and farm management theories. The consumption of water in all the 'green revolution' areas has been a steadily increasing one leading to the severe depletion

and contamination of ground water; other fallouts are accelerated degeneration of the soil with ever more increasing cost of agriculture resulting in bankruptcy of the vast mass of peasantry. Coupled with gross distortions in the products market this situation has converted large areas and many States into suicide belts. Over the past several decades agriculture has been consistently becoming an uneconomic proposition for the vast mass of small and middle peasantry leading to the trend of corporatization of agriculture, and the fact of food insecurity becoming a weapon of domination has become stronger. Case studies of Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh give ample illustration to this trend.

The increasing conflicts over water have to be viewed in this context. As in the case of areas in Tamil Nadu catered by water from Mullaperiyar dam in Kerala, the dependency on irrigation from dam waters has become crucial mainly because the model of agricultural development imposed from above leaves no other way. Disruption in the process of production due to lack of water is something that the producers simply cannot afford. It is a life and death question for them. There is no doubt about that. Within the development paradigm in which they are they have no other way. They will either have to perish completely or understand the reality. Creating a colonial 'god' is not going to help at all.

#### A DAM THAT IS NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

The Mullaperiyar dam situated in the southern Western Ghats was constructed by the British colonialists much after they had consolidated their rule, both direct and proxy. Travancore, a relatively wealthy kingdom, where the most oppressive forms of feudal relations of production had waned, was a proxy colonial territory where basic policy matters related to matters of state had to have the approval and sanction of the British resident and agrarian and industrial and educational policies were directly influenced by colonial ideology. Within Kerala itself a major part, Malabar, was directly under colonial rule, where they were facing continuous challenges to their rule, the most prominent one being the series of Moplah rebellions. The Tamil land to the east of Western Ghats was also under direct colonial rule. It is the southern part of this Tamil land that is the region convulsed by this dam.

Looking back, this dam was a clear colonial strategy to pacify that area. The area, inhabited by marauding tribes at that time was difficult to control by the colonial administration because nomadic culture strongly complemented by utter lack of productive base resources had made the population into marauders and plunderers with the same kind of localized social sanction as that enjoyed by the North Indian version of social banditry. In most parts of colonial India, where there were thousands of nomadic tribes, the colonial policy was to hound them into utter subjugation and degradation using the legal means of Criminal Tribes Act and the physical force of the colonial army and police. But in the Cumbum-Theni area of Tamil land they tried an experiment, and the result of this experiment was the construction of the Mullaperiyar dam and the conversion of the dry land below into fertile agricultural land by diverting the dammed up water. The political strategy was successfully executed through an economic measure.

The availability of water was the crucial component of the whole strategy. Water is plentiful in the Travancore side of Western Ghats and colonialists did not find it a big job to get formal sanction from the pliable and only nominally independent Travancore rulers, and thus a 999 years lease agreement was signed between the colonial governor and the monarchy for the purpose of constructing a dam at the confluence of Periyar and Mullayar by British engineers. They constructed the dam with the then available technology which itself was as old as the Roman Empire. Under the agreement 7000 hectares of land was earmarked for the dam area and water was diverted from the dam to the water starved areas of Tamil land. Quite an impressive engineering feat it was, and it was quite an impressive political success as well. Also nonviable brittle colonial control became economically viable simply because settled agriculture meant steady revenue for the administration.

The dam and the dam area formally belongs to the territorial jurisdiction of Kerala while the water use, for irrigation as well as power generation, is for Tamil Nadu. This agreement was further negotiated as late as 1975 and certain revisions, mainly pertaining to rent tariffs, ratified. It is subsequent to this that a water conflict situation actively entered the scene, which has now become a boiling cauldron. An old colonial agreement has become an active contention between two neighbouring States and peoples even after a century. Of course, a lease agreement for 999 years is ridiculous, but the fact is that the same agreement is a legally valid one. It is this legal validity that has clearly forced the politicians in Kerala to resort to the argument of safety of the dam and hopelessly plunge into the muddle of proposing a new dam in the same region. The Idukki district of Kerala in the highlands has a high value cash crop agrarian economy and a fast growing high end mountain tourism industry. It is also littered with small, medium and big dams mainly supplying power to the lower areas of Kerala, particularly serving the Kochi-Alwaye industrial belt. Currently, the dam and reservoir are only serving the predominantly vegetable and fruit growing small and middle farmers in Tamil Nadu. Certain sections of Kerala society are clearly peeved about this 'injustice'!

A spot survey of the Theni-Cumbum area clearly shows that the life of the peasantry there is crucially dependent on the water from the Mullaperiyar dam. Under the given conditions of ever increasing water requirements decided by the established agricultural production processes it is inconceivable for the farmers, who are market dependent, to visualize a situation when the water supply from this dam is stopped or even reduced. Water intensive, chemicals intensive, energy intensive, hybrid seeds based agriculture is in general becoming a non-viable economic activity for small and medium farmers all over India and farmers' suicides are a direct manifestation of the same. In all these areas the farmers are in a trap which is extremely vicious in nature. The farmers agitating against the Kerala government's stand on the Mullaperiyar dam are also in this trap because their production process is the same as, say, the farmers in Punjab or Wayanad. Right now the viciousness of this trap is a little less than in other places mainly because of the highly remunerative market for their outputs which is Kerala. But this does not at all mean that the situation is unchangeable.

By the most elementary logic inherent in the production process itself the water requirements of the predominantly small farmers of the Theni-Cumbum area are only bound to increase in an unsustainable manner and in the long run, the present water availability will easily prove insufficient for maintaining the production levels. The economy in the area is a primary one with insignificant value adding processes involved. This situation is identical to many cash crops growing areas in Kerala like Wayanad and Idukki itself with the difference that in these areas of Kerala a parasitic secondary economic layer is being superimposed on the agrarian base in the form of tourism industry. The dam controversy and potential future conflicts centring on water have to be viewed in this structural background. Tourism is also a water guzzling proposition though it may not be as intensive as chemicals led agriculture.

### POLITICS OF WATER

It is interesting to note that the first and most obvious reaction from the Tamil Nadu side was economic blockade of Kerala. As such, more than 80 percent of the daily food requirements of Kerala are met through imports from other States, a significant portion of these imports coming from Tamil Nadu. The import basket includes cereals, pulses, vegetables, eggs, fruits and meat. Any blockade of the flow of these goods is immediately reflected in the consumer markets in Kerala, while at the same time the resultant glut in the production centres certainly jeopardizes the production chain there. Both these are automatic consequences and under the present circumstances there is no way out which can avoid these consequences. Blockade hits both the States in an equally consequential manner. But there is at least one positive fallout of such blockades. There is increasing awareness among the people in Kerala that the present abject dependency for essentials ought to be rectified or at least alleviated. However, this rectification is not very easy. Self-sufficiency in essential commodities is not merely a technical matter, it requires changes in world view, which are not that easy in a State steeped in rampant, irrational consumerism.

In the short run it is imperative that the State level planners in Kerala seriously start designing and implementing transportation means as alternatives to the existing overemphasized highways system. Instead of clamouring about super speed roads in this narrow strip of land the abundant water resources of the place ought to be harnessed for transport. In the not so distant past the coast of Kerala could boast of more than forty small and medium ports as well as an elaborate internal water bodies system with thousands of jetties catering to trade, commerce, and public transport. Boat and shipbuilding technology had developed indigenously. Most part of this transport system became useless due to neglect resulting from de-emphasis. Effective utilization of the relatively bigger water bodies is mostly confined to making quick money from international and wealthy Indian tourists and some of the major perennial rivers like Periyar have become cesspits due to industrial, organic pollution effectively complemented by suicidal sand mining and encroachments. It is quite possible that renewed thinking on developing alternative transport infrastructures will be given a fillip so that a State so much dependent on outside areas for its daily requirements cannot be held to ransom due to the politicking of career politicians, whether from Tamil Nadu or Kerala.

The latest bout of Mullaperiyar hysteria saw an uncouth proposition from the Tamil side. This was the question of imagined territorial claims. Some Tamil 'nationalists' took a bizarre turn when they claimed that large areas in Kerala, including Palakkad and large parts of Thiruvananthapuram apart from the higher reaches of Idukki district, are the legitimate 'property' of Tamil Nadu and should be handed over. In fact, even as early as the 1950s claims for including the whole of Thiruvananthapuram district including the whole of Thiruvanthapuram district along with city within Tamil Nadu were raised by Tamil 'expansionist' elements. This is nothing but a highly chauvinistic distortion of the real issues and sectarian opportunism to the core. In fact, crude attempts were made during the last agitation to march thousands of poor peasants into the highlands of Kerala, which show that this sectarianism was not meant to be very innocent. The historical fact is that when the States were reorganized the enormous but disproportionate political clout of K Kamaraj, the erstwhile chief minister of Tamil Nadu, within the ruling Congress party as the key trouble shooter and management expert, enabled Tamil Nadu to obtain the rice bowl of Naanchi Nadu which was part of the Travancore kingdom for centuries and still remains bilingual after more than half a century of being part of Tamil Nadu. It was considered necessary by the Delhi policy makers to propitiate the Dravidian identity and pander to the Congress leadership from Tamil land for fear of development of this identity into full-scale articulations of ideas of sovereignty and independence. This was done at the expense of the neighbouring States. It seems that this 'privilege' has come to be perpetuated as mindset of a good section of Tamil 'nationalists.' Nothing else can possibly be the background for such irresponsible territorial claims by them.

In the mean time, a geographically external political development also occurred. This was the decimation of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the neighbouring island country of Sri Lanka. The Tamil nationalist sections in Tamil Nadu did have serious expectations concerning the ultimate military victory of the LTTE and confidence in its supreme leader as someone who can never go wrong. The possible emergence of a sovereign, independent Tamil nation in one of the most strategic places on earth was looked up to by not only the Tamil nationalists in India but also by the powerful Tamil communities in Southeast Asia. It was this dream that suffered a serious setback when LTTE as a military-guerrilla force was wiped out and its leadership killed. And the fact that the successful operation against the Tigers enjoyed strategic support from the Delhi government (along with many other governments), in which the principal Dravidian party is a junior partner, certainly rankled the Tamil nationalists. Not only that the main Dravidian political party shamelessly engaged in double talk and betrayed the Sri Lankan Tamils, but big businesses of Dravidian origin gleefully calculated on the possible gains from reconstruction contracts in the war ravaged Tamil areas of Lanka. The resultant bitterness is understandable, though such bitterness need not always be politically wise. The politically wise thing may be to seriously utilize the time for studying what exactly happened and why it happened in the way it did. Turning the bitterness to other federal units is an irrational temporary escape valve, but it is bound to leave an unpleasant aftertaste. This has happened in the case of the Mullaperiyar agitation.

Talking of federalism (whatever federalism exists under the Indian Constitution), it is paradoxical to note that the inter-State disputes (river waters or territorial) have invariably led to the strengthening of unitary power. A dispute like Mullaperiyar ought to be resolved between the directly affected parties. Taking the dispute to the mandates of Delhi and its experts has become an established behaviour pattern with the States level political leaderships, weakening the possibility of a genuine federal political structure. The historical precedence of how the British made a centralized India under their iron heels can be of interest in this context. It was through utilizing the petty quarrels between multitudes of local chieftains that made them the final arbitrator, who promptly swallowed all the petty chieftains. The tendency to more and more centralization, economically and politically, has become built into the body politic and even the most basic demand for linguistic political identity was viewed with extreme disfavour by the pioneer leaders of the Indian ruling classes. Moreover, the granting of linguistic States was immediately followed by the nullifying step of crudely imposing Hindi over all other national languages in the country. This is the recent political history. Let there be no illusions : the Constitution of India is predominantly the same as the 1935 Government of India Act and federalism here is more unitary than federal which means that the States have to be constructively pro-active if the federal traits are to be strengthened. Tamil nationalists, when they are willingly accepting central arbitration or dictates are actually strengthening the already strongly centralized political structure. Nationalism, sub-nationalism, regionalism, regional chauvinism-all are getting muddled together in present-day India. Tamil Nadu politics is an illustration of this muddled state of affairs and the Mullaperiyar dam has become incidental to the exposure of this muddle.

Crossing the border to Kerala there is little doubt that the dam issue agitated the people. How much of this agitation was manufactured remains a question. The Western Ghats in Kerala, particularly the settlers' occupied lower levels of the Ghats, are high value-but ruthlessly subject to irresponsible, often contrived market fluctuations-cash crop cultivating areas. Here again almost no value adding occurs. The sector is crisis ridden for the last more than a decade. Thousands of farmers have committed suicide due to bankruptcy, a trend that is continuing despite publicly funded alleviatory short-term economic packages. Structural reorganization is recognized as the way out at least by a small section of people but the political will for such a course, under the present circumstances, can only be considered as a long term goal.

The social fabric of Kerala society is in an extremely stretched out condition. The most obvious manifestation is the all pervading consumerism and sharply ascending crime graph linked symbiotically. Internally, the wage rates are high for the organized working sections and cash flow from abroad is an ever increasing phenomenon. The steady loss of value to the Indian currency may be bad for importers but it is a boon for receivers of petro dollars. Migration of workers to the Gulf countries has reached an optimum, but migration is a continuing affair to the relatively newer high wage destinations of Australia, Canada, United States and some European countries. The circulating cash is disproportionate to the productive

activities since a long time and land is very fast becoming consolidated as a speculative non productive asset. Actually, it is consumption and consumption all the way, a crudely surreal drama. The State produces skilled labour, which is actually the principal characteristic of its slot in the geographical division of labour in the neo-colonial world. In the absence of a dynamic production base this skilled labour is mainly exported. It is packaged attractively and its market is quite active. This export of labour power and the resultant flow of cash have played the significant role in converting Kerala into a conspicuously vulgar market for consumer goods ranging from automobiles, international tour packages to toothpicks. In other words, the basics of the economy are parasitic and the intrinsic character of bubbletness is obvious to everyone. Sex rackets, high alcohol and drug use, huge malls, waste assuming the potential of ushering in black deaths, are all manifestations of the serious maladies of the bone structure, not the cause of the acute moral, ethical and fundamental degeneration of the body politic reflecting the balance of class forces.

A very apparent feature of Kerala society is the universalization and democratization of corruption. Land being a scarce commodity the global capital is not much taken up with the idea of pumping in large amounts of finance capital to Kerala for accumulation through outsourcing of production, assembly line activities etc. Of course, this does not mean that the loot from Kerala is any less. The loot from the consumer market itself is considered good enough. The economy as a whole is solidly integrated into the vortex of global capital, but in the geographical division of labour the slot is different from, say, Tamil Nadu or Karnataka. The opening up of the economy has created enormous scope for huge commissions for the bureaucrat bourgeoisie and as is obvious from screaming headlines every morning this corruption has become systemic and an essential component of the social management system as it has evolved in the country after 1947. The scope for corruption of gigantic magnitude is relatively less in a State like Kerala, which does not have abundant land or mineral wealth under the surface that can be sold retail and wholesale. Here corruption is all-encompassing and a part of everyday life, a highly democratized system of corruption. The people in general are equally corrupt as the graft/bribe beneficiaries because they maintain an impotent stoic posture making them direct partners to the corrupt system. Opposition political parties, who regularly alternate as ruling political parties, raise corruption charges against the big bureaucrat bourgeoisie mainly because of 'sour grapsim'. They do not recognize the all-round democratic nature of corruption in Kerala society because their stakes are no less than the ruling parties at any point of time. Corruption in Kerala is really as democratic as it can be and can easily be sublimated to her national festival of Onam when everyone was supposed to be equal.

It is in this context that the proposal of the Government of Kerala concerning a new dam to replace the present Mullaperiyar dam has to be viewed. This proposal exposes the hysteria created on the safety questions of the dam as not fully genuine. There is a functioning dam though it is an old one. Now you want to decommission it and build a new one so that the people downstream can sleep alright. The main reason advanced for building a new dam is the

projected risk of the old one. And this risk is caused by seismic instability of the region. Then why the hell you want to construct a new dam in the same seismically unstable area? On the other hand, there should be a moratorium on building of all dams in the whole area and alternative methods of water using must be designed and implemented. There can only be one plausible reason for clamouring for building a new dam. Constructing a new dam involves thousands of crores and as is abundantly shown by many illustrations (eg Karapuzha dam in Wayanad) cost escalation often comes to hundreds of times the original budget and construction of a medium/large dam creates a new ruling class in the concerned area beside making the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and contractors more vulgarly pot-bellied. Being a consumerist society the contractor lobby is very strong in the State. These contractors are mainly sub contractors who take up contracts from giants like L&T or DLF, hence clearly comprador in basic character.

The Congress party which is now heading the government is well known for its advocacy of dams in ecologically sensitive areas with pristine green cover. Whether Silent Valley or Pathrakkadavu they would like to push them through if possible. The contractors and their political tools are still angry with the activists who defeated the Silent Valley project. When the people defeated the Mananthavady project proposal in Wayanad district the groans that broke out of the contractors and politicians were heart-breaking. On the whole, given the historical antecedents, the advocacy of a new dam is suspicious and the civil society activists already see this point. Even if by some remote chance the legal hurdles could be circumvented the construction of a new dam will be difficult due to internal reasons. Tamil people ought to take this as an important variable in the present imbroglio.

Technically, it should be very much possible to find cheap but effective solutions to the perceived threat from the old dam. The threat to life and property downstream ceases to exist if water can be continuously drawn from the dam and stored in the eastern foothills of the Western Ghats and not by repeating the error that the colonialists committed for political purposes. The intensity of a quake in a seismically problematic area is always unpredictable, which means that the proposal for a new dam does not serve the purposes of safety in any absolute or even substantive manner. When the State government in Tamil Nadu is bending over backward to alienate hundreds of thousands of hectares into the kitty of global capital it is outright silly to glamour for more land from outside including the dam -area. Any nationalism under the given conditions has to be anti-imperialist, a vital point that is missed by Tamil 'nationalists.' State governments in this country are competitively trying to implement the central policy of imperialist globalization, a policy that comes to the aid of the permanently crisis-ridden global capital and accentuates gross inequalities internally. Any actual or imaginary conflict between States on resources sharing, like Mullaperiyar dam or the proposed Siruvani check dams, can possibly be utilized by anti-people and anti-national forces. Demands for nationalization of all rivers and interlinking of rivers are essentially highly lucrative propositions for the bureaucratic bourgeoisie and Indian big businesses in their defined role as facilitators and junior partners in the global capital chain. Getting trapped in sectarian sub-nationalism

becomes clearly counterproductive simply because such a course hides the real issues from the people, a necessary condition for the intensification of neo-colonial plunder. Why the people do not want Koodankulam nuclear power plants; why the State and central governments and big businesses so much want it; why river water disputes are leading to the devastatingly negative logic of nationalization and interlinking of rivers, are all strongly interrelated issues concerning the 'development' model being implemented under the program of imperialist globalization. Only by hiding the real face of this imperialist globalization the program can be implemented in a thoroughgoing fashion. To break this thick shell of ignorance is the prime need of the hour. Issue by issue it can be done. Mullaperiyar is one such issue that has to be dealt with in peninsular India. □