Discovering Gandhian Thought: Perspectives of Women in Grassroots Environmental Struggles from Kerala

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Background

The State of Kerala located in the south-western tip of India is demarcated by natural features that contribute to a unique tropical environment. The Arabian sea bounds the State in the west and the Western Ghats (at an elevation of 900-2450 m) lies on the eastern side. The State with a land area of 38,863sq.km and population density of 819/sq.km can be geographically divided into 3 regions- the coast, the midlands and the highlands with unique natural, cultural and historical features. The State with 44 rivers and more than 150 wetlands was blessed with adequate freshwater for all human purposes including diverse livelihoods. The average rainfall of 3000 mm and humidity of 70-90% contributed to a lush environment with tropical forests covering more than 26% of the land area conducive for the growth of spices and other special vegetation.

The west sloping terrain with the high Western Ghat mountain occupying half the land area, the biologically rich rainforest ecosystems, high rainfall and an agricultural system most suited to the humid tropical climate are the living backdrop of the people of Kerala. The innate knowledge that various communities in Kerala with primary relationships and dependence on natural resources about the fragility and
vulnerability of ecosystems has been jeopardised since a
century in the name of development and progress. In the face of
the present ecological crisis and environmental disasters that
Kerala is facing now, it is no wonder that people have
responded spontaneously and strongly against the destruction
of vital life –support systems. As early as the 1960s people
have been raising questions on the very ethics of the model of
development especially basic facts about for whom
development and at what cost. They have started questioning
not only the viability of and sustainability of the western model
of large scale development but also its suitability to our culture.
The social, ecological and generational justice which was being
undermined by such indiscriminate ecological destruction and
impoveryisation of communities dependant on natural resources
for sustenance was also questioned. In all these struggles,
public dialogues and debates women have taken prominent role
perhaps much more than in other spheres of conflicts.

The Context

The basis of this paper is the year long study that was
done along with women involved in grassroots environmental
movements in Kerala and also individual women who have
been for many years raising basic and ethical questions
regarding development and civilisation. The grassroots
movements in Kerala connected to environment have
undergone a drastic shift in approaches, strategies and attitudes.
The latter has witnessed changes from trying to maintain a so-
called romantic version of an utopian world to raising basic
questions about development and science. The most striking
shift that has happened is the presence of women in the
struggles that are linked to and which exemplify the real ground
reality where resources are depleted or taken away from the
actual beneficiary in the name of progress. In fact many of
these struggles question not only the inequality and unfairness
of the process but are also representatives of the politics of sustenance and survival. It is here that the voices of women involved in the struggles discover the basic ethics of Gandhiji’s often quoted aphorism —“the world has enough for everyone’s needs but not enough for everyone’s greed”. The most important aspect of the movements in which women are involved that echo Gandhiji’s philosophy is in Passive resistance strategies that clearly contextualise “refusing to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience and use soul force (Hind Swaraj, p.69). This also transcends the ideology of Swaraj and forces the observer to place it in the larger context of the ethics of living and life that Gandhiji always searched for. (Ramachandra Guha, 2007).

Women’s voices : The most significant Gandhian element in the struggles

1. Dialogue:

The voices of women in the 20 struggles from various parts of Kerala which have been documented along with the 20 women who have been raising their voices and concerns about the present development paradigm bring to light the most significant of Gandhian approaches- the power of dialogue. We have seen the power of dialogue in all the writings of Gandhi- the need to harmonise dialogue with action has been his forte always. In Hind Swaraj one of the first documents written by Gandhi the concepts evolve through close dialogue between the editor and reader. In these times when no one listens to anyone, the need to use dialogue as an effective means of communication has been felt by women. This is especially poignant in the case of Kerala where the much lauded People’s Campaign for Decentralised Planning with a concern for Gender Equity along with Social Justice included the Women’s Component Plan. The WCP fell short of expectations and the
task to secure the interests of women remained a politically unsupported activity. The presence and absence of gender concerns along with the rights-based approach that emerges has been silencing women even in Grama Sabhas and other political fora. It is in this situation that women who have taken up highly localised causes like sand-mining, dam displacement, pesticide overkill and land alienation have raised their voices and concerns to dialogue with the society, the planners and developers and so on.

2. Civilization:

The women who have come to the forefront of the struggles do so because the present path to development with its inbuilt patriarchal approaches most often denies women’s access to resources, income and employment. The women who have got out of the victim mode say that the crisis is now related to impoverishment, food insecurity, financial and monetary disarray, environmental degradation and denial of access to life-sustaining resources which are related to the “Distinguishing characteristics of modern civilisation (which) is an indefinite multiplicity of wants” (Gandhi, Young India, 1927). The women in Plachimada Coco-Cola struggle, the Athirapally dam displacement issue and the Vellikulangara quarrying problem have raised concerns that reflect on the definition of “civilisation as the mode of conduct that points out to man the path of duty” (Hind Swaraj (HS), p. 53). But we also come across individual women who go beyond in search of their defined identity as ‘Queens of the household’ (HS, p. 33) and identify the “point where women begin to affect the political deliberations of the nation” (Young India, 1921).

3. Morality, Chastity and Good conduct:

The women in struggles that have been documented have brought to focus the most common allegation –their lack
of morality. The word civilization in Gujarati means “good conduct” (HS, p. 53). To achieve good conduct there has to be a strict moral code. The women in Vellikulangara, Muriyad, Athirapally, Kainur and Neyyatinkara have redefined morality, chastity, good conduct in terms that go beyond the physical being, beyond fidelity and domestic/conjugal terms. It is here that they unknowingly and inadvertently adhere to Gandhi for whom “chastity is one of the greatest disciplines without which the mind cannot attain requisite firmness” (HS, p. 73). The women are also questioning morality as being part of “civilisation that seeks to increase bodily comforts and fails miserably in doing so”.

4. True Home Rule and Swaraj:

It is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves. Do not consider this Swaraj to be a dream. It is in the palm of our hands.

Is this not what the 80 year old grandmother who sat in the Satyagraha hut for 3 years asking for a review of the Vamanapuram Dam project in Thiruvananthapuram district asked the planners and developers? She could forcefully stop all those who passed by whether the local MLA, the Minister or any other VIP on the way to the tourist destination Ponmudi and point out that Swaraj is in the palm of the people’s hand and not with a handful of politicians. The downstream panchayats who are adversely affected by damming the Chalakudy river in Thrissur came together and passed a resolution against the dam inspite of all the projected supposedly beneficial outputs. The eight panchayats surrounding the famed Muriyad lake struggle in Thrissur district got together shedding their political differences to protect the lake that was being reclaimed for mining by the land mafia. The women and community in Eriyamkudi in Thrissur
district who led a significant fight for the right to plant paddy and retain the water cycle in the wetlands were able to get the Collector to ban the land developers and real estate lobby and rejuvenate agriculture in the area. This processes have happened along with the ongoing debate on digression from decentralisation and its essential pre-requisites like participation and transparency along with community participation in major decision making processes. The Adivasi women in local self governments in Wynad, Attapady and Idukki districts in Kerala say ‘Politics is not just for power per se but for the power to preserve culture, value systems, autonomy and survival security’. Is this not what Gandhi meant by “learning to rule ourselves”?

5. Passive resistance:

Passive resistance is “the method of securing rights by personal suffering. When I refuse to do something that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul force “(HS, p. 69)

The women in various struggles that have been documented have realised the strength and innovativeness inherent in soul force. The myriad ways in which the State and the executing machinery tries to suppress and oppress the passive resistance strategies and make it a law and order situation is shocking. The local Sub Inspector of Police who refused to give police protection to a lone woman who was being abused by the sand-miners by saying that “police protection cannot be given to an old hag” was shocked when she reacted that the “strength of my faith in what I am doing will protect me”. This is true in the case of the women who blockaded the road through which 20 lorries of untreated waste from Trivandrum city was being taken to the waste treatment plant in their village – there was no argument, no negotiation , no conflict- only resistance. The Adivasi women in Attapady
who physically obstructed the bull-dozers in diversion of Bhavani river project were jailed for several days. The women in Alapad in Kollam district who stopped the India Rare Earths Company from mining sand from their coastal homes were also jailed as law-breakers. The women discovered Gandhi in this strategy and reiterate that passive resistance is the strongest weapon that cannot be suppressed—“passive resistance is an all-sided sword- it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. It never rusts and does not exhaust. The sword of passive resistance does not require a scabbard” (HS, p. 71-72).

6. Fear and Fearlessness:
Strength lies in the absence of fear (HS, p. 38)
Those who defy death are free from fear
Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness (HS, p. 72)

The words of the lone women fighter for the rights of the river to flow at Neyyatinkara where the sand miners are indiscriminately mining reflect the above statements of Gandhi ‘I am not afraid. Let them abuse, throw stones, come and pull my house down. I am not afraid of death’

The women who are lobbying against the huge rock and stone quarrying company in Vellikulangara in Thrissur in spite of witnessing the ‘accidental’ death of two young resisters by a lorry brave the threats and say ‘We are not afraid. How can we be silent when the blasting has cracked the walls of our homes and also the school where our children go?’ Fearlessness certainly is the hallmark of a true passive resistance movement.
The above said are some of the main areas in which the environmental struggles and women have found Gandhi in their own strategies and approaches. Even now they do not refer to him or use him as a model, but there is definitely a strong undercurrent of Gandhian thought here. As Gandhi wrote (*Harijan*, 1935) “we do not know we are burning these lights at the expense of the poor” the young Kada girl who travelled all the way to Trivandrum to meet the Chief Minsiter remarked on seeing the neon lights and hoardings shining all night through –‘Is it for this that you are damming the Chalakudy river? Why should we pay the price for this opulence?’

Gandhi’s famous comment “ the blood of the villages is the cement on which the edifices of the cities is built” (*Harijan*, 1946) is echoed in the response of women in Vilappilsala and Kainur where the waste of a city and waste from a pig farm destroyed life in the small villages –Why should we take your waste? Why are our waters and health being sacrificed so that you can be neat and clean?’

The analysis of macro processes of economic development, the prescriptive positions and effective solutions for rural reconstruction and ethics for living that Gandhi put forth in all his writings and dialogues form the basis of many women-led reconstruction and rejuvenation processes happening in the State. The most striking among this are the organic farmers group called the Jaiva Karshaka Samiti led by a women and the Eco-san initiative combining sanitation, health and restoration of health in coastal villages along with the Zero-Waste and Organic bazaar program in Thiruvananthapuram city.

The stories and narratives that emerge from the *adivasi* women in governance, *adivasi* women in struggle for basic land
and resource rights reveal the real questions that modern human civilisation needs to ask itself and to which Gandhi offered a talisman. At a time when survival rights are under siege by corporate regimes, delving deeper into the mindsets of the women who are silently but strongly in true citizenship movements holding close the talisman of seeing the face of the poorest before planning an action would give the human race the path to a more secure democratic, egalitarian world.

**Afterword**

The women in the environmental grassroots movements of Kerala have been thrown into the face of struggle and opposition and have taken it not by choice or compulsion but because there is no choice at all. But all of them have found immense meaning and fulfilment in the self-sacrifices, the corrections, regulations, abnegations and learning that the chosen path demands of them. They admit that this exposure and the need to go beyond their secluded private lives with a Do or Die attitude has opened a vast and challenging world hitherto unknown to them. With little or no precedence of activism or ideological positioning most of these women have stumbled, struggled, fallen and stood up with a courage, honesty and steadfastness that their conviction and commitment granted them. The pitfalls associated with fighting the invisible enemy within and outside has empowered them to evolve their own strategies and action plans. It is here that we see the hidden shadow of Gandhian thought and action that seems to be a directing force and strength too. The most poignant linkages that remain as we near the end of this sojourn from one end of Kerala to the other is about the moral courage, the capacity to dialogue and the chancing upon their own infinite reserves of fearlessness that women have rediscovered and rejuvenated in their lives and in the lives of those around them. The new social transformation that this has initiated in Kerala which surpasses
all existing political, social, communal and religious alliances is the only path to Swaraj as Gandhi envisioned a century ago. The women here have not read Gandhian thought or do not refer to him in any way, but they ‘perennially return to Mahatma Gandhi while at the same time going beyond him’ (Ramachandra Guha, 2007).

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